

# Looking for a reason to be generous

## a case example of the postmodern ethical vacuum

*Brett Parris*

**T**HE LATE 20TH CENTURY seems to be afflicted with more than its fair share of crises. We are witnessing environmental degradation, escalating species extinction rates, the deterioration of farmlands and widespread malnutrition. We face the prospect of climatic changes and rising sea levels. We have the AIDS plague, social dislocation and seemingly permanent unemployment. Many development writers are no longer talking merely of a crisis in the Third World, but also of a crisis of maldevelopment in the First World. In industrialised countries a predatory system has evolved which relies on mass consumption at ever-increasing rates.<sup>1</sup> At the root of these problems lies a crisis of personal values which is exacerbated by the post-modernist rejection objective values. Ethical values are fundamental to questions of development policy and strategy. Assumptions regarding justice, morality, reconciliation, what it means to be human, the idea of the good life and so on, all arise from people's philosophies of life and how they understand the world and their place in it - their 'worldviews'. Any solutions must therefore involve debate, education and change in people's values and worldviews - the very things for which Christian aid or 'Non-Government Organisations' (NGOs) are so often maligned.

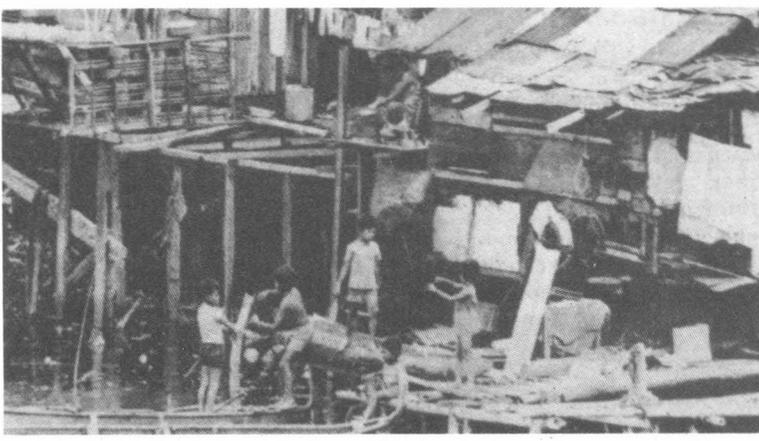
### **Development agencies and the crisis of values**

Christian NGOs and missions often come under fire for spreading their 'religious' views. It is

claimed that, at best, these are irrelevant to development and, at worst, culturally imperialistic and devastating to indigenous peoples. Apparently development assistance should be value-free. But can it be that simple? Development is a social exercise, laden with value judgements. It reflects particular worldviews, whether or not these are consciously articulated or carefully considered. Value judgments are inevitable: whether about the value of land to miners or hydroelectric power companies, as against its value to indigenous people; the value of traditional social structures and customs, as against the value of modern, smaller or fragmented families; the value of traditional agriculture, as against modern industrial agribusiness; or even the value of one race or ethnic group over another.

Each year corporations spend billions of dollars on mass media advertising to change people's worldviews and their perceptions of themselves - to exhort them to consume more and more and more. The beauty and cosmetic industry which first strives to make women feel inadequate about themselves and then offers them the 'solution' to their 'needs', is but one example. There is no escaping value-judgements in development. All such judgments must have *some* foundation.

I have observed, in the context of my university course-work, an unwillingness to recognise and debate the strategic importance of personal values and ethics to development studies. In one of my classes the question was posed: 'When the British were in India, were they right to ban the practice of a widow throwing herself on her husband's funeral pyre?' The respondent recognised instinctively the justice behind the British decision, aided, perhaps, by the fact that it was a clear case of the oppression of women. However she could not bring herself to admit, even in this case, that it was right to impose an idea of justice from outside the culture. This would be an admission of the objectivity of justice and ethics - something inadmissible by definition. Hence, the answer: 'The British shouldn't have been there in the first place.' True, no doubt, but for me this answer high-



lighted the dilemmas many people are feeling. Confronted with a disintegrating world they grasp instinctively for values such as justice, obligation, generosity and accountability, but find, in post-modernist relativism, nothing to support them.

