
Liturgies of Development: Formation for Working Among the Poor

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Mainstream discourses of international development are deeply rooted in secular ways of imagining the world, enclosed within an immanent frame. Therefore, as Christians engage in the development field, they will face tensions between the embedded secular assumptions of the field and their faith commitment. Some theorists have sought to resolve this dissonance through articulating ideal Christian models of development. In practice, however, Christians who work in the field operate within the synergies and tensions emerging from these different underlying assumptions. Christian development practitioners are at risk of becoming formed by the rituals and practices of the field and thus inculcated into secular ways of viewing their work. Based on a practical theology approach, this article argues that Christians should be formed for their work in development through participating in corporate worship and illustrates this by outlining how one expression of liturgical worship can be formational for Christian development practitioners.

In his book *Walking with the Poor*, Bryant Myers argues that Christians working in the field of international development are at risk of becoming “functional atheists” in their work (Myers 2014, 222). The reason for this is that mainstream development discourses are rooted in a secular understanding of the world, where humanity is assumed to be enclosed within the material world without reference to the divine. As Christians engage in the field of development, they are in danger of adopting these secular assumptions, or at least encountering a fraught tension between their work and their faith. The goal of this paper is to articulate a practical theology for Christian development practitioners. I do not attempt to conceptualize a singular Christian approach to international development that can be directly compared to secular approaches. Rather, I argue that Christian development work takes places within the synergies and tensions emerging from these differences. As Christians engage in the field of development, they can become formed by its rituals and practices, and inculcated into secular ways of viewing their work. I describe these practices as “developmentalist liturgies,” and argue that Christian development practitioners should resist this formation by making explicit the secular assumptions underlying these practices. Additionally, Christians are called to see their participation in regular corporate worship as forming them to work as development practitioners in a way that is aligned with their faith.

Tensions Experienced by Christian Development Practitioners

I personally experienced tensions between the assumptions of the development field and Christian faith when writing funding proposals for church-based development projects in the Middle East. In order to be successful in fundraising, project proposals must be targeted to meet the priorities of the donor organizations. Therefore, for the same project I would write multiple versions to ensure that the proposal matched the ethos and criteria of each funding organization. For example, one funding proposal I wrote for the construction of a new clinic at a Christian hospital emphasized the quality and accessibility of medical care. A separate proposal written for a Christian organization was framed in a different way, with an emphasis both on the medical care and the Christian witness to the patients at the hospital. While both proposals accurately reflected the hospital’s ethos and practice, the act of creating different proposals exemplifies the sense of dissonance Christian practitioners may encounter as they engage in development work. This requirement to be fluent in the languages of secular development and one’s own faith tradition can feel at times to border on a kind of cultural schizophrenia.

Tensions also surfaced for me in a subsequent decision about post-graduate study. My motivation for pursuing study was to be equipped for future roles in development, and I was presented with the choice between studying either international development or Christian theology. Because I felt drawn to continue

working at a grassroots level, rather than roles designing development projects from a distant office, I chose to study theology at a residential seminary. Studying theology seemed to offer a better opportunity to address the deeper questions I had around poverty and suffering, and I hoped the spiritual formation would equip me to work in challenging places without feeling overwhelmed or experiencing burn-out. As soon as I started studying, however, I experienced doubts about this choice. At times, Western academic theology felt distant and abstracted from the contexts I had been working in. Conversely, I felt sure that if I had studied international development, I would have felt frustrated with the secular assumptions of the field and the lack of engagement with the theological questions I wanted to address. I explored this tension through writing a thesis using the lens of practical theology (Swinton and Mowat 2016). This paper builds on that initial work, which reflects on how theology both affirms and subverts mainstream development discourses and how Christians can seek to faithfully engage in the field (Fyfe 2018).

Assumptions of Mainstream Development Discourses

The field of international development is so comprehensive that it may be constitutive of a social imaginary (Taylor 2007, 171-172). Development has become a lens through which societies and individuals have come to define themselves and others. While development is often imagined to be a neutral moral good, the discourses of the field carry within them implicit assumptions about human flourishing, and the telos, or better future, that development activities seek to achieve. For example, while some discourses focus on increasing overall GDP or meeting individual's basic needs, recent approaches emphasize increasing people's freedom and capacity to choose. Development discourses also carry within them assumptions about the pathways to a better future. In theological terms, these questions relate to eschatology: what is our final hope and how do we get there? In what or whom do we place our trust?

