

A Theology of Development - lecture by Dr Rowan Williams

The last few years have seen definite shifts in attitudes to religious faith among those concerned to find paths out of poverty and powerlessness for the majority of the world's population. But these shifts have not been simply in one direction. On the one hand: there has been a very belated recognition that the majority of the world's population does have religious convictions and that to ignore these is to push against the grain of the societies you're trying to help and support. Religious faith is a sheer fact about these contexts and it is thus also a potent force in civil society – often the only effective and sustainable 'civil society' network that exists, (especially in areas affected by conflict). What is more, if freedom of religion is an aspect of human rights, how you actually handle the religious practices of communities must be part of a global understanding of 'development'; it can hardly be left as the one form of liberty that a development agency does not care about. At best, communities of religious conviction have the potential to be serious and effective allies in the struggle against privation.

But on the other hand, there is a long-standing suspicion towards faith in many quarters of the development establishment, accentuated in recent years by a number of specific issues and coloured by the current nervousness about religious extremism. Religious communities do not begin from a clear Enlightenment doctrine of universal liberties; they are necessarily exclusive, in the sense that they are committed to particular beliefs that not everyone shares. There is always going to be the shadow of a suspicion that they will favour their own instead of working for universal benefit, or that they are using aid and development as a vehicle for propaganda on behalf of their convictions, a cloak for proselytism. And they may, of course, disagree about what 'universal benefit' might mean: for example, in the area of reproductive rights and liberties. The development agency may come to see religion as a positive obstacle to liberation; and the result is often a standoff between what can look like two sets of absolutisms, traditional faith and a passionate enlightened universalism. Faced with the rise of aggressive religious conservatism – the word 'fundamentalism' is not actually all that helpful – all this long standing unease becomes more sharply focused. Combined with governmental reluctance to be seen as favouring specific communities and their convictions, it can produce a standoff between development agencies and faith groups that has the effect of shrinking the possibilities of creative co-operation.

In what follows, I shall try to address a number of issues arising out of the potential tensions in this situation. The first is to do with **trust**. We have seen how religion arouses suspicion among the development establishment; but, if there has to be a question about whether religion is to be trusted in this context, there is a counter-question about how that establishment itself secures trust among those with whom it works. The second is the complex matter of how the language of rights plays out in discussing development, and whether religious perspectives help or hinder clarification here. The third and broadest is why religious faith has an interest in this in the first place and what the roots of that interest can contribute positively to the struggle against poverty.

So, as regards trust: granted for the moment that there is a problem in that religious communities are distinctive groups with beliefs and practices that are unique to them and not universal, the possible dilemma for the development establishment is that there is no such thing as a community with **only** universal values and loyalties. You are always dealing with human beings who have specific habits and affinities. And to deny or override those is to import another sort of propaganda or proselytism, and to risk engaging with people at less than their fullest level of self-awareness, moral motivation and so on. It won't do to find yourself preferring an abstract or imagined community to a specific one; yet the specific one has commitments that are not universal and habits that are open to challenge or critique (especially around the roles of women). It is not an option simply to accept the specificities of a culture (religious or otherwise) that may actually be responsible for reducing the liberties or options that are available for other human beings.

Part of the answer to this lies surely in a better level of religious literacy among secular NGO's and activists. This involves the ability to identify and in some measure identify **with** the motivations of the culture in which work is going forward. It requires a deepening fluency in the language of religious discourse, to understand the intention and nuance behind religiously inspired definitions of mission and human development. It is to be aware of what elements in a particular religious culture are most fruitful in terms of the struggle against poverty; to be able to use the images of fulfilled or normative humanity that are around in the culture so as to stimulate effective action and, ideally, change. And this means 'trusting' the specific religious culture to the extent of recognising in it a sense of what the human good might be and recognising also the consequent possibility of change from within that frame of reference. It may also be the capacity to see that a failure to provide exactly the same range of options as might be available in a more differentiated or secularised society is not invariably an impoverishment. And where traditional models do lead to straightforward conflict, there needs to be a capacity to be clear about this, to present the conflict as genuinely a disagreement, not simply a standoff between enlightenment and prejudice that can be overcome by 'neutral' education; a willingness to have arguments with respect.