David Korten, one writer who does recognise the importance of values, argues that:

*... raising the consciousness of power holders of the nature and consequences of power relationships to impress upon them their stewardship responsibility is as important as carrying out consciousness raising exercises among the powerless.... Only those power holders who are conscious of their privilege and its consequences for those not so endowed can be expected to embrace their obligation to be responsible stewards.<sup>2</sup>*

While I thoroughly agree with Korten's sentiments, the question must be asked: Why should these newly educated power holders 'embrace their obligation to be responsible stewards'? Moreover, who is to say they are under any 'obligation' to do so? Many people, especially the 'power holders', simply do not care. Faced with massive social dislocation, poverty and environmental destruction in the Third World, most people in the First World who are able to make any significant changes to their lifestyles, don't care enough to do so - and why should they? Many want to 'do their bit to help save the world', but only as long as it doesn't demand any major change in lifestyle, career path or priorities. Yet this is exactly what may be required. As vital as development education and a vision of alternative development may be, it is naïve to think that these will be enough to motivate the majority of people to change their lifestyles. Development writers and activists such as Korten are, quite rightly, appealing to 'justice' and people's 'obligations and responsibilities' to do something to help. But this entreaty founders on the fact that Western culture is increasingly a culture of relativistic ethics where these words carry less and less weight. Popular post-modernist relativism has pulled the rug out from under these sorts of rallying cries.

To speak in terms of 'obligations' or of 'justice' seems to presuppose one of two things: either some sort of objective absolute standard which is intuitive and/or divinely revealed, or a human construct which is more or less arbitrarily defined on the basis of the current weight of public opinion as encoded in national and international law. If the law becomes the touchstone then, if people are not breaking the law, how can they be accused of living 'unjustly'? Who is to say the privileged are under any 'obligation' to help

the poor? If the basis for ethics is arbitrarily defined, if there are no absolute standards of justice and if there is no personal accountability for the ways in which people treat each other or the planet other than the law, then why should people care about what is happening in the Third World?

More particularly, who is to say that men and women should have equal rights to participation in development? We in the late 20th century West may take this as self-evident. It is by no means self-evident in all cultures. Aristotle, for example, thought that women were of a different nature and inferior to men. Some cultures view women similarly today. On what basis does the well-meaning development professional challenge these deeply-held, traditional, cultural beliefs without being accused of 'cultural imperialism'?

These issues have gained prominence recently as the West has found itself in difficulties with Asia in its discussions over human rights. Some Asian countries, such as China, have become resentful of Westerners lecturing them on the subject. For Westerners the rights of the individual are supremely important. For many Asian cultures, however, the rights of the community outweigh those of the individual. If the community will benefit and develop faster by locking up those who oppose strong government policies, or those regarded as subversive, undesirable or likely to commit a crime, then so be it. The problem is that Westerners are not being consistent in their ethical relativism. Many Westerners want to be relativists at the micro-level of their personal lifestyle ethics while being absolutists at the macro, or international, level.

### **The role of church based development agencies**

Korten further argues that the church has a distinctive role in addressing the realities of underdevelopment:

*If the church as an institution is not being effective in this role, then a priority concern of religiously oriented development NGOs should be to help it to rediscover its mission. If the institutional church is incapable of this role, then the religiously oriented development NGOs should themselves accept a responsibility to play the role of teacher in carrying forward the universal messages of love, brotherhood and reconciliation as central to their own missions. This is not a call for proselytising to win religious converts. Conversion from one religious tradition to another is not the objective. ... The objective is to help each individual discover the power*

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of the fundamental integrative teachings of his of her own religious faith - whatever that faith may be.<sup>3</sup>

**W**HILE I AGREE with Korten's sentiments about the centrality of values, I have a number of difficulties with these statements. Firstly, we most certainly are talking about 'conversion from one religious tradition to another'. We are talking about the fundamental reorientation and conversion of people's worldviews and priorities from greed, materialism, power and self-interest to peace, justice, reconciliation, love, forgiveness and self-sacrifice. These involve a major challenge to each person to reassess his or her core religious and philosophical beliefs.

