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Religion and Development Ethics: Contradiction or Possibility?

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This issue of *Pacific Journal* is on the environment. Environmental concerns such as polluted air and water, food tainted with poisonous sprays, toys manufactured with cancer causing agents have become increasingly important in our society. Our environment is affected by the goods and services that are produced around the globe for a growing consumptive population. In this paper, rather than focusing specifically on the environment, I will consider religion as one possible dimension for evaluating economic development that is straining the environment. In the burgeoning body of literature that evaluates both the theory and practice of economic development,¹ religion is only beginning to find a voice. I hope to show that religion, in its commitment and call for justice and shared account of the human good, can be an important component for constructing a development ethic that is equitable, just and, at the same time, environmentally responsible.

The scope of the paper is modest. I will not consider the numerous church and religious organization statements on specific economic policy issues, or the increasing number of edited collections and scholarly books on religious faith and economic policy. Rather, I will primarily analyze the proposals of three scholars: Martha Nussbaum, Amartya Sen, and Denis Goulet; all three have made a major contribution in the field of ethics and economic development, and each has considered the role of religion as an element in a just and equitable environmentally sustainable economic ethic.

Neither Amartya Sen nor Martha Nussbaum places an emphasis on the importance of religion for an ethic of development. Although Sen's capability approach seems implicitly open to the influence of religion (if it is freely chosen), Nussbaum has tended to reject any metaphysical basis that is external to the way people think about themselves. Both Nussbaum and Sen make no sustained appeal to religion; instead they call for a shared account of people's real needs, of what they wish to do and be, and of what freedom they have to function this way.²

Nussbaum in particular does not consider the transcendent or metaphysical dimension of development in her capability ethic, but rather argues that ethical truth can be seen only from the point of view of human experience.³ For example, the wish to be able to fish in unpolluted waters so that each

family in an Aboriginal community can live healthy and independent lives is not discovered on the “rim of heaven,” somehow distantly apart from experiences, hopes, aspirations, pains, pleasures, and evaluations.⁴ Such a wish could be found on the rim of heaven only from within a conception of things that assumes that ethical norms are independent of human ways of life. Nussbaum associates this conception with Plato and, in its Christian form, with what she calls an “Augustinian version of Christian ethics.”⁵

God has set up certain ethical standards; it is our job to do what God wants. But we may or may not be endowed with the capability of seeing, or wanting, what God wants. Truth and God’s grace are out there; but the ability to see ethical truth or to reach for grace is not something we can control. There is, therefore, no reliable method by which we can construct an ethical norm for the scrutiny of our deepest needs and responses and desires.⁶

Nussbaum argues that to construct a development ethic on the “rim of the heavens by pure souls” is to fail to consider the feelings, needs, and aspirations of human lived experience.⁷ Thus for Nussbaum, the search for a development ethic will be internal and evaluative, conducted in and through human concepts and beliefs, and assessed according to more important elements of human life. This evaluative process is, however, ethical in the broadest sense; that is, it is about deciding what is worthwhile and what is not, what is worth living for and what is not. These are matters to be judged and appropriated within specific communities, although, according to Nussbaum, they should also be open to cross-cultural scrutiny and comparison.⁸

Such a comparison is particularly important when the matters in question concern theology because some traditional theological accounts may be incompatible with equal opportunity for the full human functioning that a society ought to promote.⁹ Nussbaum claims that this internal and evaluative process for human flourishing and development is for the most part foreign to theological traditions. According to Nussbaum, human beings are not a repository of extra-historical, transcendent values formulated by the gods but are by nature political beings whose conceptions of value are defensible by practical reason.¹⁰

Nussbaum is prepared, however, to consider the contribution that “the utopian and prophetic elements in a religious tradition” can offer as a “public function” on behalf of the marginalized and oppressed.¹¹ For example, she

seems quite drawn to David Tracy's account of the pluralistic and evolving character of religious and cultural traditions. His account opens a space for an internal debate on every point where those who are traditionally excluded are given a hearing.¹² Additionally, Nussbaum does give religion "deference" in what she calls "the principle of moral constraint," because "religion is extremely important to religious people as a way of searching for the ultimate good" and for promoting a moral vision for human living.¹³ However, a religion that strays too far from a "shared moral understanding that is embodied in the core of the political conception does not deserve the honorific name of religion."¹⁴ For Nussbaum the central list of human capabilities guards against the possible harm religion can evoke,¹⁵ for example, the constraint on women to lead within their religious denomination or group.