Without this, the development agenda is doomed to be seen as allied to a campaign for conversion to someone else's values. 'It...sometimes happens that economically developed or emerging countries export this reductive vision of the person and his destiny to poor countries', as the Pope puts it in his recent encyclical, ***Caritas in veritate*** (p.51). Attempts to bypass local networks, local styles of decision-making, and above all local rationales for action or change invariably produce resentment and puzzlement. What people see is an agenda that is not theirs, activated by foreigners claiming to act on their behalf, co-opting some of the local people into a new and largely alien elite of income and lifestyle. If development processes and programmes are not to be paralysed by such resentment and mistrust, with the result that local communities cannot see themselves as agents of their own change, enormous potential is left unrealised. This means, of course, a challenge to both sides. It means creating space for debate and mutual learning. This current seminar series, and the inter-religious consultations on DFID's recent White Paper process, are encouraging examples of such debates. It is also important to recognise that parallel debates may be taking place **within and between** faith communities, given the diversity of

beliefs and values. For example, the response of faith groups to HIV, while representing an outstanding witness in the provision of care and support, has also involved intense internal debates around how we best challenge HIV-related stigma and on the priorities in effective prevention approaches.

'Franchising' development work to local faith groups or networks, partnering with such bodies on a long-term basis, can feel like a risk for governments or NGO's that have to preserve strict accountability for their electorates or donors; they may have to revisit what they take for granted about professional standards and the timescale of results, so as not to force local faith organisations into impossible changes of practice, that may in turn inhibit authentic grassroots participation (it's worth saying that this flexibility is no less desirable in the context of community regeneration funding regimes in this country). But equally, the embrace of partnership by religious groupings has to bring with it the readiness to embrace at least some patterns of accountability and effective delivery that may feel alien. There is risk and uncertainty for all involved, and a great need for good communication. But without this, the patterns of crippling mistrust will not be altered. Some faith-inspired NGOs, rooted both in their faith beliefs and in professional development practice, play a crucial role in mediating understanding and promoting mutual trust.

The question of rights and of the proper place of language about rights in the context of development issues is a notably difficult one. Although there is a strong case for saying that the religious – especially the Jewish-Christian – frame of reference is what historically made this language possible through its emphasis on the dignity of each individual and the sense of responsibility before God for the welfare of each and all, the discourse has become very detached from any specific appeals to revelation or to the divine. It has become strongly legal in colouring: rights are the liberties you can legitimately claim, a set of entitlements, the absence of which needs to be rectified by some authority, legal or political. This is a model that has served well in some circumstances; but it has increasingly been recognised that on its own it presents a negative (or at least a rather thin) view of the human good. What needs to be struggled for is simply the absence of limitations to our natural entitlements to free choice in our actions. Hence many of the current moral impasses in our culture, not least over issues around the beginning and end of life. A vision of the moral agenda that avoids formalism and individualism has to find a more substantive picture of what is desirable for human beings; which is why Michael Sandel in his new book on *Justice* underlines the need for us to rediscover how to argue robustly in the public arena over broad ideas about what the good life looks like, rather than being paralysed by the model of formal entitlements as the sole business of law and government.

This is a significant question in relation to development. A philosophy that stresses only the need to secure abstract entitlements for all simply fails to address the actual complexity of societies in which 'equal' freedoms amount to protecting the liberty of the already secure and wealthy – just as in the discourse of a lot of modern market economics, unconstrained freedom for some means powerlessness for many. Any talk about non-voluntary redistribution of wealth, whether by progressive taxation or adjustments in the conventions of international trade that will protect emerging economies for a period, will threaten a purely abstract account of rights and freedoms. The basic liberties of some can be secured

only by the restriction of certain liberties in others; the point is made with characteristic energy by George Monbiot in his groundbreaking overview of these issues in *The Age of Consent: A Manifesto for a New World Order*, particularly the sixth chapter, entitled 'Levelling', which is an eloquent defence of *genuine* free trade as the organ of growth and a scarring critique of the naked protectionism practised by wealthy nations.