In the post-modernist setting, religious claims to truth and the objectivity of morality are derided, but the problems remain. Korten also cites Charles Elliot's *Comfortable Compassion* with approval:

*Unjust structures are the creations of people and are products of the greed and egotism that are deeply embedded in human nature. The human spirit must be strengthened to the point where greed and egotism play a less dominant role.*<sup>4</sup>

But why are greed and egotism 'deeply embedded in human nature' and just how is this 'strengthening of the human spirit' to be achieved? These are deeply religious questions and the major personal changes necessary in ethics and orientation can really only be described in religious terms such as a 'dying to selfishness' and a willingness to forgo power and personal gain for the benefit of others. Relying solely on 'enlightened self-interest' will lead to disaster, because, when it comes down to action and personal lifestyle, short-term 'self-interest' usually wins out against long-term 'enlightenment'.

**S**ECONDLY, not all 'religions' are essentially the same in their application. Helping each individual discover the 'power ... of their own religious faith - whatever that may be' will not necessarily result in the carrying forward of the 'universal messages of love, brotherhood and reconciliation.' Quite simply, these are not the major thrusts of every religion. Christianity, for example, claims that Jesus Christ is God incarnate who has come to earth in order to restore the broken relationship between God and humanity. This gospel is the major thrust of Christianity. 'Love', 'brotherhood' and 'reconciliation' are secondary aspects which flow from and are empowered and made possible by a restored relationship with God. The *de facto* religion of millions of modern Westerners, moreover, is 'scientism' or 'sci-

entific materialism', which Dr. Herman Daly, formerly a senior economist in the environment department of the World Bank, describes as:

*...the elevation of the deterministic, materialistic, mechanistic, and reductionistic research program of science to the status of an ultimate World View. Undeniably the methodological approach of scientific materialism has led to great increases in our technological prowess. Its practical success argues for its promotion from working hypothesis or research program to World View. But a World View of scientific materialism leaves no room for purpose, for good and evil, for better and worse states of the world. It erodes morality in general and moral restraint in economic life in particular.*<sup>5</sup>

For millions of modern Westerners life has no meaning other than what each person gives it. Life's major pursuits very often become money, power, prestige, material possessions, personal 'happiness' and 'fulfilment' - with minimal interest in long-term, global issues of poverty and justice, (unless of course this gives the person a sense of 'fulfilment'!). This is not just a picture of the money-hungry Gordon Gekko-type figures of Wall Street fame, but of average Australians who just want to be left to live their own lives. They may have a passing interest in 'the poor' and may even donate a few dollars to an NGO but they have no ethical basis or motivation to make any real changes in their lifestyles in response to the crises in the Third World.

Where are the 'universal messages of love, brotherhood and reconciliation' here? Unfortunately, the teachings at the core of many people's 'religions' are not as easily blended and universalised as Korten implies. Some, in fact, are clearly contradictory.

**M**Y THIRD difficulty with Korten's argument is that he avoids the issue of truth. He seems to imply that a religion can still have power for people even if they don't actually believe it to be true. However, people who take their faith and its ethical implications seriously, generally adhere to their particular religious faith because they believe that it is actually true - that it gives an accurate account of the universe, their place in it and their experience of it. But religion has no power in its 'fundamental integrative teachings' if these teachings are not perceived to be true. The moral and ethical superstructure of a particular faith carries no weight at all if the truth of its historical and doctrinal foundations are demolished and disregarded.