The assumptions of mainstream development discourses are consonant with the inventive notion of the secular. In his book *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor defines a particular usage of the term secular to describe this current period in the West in which the conditions of belief have changed (Taylor 2007). Religious belief is now one of many options and is therefore both contestable and contested (Berger 1980). This context

makes exclusive humanism possible, a social imaginary that accounts for meaning and significance without any appeal to the divine. Development discourses are secular in this sense; they inhabit an immanent frame that limits the scope of reality to the material world closed to the possibility of transcendence. This social imaginary profoundly impacts the way that humans are viewed: the self is seen as contained to the natural order and closed off to the transcendent. The telos towards which development discourses are therefore oriented is limited within an immanent frame, and humans are consequently viewed as only material beings with no reference to the transcendent. Furthermore, development discourses carry within them a secularized eschatology; they hold an implicit belief in the ability of human agency to end global poverty (Anderson 1999, 110).

This social construction of the immanent frame contrasts with a biblical view of the world and the role of humanity. The world described in Scripture is enchanted; there is a porous boundary between the spiritual and material (Taylor 2007). The better future, or telos, revealed in Scripture is the kingdom of God. Rather than defining our own telos, humanity receives a telos from outside of ourselves, a better future that ultimately comes about through God's agency. Although we have a mandate to bring about signs of God's kingdom on earth, it is God who ushers in his kingdom when Jesus Christ returns to earth. Thus, the implicit telos within predominant ideologies of international development run counter to the teleological orientation given in Scripture. An implication of this is that Christians working in the field of international development can become inculcated into secular ways of imaging the world; catechized into an understanding of the world and the role of humanity therein, which runs counter to the reality of the kingdom of God.

Shaped by Developmentalist Liturgies

One means by which development practitioners can come to adopt the secular assumptions of mainstream discourses is through participating in the liturgies of development practices. Liturgies are rituals and practices that shape and form us. All liturgy, whether sacred or secular, is identity forming (Harrison Warren 2019, 28-29). As congregants gather for Sunday worship, they are shaped and formed according to the telos of God's kingdom. Liturgies can also form us for a telos antithetical to the kingdom of God, which James K. A. Smith labels as "secular liturgies" (2009).¹

¹Smith argues that liturgies, whether "sacred" or "secular" shape and constitute our identities by forming our most fundamental desires and our most basic attunement to the world. He defines liturgies as "rituals of ultimate concern:

Smith argues that humans are essentially teleological creatures, formed and shaped by their vision of the good life. Each person carries a vision of what human flourishing looks like, and one's actions and decisions flow out of this: "we begin to live into this vision of the good life and start to look like the citizens who inhabit the world that we picture" (Smith 2009, 54). Smith maintains that people's affective desires influence their actions more than cognitive thought; "we are what we love," he says (Smith 2009, 40). Therefore, people are formed by their visions of the good life, and the kingdoms that they desire, more than they are by ideas or theories (Schmemmann 1963, 15).² People's visions of the good life are profoundly shaped by the liturgies, the everyday rituals and practices, which they participate in.

The liturgies of many mainstream development practices, which I refer to as "developmentalist liturgies," fit into Smith's category of secular liturgies. They are rooted within secular ways of imagining the world, and with a telos other than the kingdom of God. When Christian practitioners engage in developmentalist liturgies they are at risk of adopting the teleological orientation and the view of humanity implicit within them. They can be influenced to see the world as limited within an immanent frame and forget the porous boundary between the natural and supernatural world. Christian development organizations, or Christians working within secular organizations, cannot avoid participating in these practices. One Christian NGO leader claims that "to gain credibility, legitimacy, or funding in the secular development world, faith based organizations must operate in a way that is consistent with its secular discourse" (Mitchell 2017, 5).³ An example of a developmentalist liturgy, described in the introduction, is the act of writing funding proposals to meet particular sets of criteria. If these criteria are embedded in secular ways of imagining the world, then writing proposals can inculcate development practitioners with visions of human flourishing limited within an immanent frame. Engaging in development work can lead practitioners to assume that human agency can ultimately solve the problem of poverty. This can be contrasted with the

transcendent eschatology described in Scripture, where ultimately poverty and suffering will cease when God ushers in His kingdom and the effects of sin and death are finally ended.