But this means that we have to find some criteria for deciding which liberties are more important among the varieties of claims we might in principle make. And that is not a discernment that can be made without some broader sense of what is essential for the good life. If we imagine an economic world in which the prime concern is not just to secure absolute profit-making freedom for some, or even to secure a moderate degree of material prosperity for all or most, but to allow communities to decide the shape of their own life, to become (as it is sometimes put) the subjects of their own history, something more is at work than a language solely about claims and liberties.

The point is that thinking about development needs to involve thinking about human agents as three-dimensional. Without this concern, development becomes no more than opening up a universal market for consumers; and in such a perspective, it doesn't much matter whether or not the disadvantaged are made really able to be subjects of their own history, agents of their own economic future. The morality of power is no longer an issue: who exactly brings about material prosperity and maximised options is of no significance –which also means that development loses contact with authentic politics. But as soon as this element of recognising human dignity in the freedom to shape a community's future is allowed, we have moved beyond a narrowly material account of what's needed and also beyond a myopic focus on rights as claims: the notion of human dignity is reconnected to the language of rights, and the vision of what development actually works towards is filled out. In recent years we have seen quite a bitter debate over whether the language of rights is itself a culture-specific thing being foisted by a secular and legalistic 'West' on the rest of humanity. But the language of intrinsic human dignity is, in one shape or another, a theme that resonates with the great religious traditions. Learning to relate to this language is a specific example of that religious literacy which I mentioned a little while ago as needing to be acquired by the secular activist so as to build bridges into the deepest motivations of those engaged in the battle against deprivation. At the same time, those coming from a faith perspective need to develop literacy in the discourse of human rights, to establish ground for dialogue.

Thirdly, why is or should the theme of development be of interest to a religious believer? I want to answer this specifically in terms of Christian faith, while aware that there will be other answers from other perspectives. I do so because, while it is true that all major traditions, as I have mentioned, share a belief in the dignity and freedom of the human subject, each one has its own particular rationale for this and its own ways of spelling out its full implications in concrete terms. It is easy to see religious motivations here in terms of imperatives to care for the unfortunate; 'almsgiving' is undoubtedly a strong theme in most faith traditions. But what is interesting is that this is by no means the whole story.

Thus, in Christian theological terms, two motifs are specially significant in such a larger picture. First, there is the belief in humanity's creation in the divine image, with the implication spelled out in the Book of Genesis that this entails responsibility for cultivating the material world around and giving names to the animals. To be human is to be **consciously** involved in giving meaning to the world you inhabit; and so a situation in which you have no power to exercise that creativity, where you are expected to be passive in relation to what lies around you, is a situation in which the image of God is obscured. The Christian belief is that we all begin in such a situation as a result of 'original sin', but that salvation restores the image and allows us to take up the position we were made for within creation.

Material poverty and powerlessness are a problem for the Christian believer because they represent one outworking of the structural sin or failure into which we are born, the various ways in which our humanity is compromised or reduced. To be stuck in a reactive relation to the material world, incapable of getting beyond subsistence, survival, is a tragedy in the light of what humanity could be. To recover the image of God must mean recovering an intelligent and creative way of relating to and working with the environment – not by being set free from dependence on the environment but by being able to shape it and direct it in certain ways so as both to express and to increase the creative liberty of human persons in harmony with the flourishing of all creation. 'Development' is an aspect of this self-recovery and self-awareness as an agent within the world, capable of making a difference that will serve human dignity.

But there is a second dimension to this. Once the basic breakthrough has been achieved – by the coming of God in human flesh – the recovered or restored divine image is understood as involving a responsibility, not only for the world at large but for each other in particular. The imagery of the Body, used by St Paul, underlines this by insisting that the welfare of each individual and the welfare of all are inseparable, so that the poverty of another is also **my** diminution and the liberation of the other is likewise mine as well. Thus to take responsibility for nourishing the creative liberty of someone who would otherwise be threatened with a life less than properly human is to open myself to a gift of greater fullness in my own humanity. This is not, in other words, simply about the prosperous giving something to the poor, but about a gift that contributes to the liberation of both poor and prosperous and transforms both. No-one's identity or destiny in the Christian framework is to be understood simply individually; in the much-quoted words of an early Christian monk, 'Our life and our death are with our neighbour'.