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## Has the notion of truth passed its use by date?

The question of the truth of a faith cannot be avoided. Yet in a post-modern context, the notion of any sort of objective truth is dismissed as *passé* - an impossible dream left over from modernism. But it matters - especially to a religion's adherents. Questions such as whether a truth is knowable and whether it can be discerned between competing claims for truth are epistemological and theological and may not be finally resolvable in any formal sense. But this does not mean that the possible existence and knowledge of truth is therefore unimportant and able to be subsumed under an undifferentiated relativism. Abandoning any claim to the truth of a religion's foundational beliefs robs it of any power to change people's behaviour. So without some perception of the existence of objective truth which can be discovered or revealed, relativism rules. There can be no real talk of 'justice' or 'obligation' or 'responsibility' in such a world. In this vein, Herman Daly argues:

*Once the word gets out (and it already has) that morality has no basis other than random chance and natural selection under impermanent environmental conditions, then it too will have about as much authority as the Easter Bunny. In sum, the attitudes of scientific materialism and cultural relativism actively undercut belief in a transcendental basis for ethical value, which undercuts moral consensus, which undercuts the minimum moral constraint on self-interest presupposed by Adam Smith (the father of modern economics) and most of his followers.<sup>6</sup>*

You cannot cut a tree off at its roots and still expect it to bear fruit! Unless people believe in some sort of absolute, transcendent, objective standard of justice they have no right or basis on which to challenge a culture or people for abusing women, exploiting children or oppressing the poor. There can be no widespread return to the ethical teachings of 'love', 'brotherhood' and 'reconciliation' without a return to belief in the truth of whatever faiths or philosophies produced these teachings.

## Why Christian NGOs should affirm their religious basis

Christian NGOs therefore have a unique contribution to make in the field of development ethics because Christianity does take this stand:

- *It affirms that there are objective, absolute standards of justice which have their origins in God's goodness (eg Deuteronomy 10:14-20; 32:4; Ps 25:8-10; Isaiah 5:7-8).*

- *It affirms justice for women, widows, refugees, the poor and the oppressed, condemning flagrant wealth and materialism (eg Exodus 22:21-24; Amos 2:6-7; Isaiah 3:13-26; Micah 2:1-2).*

- *It condemns the devaluing of women through female infanticide, crushing dowries, or caste systems where 'untouchables' are born to be despised. It affirms, rather, that all people of all races - males and females - are created equal in the image of God (eg Genesis 1:27; Galatians 3:28).*

- *It challenges ideas such as Karma - that a person suffers because of wrongdoing in a past life - affirming instead that good and bad happens to all and that God will hold all people personally accountable for their own wrongdoing after death. Poverty and oppression, where they exist, are an injustice and an indignity to be fought, not some sort of 'natural justice' in which to acquiesce. Each person is personally accountable before God for their actions during life (eg Deuteronomy 27:19; Matthew 25:31-46; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Hebrews 9:27; Romans 6:23; Revelation 20:11-13; 22:12-13).*

- *It condemns revenge, 'payback', and retribution for wrongs committed. It affirms forgiveness, love of enemies and mercy to all in need, leaving judgement to God (eg Leviticus 19:18; Deuteronomy 32:35; Matthew 5:43-48; Luke 6:27,28; 35; Romans 12:19; Colossians 3:13).*

- *It condemns unjust power structures and empty, superficial displays of religiosity in which justice and mercy are neglected (eg Isaiah 1:10-17; Amos 5:21-24; Matthew 23:23-24).*

- *It overturns conventional notions of power and prestige, teaching that greatness comes through the service of others. A leader, therefore, is the servant of his or her people rather than a master who lords it over them (eg Luke 22:24-27; Ephesians 5:1-2).*