In comparison to Nussbaum, Sen's capability approach seems implicitly open to the influence of religion if it is freely chosen. However, Sen does find affinity in Bertrand Russell's view that there seems to be little evidence of an "all-powerful benevolence" in the midst of a world with "acute misery, persistent hunger and deprived and desperate lives, and why millions of innocent children have to die each year from lack of food or medical attention or social care."¹⁶ Sen continues:

The issue, of course, is not new, and it has been a subject of some discussion among theologians. The argument that God has reasons to want us to deal with these matters ourselves has had considerable intellectual support. As a nonreligious person, I am not in a position to assess the theological merits of this argument. But I can appreciate the force of the claim that people themselves must have responsibility for the development and change of the world in which they live. One does not have to be either devout or non-devout to accept this basic connection. As people who live—in a broad sense—together, we cannot escape the thought that the terrible occurrences that we see around us are quintessentially our problems. They are our responsibility—whether or not they are also anyone else's.¹⁷

Sen is calling for an ethical of social responsibility that takes into account not only the afflictions that our own individual behavior causes, but also possible solutions to the many social ills we have within our power as individuals and social institutions to remedy. Surely there is in this construction a recognizable space for the role of religion in its commitment and call for justice and shared account of the human good.

Denis Goulet, arguably one of the most well-known development ethicists to consider the metaphysical dimensions of economic development, builds on Nussbaum and Sen's suggestive proposals and asks the following question in the title of the last chapter of his book, *Development: Historical Task or Opening to Transcendence?*¹⁸ He begins to answer this question by citing several development experts who lament the omission of the religious dimension from development theory. For example, Godfrey Gunatilleke, director of Sri Lanka's Center for Development Studies, states that "religious-cultural components are not kept in the field of vision of the development strategy itself."¹⁹ According to Goulet, this myopic approach to development shows a "reductionist approach to knowledge" that "leads most development specialists to function as 'one-eyed giants,' purveyors of science who are bereft of wisdom. They analyze, prescribe, and act as if humans could live by bread alone, as if human destiny could be stripped down to its material dimensions alone."²⁰ For Goulet, however, human destiny cannot be stripped; indeed religion serves as the "meaning" function of life and may be the most basic of the human needs.

Goulet's comprehensive vision of development follows in the tradition of his late professor L.J. Lebrét, with whom he studied in France. Already in 1942, Lebrét was calling for universal development planning that would consider "all in man and all men" (*tout l'homme et tous les homes*).²¹ This vision of human solidarity, according to Lebrét, must include all aspects of human experience, from the social, to the economic, political, and recreational to the religious and transcendental dimensions. Human solidarity or the "human ascent," as Lebrét called it, to be effective must then supersede all else, including material welfare.²² This "revolution in solidarity," a cooperative binding of local groups into a world community of mutuality and cooperation, rather than domination and exploitation, would place a moral claim on humanity to ensure that all world citizens would have their needs met.²³ Lebrét defines this revolution in development as

a series of transitions, for a given population and all the subpopulation units which comprise it, from a less human to a more human phase of existence, at the speediest rhythm possible, at the lowest possible cost, while taking into account all the bonds of solidarity that exist (or ought to exist) among these populations and the subpopulation groups.²⁴