Carrying this over into the ethics of development brings a crucial insight: we are not trying to solve someone else's problem but to liberate **ourselves** from a toxic and unjust situation in which we, the prosperous, are less than human. The way forward is not simply the shedding of surplus wealth on to grateful recipients but an understanding that we are trying to take forward the process by which the other becomes as fully a 'giver' as I seek to be, so that the transaction by which I seek to bring about change in the direction of justice for another is one in which I come to be as much in the other's debt as they are in mine. The Christian foundation for a search for a more equal distribution of resources within and between societies is essentially about what might be called a proper 'distribution of dignity'

– not a mechanically levelling process but one in which exchange becomes possible in new ways and so mutual enrichment of various sorts becomes a reality.

If we take this fully on board, we are bound to realise that one of the most debilitating features of our normal donor culture is – as was hinted earlier – the mentality of patron and client. One party is always petitioning, the other is free to give or withhold and so retains power over the petitioner. It is unquestionably true, alas, that religious rhetoric has, with its stress on almsgiving, intensified this imbalance of power; but the truth is that the perspective of faith in this connection *ought* to be a critique of patronage. 'The life you save may be your own' is a tag used by the great Catholic novelist Flannery O'Connor as the title of one of her fictions: it is a good summary of the essence of a religious critique of the client-patron trap. An unbalanced distribution of power is in the long run as damaging to the powerful as to the powerless. To the extent that a Christian world-view can provide firm ground for this sort of critique, it is a creative and necessary element in thinking through development issues.

It is also true for Christians as for other religious groups that what we might call unofficial forms of solidarity across nations and cultures are routine. Christian congregations are frequently linked internationally: to give just a few examples from the UK, dioceses of the Church of England have partnerships with dioceses overseas; the Mothers' Union offers an impressive range of contacts for lay people and has, obviously, a particularly strong focus on women's issues in health and education; church schools sometimes develop internet links with schools in Africa or India or the Middle East. These represent a range of ways to engage with development, not least in raising consciousness about development issues. They are to do with prayer and mutual learning as much as practical assistance, and they often involve people from the less privileged end of the partnership visiting and ministering in the UK. Of course, as with all development links, there is a risk of patron-client features, and there is a constant need for scrutiny to prevent these relationships slipping back into a classically unilateral and unbalanced style. Many faith organisations (as with secular agencies) seek to be conscious about the dynamics of power and the nature of authentic partnership, and to build mutual accountability and transformation into their vision and practice. But it is not simple, and, as it has sometimes been expressed, the links described above illustrate how development is sometimes best understood when it is not the sole focus of a relationship or an agenda.

It is interesting, incidentally, to see how many of the same possibilities and challenges are increasingly being identified by Muslim-based agencies. Like the churches, they can take for granted a powerful emotional solidarity and (though for different reasons and in different ways) a set of close cross-national relationships between particular communities. As in the Christian context, Islamic activists and organisers face the challenge of working out a distinctive approach to development questions without becoming exclusivist in their targets, and recognise the need to locate development within the context of a global vision for the restoration of 'integral' humanity, a vision or mission within which the element of economic liberation is vital but not the only priority.

I have used the term 'economic liberation' as a way of entering a mild caution about speaking too uncritically of 'development' as a self-defining notion. The word has – notoriously – been associated with one particular sort of global narrative, allied to the hope of unrestricted economic growth. And given the mixture of factors in our contemporary world that suggest this is a dangerously naïve hope, we ought to be qualifying our language about development so as to free it from any such automatic alliance. I have proposed that one of the contributions of religious conviction to the discussion of these issues is that faith, by putting economic development in a wider context, allows us to raise the perennially difficult and often evaded question of what the purpose of material growth is – in other words, to check the idea that unlimited material expansion (as opposed to freedom from poverty) is a self-evident good for any economy or for the world as a whole. To talk about 'economic liberation' is to bring us back to the aim of making persons and cultures agents on their own behalf, able to exercise some creative freedom in regard to their conditions of living; and that is a different matter from simply guaranteeing material growth at a certain level, because it factors in the criterion of how human dignity is to be served.