- *It teaches that rulers, public officials, judges and merchants are not to be corrupt but instead are to be scrupulously honest, fair and impartial (eg Leviticus 19:15, 35-36; Deuteronomy 1:17; 16:18-20; 17:14-20; 25:13-16; Proverbs 11:1; Luke 19:1-9).*

- *It teaches that happiness, pleasure and material possessions are not life's goals. If a person pursues happiness it will flee from them, but they will find it in 'losing' their life in service to God. (eg Micah 6:8; Matthew 6:19-21; 10:39; 16:25-26; Mark 8:35-36; Luke 12:13-21; 16:13; 17:33).*

- *It teaches that the earth is God's. We should not pollute, plunder or waste its resources but should care for it as good stewards. (eg Genesis*

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1:28; 2:15; Deuteronomy 10:14; Psalm 19:1; 24:1; Romans 1:20; 8:19-21).

• *It demands generosity on the part of every Christian. Generosity is even described as an indicator of whether faith is real (eg 2 Corinthians 8:13-14; 1 John 3:17-18; James 2:15-17; 5:1-6).*

**N**ONE OF THE ABOVE is presented as evidence that Christianity is the only coherent and valid ethical system that can be constructed (leaving aside, for the moment, the issue of whether its claims are true). However, it is clear that development problems ultimately distil down to the 'religious' questions of values, priorities and what people want out of life. Christianity is an example of a religion which can deal with these root spiritual issues and their application to the world in daily life.

Certainly there have been mistakes made by Christian missionaries in the past, being heavily influenced by the eurocentric cultures from which they came. The church has by no means always lived up to its calling. But the biblical insight into human nature, the sure foundation for ethics which it provides and the deeply spiritual transformation which it claims to make possible certainly make Christianity a rich source for the values about which Korten writes. Christian NGOs should not apologise for their 'religious' bases. They should not be reluctant to affirm their values up-front, particularly their beliefs in the necessity of a spiritual and ethical transformation in each person, personal accountability for action and the objectivity of ethics and justice. Christianity provides an objective ethical framework and the motivation necessary to observe it by dealing with the root spiritual problems of human nature. If that is the reason for the existence of the Christian NGOs, they have every right, and perhaps even obligation, to speak of the foundation of their worldview.

**T**HIS ISSUE is also a challenge for 'secular' NGOs to honestly examine their own worldviews and presuppositions. What are the bases from which they claim to speak of 'justice' and 'obligation', given the prevailing climate of post-modern ethical relativism? Is there really such a thing as 'value-free' development assistance? Do practitioners have the same absolute conceptions of 'justice' and 'obligation' and 'responsibility' at the personal level as they do at the macro level?

In my experience, it is very hard to find someone trying to work for a better world who is also a consistent post-modernist.

## References

- 1 Following common practice, First/Third World is retained, recognising its limitations, because the terms are commonly understood and the alternative North/South is not really appropriate for Australian readers.
- 2 David Korten, *Getting to the 21st Century*, Kumarian Press inc, West Hartford, Connecticut, 1990, p 168
- 3 Korten, pp 190-91
- 4 Korten, p 168
- 5 Herman Daly, 'The Economic Growth Debate: What Some Economists Have Learned But Many Have Not', *Journal of Environmental Economics and Management*, Vol 14, 1987, pp 323-336; pp 333-334
- 6 Daly, p 334

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**W**E VISITED Suai which looks out to the Timor Sea. The people there are poor and water is scarce. The Australian ships sail out in the sea looking for the oil which may make some people very rich. The oil seeps out of the ground and the parish priest told us that many people dig wells for water but can only get oil. Oil is a great resource and a profit maker for governments like Australia, but East Timorese people need water more than oil.

Here the people can watch the foreign ships drill for oil, one of the natural resources of East Timor, and imagine the foreigners enjoyment of the millions of dollars to be profited by such ventures. The locals will continue to live in poverty and suffer the effects of a lack of water. They will continue to be told that nationhood must be denied them because they are simply economically non-viable.