According to Goulet, the universal vision of solidarity between groups and subgroups based on moral values articulated by Lebret can be understood in the distinction between *plus avoir* (to have more) and *plus etre* (to be more). For Lebret, the goal of development or possession of commodities is the enhancement of and enablement to be and to do what is individually and in common desired. Goulet aptly summarizes the “Economy and Humanism” movement initiated by Lebret:

What is conventionally termed development—dynamic economic performance, modern institutions, the availability of abundant goods and services—is simply one possibility, among many, of development in a broader, more critical sense. Authentic development aims at the full realization of human capabilities: men and women become makes of their own histories, personal and societal...It follows from this view...that innovation can be good only if it is judged by the concerned populace to be compatible with its image of the good life and the good society. This is why open, popular debate on values must precede significant impingements, including the interference wrought by research itself, upon a society’s life. Both planners, who seek to design strategies for inducing change, and researchers, who profess merely to study change, must submit their assumptions to careful public scrutiny.²⁵

At the same time Goulet has been concerned with the negative effect of development on the ability of traditional cultures to image their concept of the good life. He argues that development has a dialectical dimension: it produces gains but also losses and value contradictions, and it these losses and contradictions that tend to be felt most significantly by traditional cultures.²⁶ For example, Goulet worries that the meaning systems of cultures are being lost as economic development and consumerism pushes ahead unabated. As a result “religious, philosophical, and cosmic symbols and codes providing explanations as to the significance of life and death” are lost as people are caught in the pursuit of commodities and upward mobility.²⁷ When meaning systems are destroyed, concern for others and the natural world is also evacuated.

What is also significant, according to Goulet, are the value conflicts that development generates. By “value conflicts,” Goulet means the competing models of the good life that people, cultures, and nation-states espouse. Here

he offers no specific answers about how to resolve these conflicts, only questions that require further consideration. For example:

What do civil and political rights assuring individual freedoms to enjoy primacy over collective social and economic rights have to do with needs being met and the collective good of society being pursued? To what extent are institutions and social structures a function of the ideological preference for either individual democratic ideologies which stress political and civil rights or socialist and communitarian ideologies which stress economic and social rights in the community?²⁸

For Goulet, the framework for answering these questions should be wisdom, which “offers a larger view of the purposes of human life and the human efforts to guide the formulation of development paradigms.”²⁹ It is here that Goulet turns to Aristotle’s call for political friendship and Lebret’s call for dialogue among cultures. Wisdom can function as a grand narrative for teaching the interdependence that is required between cultures and societies in the present world, but it can also function to redefine “personal and social identities.”³⁰ Goulet believes that dialogue based on wisdom can both transcend and criticize the powerful modern forces of economic development and also the “sacred dances, many wisdoms” of traditional cultures.³¹ It is the role of wise political leadership to respect the values of traditional cultures in order to avoid the trap of elitism and manipulation. According to Goulet:

To design and build development on tradition and indigenous values is to espouse a philosophy of change founded on a basic trust in the ability of people, no matter how oppressed or impoverished, to improve their lives, to understand the social forces that affect them, and eventually to harness these forces to processes of genuine human development.³²

Goulet’s analysis and questions seem valid: that is, traditional cultures have struggled with some success to maintain their value systems in the wake of the modern forces of economic development, and these traditional values should be respected and harnessed for a just and equitable development paradigm. But how do we know which traditional values should be respected and harnessed and which should be rejected? One direction to take in answering this question is to entertain the importance Goulet places on the

religious dimension of human life for determining how development should be pursued.