So the importance of faith within the language and practice of development is not simply to act as a motivation for realising goals that have been defined by some independent universal authority, but to provide a critical perspective on how some of those goals can be pursued unthinkingly, and in ways that will do further damage in the long run. It should be very clear in our current situation that we need more and more public debate about the goals of economic growth; but what that really means is that we need more debate about what makes us human. If it is true that this isn't a question we can answer just by taking a poll of random opinions or by appealing to what all reasonable people really know, then the voice of religious conviction needs to be heard. The Pope's recent encyclical, already referred to, insists that no concept of development is finally workable or justifiable unless it allows for the transcendent and the gratuitous in human nature (e. pp.19, 50, 63-4); and it is because of this, he argues, that our capacity to create a sustainable universal community, a 'a fraternal communion transcending every barrier' (p.63) in our own strength is bound to be flawed.

The corollary is not that NGO's and governments concerned with development matters should be subsidising religious institutions or privileging faith-based agencies. It is rather the twofold point that there needs to be a willing and intelligent partnership with religious groups, both faith-inspired NGOs and faith communities, and that such a partnership needs to involve engagement with some of the broad issues about the good life and the human calling which religious conviction presses. At least, it entails a readiness to question the kind of secular rhetoric around development which would reduce the whole issue to one of securing the formal liberties that can be spelled out in terms of human rights; to question some of the unexamined assumptions about power (political and ideological) that attach themselves to this rhetoric; and to enlarge the definition of human well-being to take in the possibility of relation with the transcendent. The argument I have been mounting is not only that doing this delivers a more effective set of local strategies for achieving paths out of poverty – though there is reasonably good evidence that this is a common result – but also that it connects the whole development project with a renewed political and moral energy,

an agenda beyond solving the 'problems' of poverty and looking towards a genuine strengthening of what is distinctively human.

As I have noted, this carries challenges to faith –based activists and groups as much as to secular development agencies. There are temptations and risks here. The undoubted 'capital' constituted by the trust felt towards religious organisations should not be taken so much for granted that it comes to be jeopardised by co-option on the part of governments eager to have their work done for them cheaply. The need to take seriously and sensitively the traditional ethics and cultural norms of religiously shaped societies should not be an excuse for failing to confront oppressive and dehumanising patterns of power (once again, the status of women is the most obvious area of concern in many contexts). Partnership between religiously based agencies and governmental or secular bodies should not become an excuse for the former to ignore issues of prosaic accountability and effectiveness. And, of course, there needs to be a steady vigilance about proselytism, manipulative use of favours, exclusive focus on people of the same faith and other practices that distort the goals of liberation for a whole community. The fact that these risks are sometimes exaggerated and are used as grounds for rejecting the whole idea of partnership with religious bodies should not blind us to the fact that the dangers are perfectly real.

If it is true that there is a real, if cautious, rapprochement between what I have called the development establishment (government and NGO's) and the world of faith-based aid organisations and local faith communities, there is major potential for benefit all round – not only, as I've argued, in terms of increasing reliable delivery systems for development goals, though that is hardly trivial, but in broadening the horizon of our whole discourse about development and sharpening the critique of some of its more ambiguous features. If development agencies continue to learn how to relate intelligently to religious faith, the concept of development is less likely to be seen reductively as a matter of securing universal claims and more likely to be seen as one aspect of a wider human liberation. But for this to happen, religious bodies too need a degree of humility and willingness to learn – about the causes of poverty and the problems of power, about their own internal resources for thinking through the imperative towards mutuality not merely benevolence, about what is needed to maintain credibility with the wider world in terms of responsible and professional practice. We are at a point where both sides seem unusually ready to learn. If the hopes of realising the goals we have spent so much energy discussing and defining in recent years are not to be disappointed, the honest exchange of challenge and experience in this area is an urgent matter.

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