According to Goulet, the religious dimension provides a primary source of meaning that is non-material and that can provide hope in the midst of life's quandaries and tragedies. But this fact does not suggest for Goulet that religion should be used instrumentally as a tool to engineer development projects and programs; that is, religious values should be seen as a development aid, as a means, for the achievement of certain goals or development strategies promoted by development agencies or government authorities. Goulet has been particularly concerned that indigenous religious values have been "harnessed" to promote development goals that fail to meet the real needs and aspirations of indigenous peoples in developed and developing countries.³³ Rather, for Goulet, religious values can play a vital role in the necessary function of determining how development should be pursued, of determining ends consonant with the needs and aspirations of the particular community in question.³⁴ Goulet characterizes this approach as a "means of the means, that is, as a moral beacon illuminating the values questions buried inside instrumental means appealed to by decision-makers and problem solvers of all kinds."³⁵ One of Goulet's most important epistemological contributions to the discussion of whether it is the means or the ends that are most significant for development theories and practitioners to consider is his comment that "the closer any knowledge comes to human subjects—especially in their social context—the more difficult it becomes to sustain any real difference between observed connections among phenomena and the organization of the ends of action."³⁶ Thus, for Goulet, it is not just the ends that count, nor the means, but the "means of the means."

Goulet admits that development ethics is centrally concerned with the means of human action, but he is also suggesting that ends are necessary to guide and orient decision-making. Yet, he is concerned that ends not be understood as a spiritual "other-worldly solace" in the midst of unjust structures. Thus, development ethics must function in praxis, reflecting critically on the meaning and value of human action.

For Nussbaum and Sen, religious or transcendental values are extrinsic, set apart from human needs and aspirations. Goulet, on the other hand, takes a different position, namely, that the connections between religion and human history are "intrinsic and essential, not extrinsic or accidental."³⁷ Charles Taylor makes a similar point in his review of Nussbaum's book, *The Fragility of Goodness*. Taylor characterizes Nussbaum's version of the good life

as Aristotelian *eudaimonia* only, without any aspiration to transcendence. Taylor posits that the aspiration to transcendence “can turn us toward this life with a new attention and concern, as has undoubtedly been the case with the Judaeo-Christian tradition, with decisive consequences for our whole moral outlook.”³⁸

In much the same way, Goulet contends that religion has at its core a commitment to human flourishing and, thus, a dedication to oppose those barriers that mitigate against human flourishing, a dedication to the cause of justice. “It is a mistake,” he says, “to assume that development is incompatible with religion. On the contrary, mutually respectful encounters between religious values and sound development plans usually prove beneficial to both sides.”³⁹ Here Goulet’s analysis that building history and witnessing to transcendence coexist has been shaped by theologies of liberation.⁴⁰ In sum, Goulet asserts that religious values will challenge development models to become more humane and, in fact, will expand the range of values for a “fuller” development ethic.

Taken together, these various accounts of the role that such aspirations to transcendence can play in economic development proposals show that religious traditions contain a deep and evaluative component. Indeed, it is in the nature of such traditions to ask both implicitly and explicitly which functional capabilities of a human being are so important, so central, that their absence would mean the absence of a human life. Questions about functional capabilities, about a development ethic that is just and equitable, are the concerns not only of philosophy and law (Nussbaum) and development economics (Sen) but also of religious ethics (Goulet).

NOTES

¹ For a formative essay on development ethics, see David A. Crocker, “Toward Development Ethics,” *World Development* 19 (1991): 457-483.

² Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, *The Quality of Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 1-8.

³ Martha Nussbaum, “Human Functioning and Social Justice: In Defense of Aristotelian Essentialism,” *Political Theory* 20 (1992): 208.

⁴ Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 17-22.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶ *Ibid.* Numerous times in the same text, Nussbaum criticizes the Christian tradition through her reading of Greek texts (119-120, 197-198, 200-201, 267-268).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁸ Martha Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, and Species Membership*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2006), 76-78.

⁹ Martha Nussbaum, "Religion and Women's Human Rights," in *Religion and Contemporary Liberalism*, ed. Paul J. Weitham (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 93-97. See also, Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 167-240.

¹⁰ Martha Nussbaum, "Aristotle on Human Nature and the Foundations of Ethics," in *World, Mind, and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams*, ed. J.E.G. Altham and Ross Harrison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 104-107. On the matter of practical reason, or an "internal-realist" conception as Nussbaum calls it, the work of Hilary Putnam and Charles Taylor is often appropriated; for example, see Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); *The Many Faces of Realism* (La Salle: Open Court Publishing, 1987); and Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); "Explanation and Practical Reason," in Nussbaum and Sen, *The Quality of Life*, 208-231.

¹¹ Martha Nussbaum, "Comparing Virtues," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 21 (1993): 357.

¹² *Ibid.*, 357-358. Here Nussbaum draws on her earlier essay with Amartya Sen, "Internal Criticism and Indian Rationalist Traditions," in *Relativism, Interpretation, and Confrontation*, ed. Michael Krausz (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 299-325. Nussbaum's capability approach is closely related to Sen's approach on the comparative measurements of quality of life for which he won the Nobel Prize in Economics in 1999, but Nussbaum moves beyond Sen to provide the philosophical underpinnings of core human entitlements that all governments should respect and implement as bare minimums for social justice and human dignity.

¹³ Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development*, 190.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* In her latest book, *The Clash Within: Democracy, Religious Violence, and India's Future* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), Nussbaum returns again to India to document how religious extremism can threaten India's constitutional commitment of religious pluralism, tolerance, and democracy. She examines the killing of nearly 2,000 Muslims by Hindu right wing extremists in the 2002 Gujarat riots.

¹⁵ Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*, 78. There are ten central human capabilities that Nussbaum lists, three of which explicitly include religion, the "freedom of religious exercise," "the liberty of conscience and religious observance," and "nondiscrimination on the basis of religion."

¹⁶ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Alfred Knoff, 1999), 282.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Denis Goulet, *Development Ethics: A Guide to Theory and Practice* (New York: Apex Books, 1995), 2005. The chapter is a slightly revised and updated version of an earlier article, "Development Experts: The One-Eyed Giants," *World Development* 8 (1980): 481-489.

¹⁹ Goulet, *Development Ethics*, 205.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 205-206.

²¹ Denis Goulet, "Development Experts," 482.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Denis Goulet, "The Search for Authentic Development," in *The Logic of Solidarity*, ed. Robert Ellsberg and Gregory Baum (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989), 134.

²⁵ Denis Goulet, "An Ethical Model for the Study of Values," *Harvard Educational Review* 41 (1971): 206-207. Here we are reminded of the capability approach articulated a few years later by Sen and Nussbaum.

²⁶ See especially, Denis Goulet, "Development: Creator and Destroyer of Values," *World Development* 20 (1992): 467-475; "International Ethics and Human Rights," *Alternatives* 17 (1992):

231-246; and "Culture and Traditional Values in Development," in *The Ethics of Development: The Pacific in the 21st Century*, ed. Susan Stratigos and Philip J. Hughes (Port Moresby: University of Papua New Guinea Press, 1987), 165-178.

²⁷ Goulet, "Development: Creator and Destroyer of Values," 471.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 472.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 473.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 176.

³³ For example, see Goulet, "Culture and Traditional Values," 165-178; and "Ethics in Development Work," *SEDOS* 22 (1990): 53-59 and "Global Governance, Dam Conflicts, and Participation, Human Rights Quarterly 27 (2005): 881-207. In the latter essay, Goulet documents in Brazil's water/dam policy that participatory governance is possible in macro economic sectors.

³⁴ Goulet, *Development Ethics*, 208-211.

³⁵ Denis Goulet, "Tasks and Methods in Development Ethics," *Cross Currents* 38 (1988): 158.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Goulet, *Development Ethics*, 212.

³⁸ Charles Taylor, review of *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, by Martha Nussbaum, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 18 (1988): 813.

³⁹ Goulet, *Development Ethics*, 213-214.

⁴⁰ Denis Goulet, *A New Moral Order: Development Ethics and Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1974); "Is Economic Justice Possible," *Cross Currents* 31 (1981): 35-51; and "The Search for Authentic Development," 127-142.