Another example of a developmentalist liturgy are the tools used to assess the effectiveness of development projects. Reporting becomes a way of defining what development is, and invariably excludes any spiritual impacts (Mitchell 2017, 5). Additionally, while tools such as logframes⁴ are effective in measuring if projects have met their predefined outcomes and outputs, they can be used in an overly mechanistic way. For example, if they are used as the sole arbiter of whether or not projects are successful, particularly in the absence of relationships between donor organizations and project implementers, these tools fail to describe the full picture. Abstracted metrics cannot convey the complexity of implementing projects. For example, for a project I worked on in Ethiopia, the Western donor organization outsourced the evaluation process to a third party in the United States which had no relationship to those implementing the project. While this process was designed to ensure neutrality, the results did not adequately consider the complexities on the ground, which included ethnic violence, the influx of refugees and shortages of materials. Such a reductionist approach, which places sole value on measurement tools, stands in contrast to normative assumptions about giving and the nature of the Church found in Scripture. The apostle Paul describes the Church as the body of Christ, united in the Holy Spirit. This unity of belonging means that if one part of the body suffers then all suffer (1 Cor 12: 26). Christian partnership is deeper than donor/donee relationships governed by measurable goals and indicators but rooted in our shared identity that we are part of the same body. This does not exclude the use of measurement tools, but for Christians they should be used in the context of partnerships rooted in a familial unity under the headship of Christ.

I have argued that Christian practitioners working within international development systems and organizations are at risk of being shaped by the secular liturgies of the field. The Augustinian distinction of the

rituals that are formative for identity, that inculcate particular visions of the good life, and do so in a way that means to trump other ritual formations."

² Schmemmann similarly argues that homo sapiens are "first of all, homo adorans," that is primarily humanity was created to worship.

³ Mitchell describes the purpose of reporting as merely "to report quantifiable results in industry approved language," and argues that the "result is a mechanistic and perfunctory exercise that has the effect of excluding any deeper consideration of the interplay between religious beliefs and development practice or outcomes."

⁴ Logical framework analysis (logframe) is a measurement tool which sets out program activities, short term outputs, medium term outcomes, and long-term goals in a table. The goal is to show the logic of how the activities will lead to the outputs, which in turn lead to the outcomes, and ultimately the long-term goals.

earthly city and the heavenly city, based on New Testament writings, provides a helpful framework for Christian development practitioners who want to live out their faith in their work.⁵ While Christians live their earthly lives in what is known as “the saeculum,” the time between the fall and the coming kingdom in which the Church and the world live intermingled together, they live as resident aliens. They reside in the earthly city, but live out their citizenship of the heavenly city (Smith 2017). This means that even while engaging in international development practices, Christians should resist being shaped by the secular assumptions of the field. They should live with a posture of hope; not a futile hope formed from within humanity, but a hope in God’s kingdom. One way of resisting the formational influence of cultural liturgies is to make explicit the secular visions of human flourishing embedded in the practices of the field. Alongside resistance and critique, Christians are called to participate in corporate worship and be formed for all their life and work in the world (Schmemmann 1963, 11-17).⁶ The following section describes how church liturgies form Christian development practitioners and compares these with assumptions embedded within developmentalist liturgies.

Christian Liturgy: For the Life of the World

Christian worship is an act of allegiance that forms citizens of the kingdom of God to live their lives in obedience to the one true king. Christian worship is an act of defiance to the spirit of this age, as Christians instead focus their worship and hope on the Spirit who is ageless (Iddings Bell 1944). Instead of seeking kingdoms created by human hands and imagined within the human mind, Christian worship orients people toward the kingdom of God. Participating in liturgy shapes identity. Liturgies used in Sunday worship at churches shape worshippers into alternative social imaginaries, based on the assumptions of Scripture (Smith 2009, 134). The worship enacted by Christians on a weekly basis shapes the lens through which all the world is seen. All church worship is liturgical, regardless of whether formal written liturgy is used. The underlying question is what kind of people is the liturgy forming us to be (Harrison Warren 2019, 30). This section suggests how the liturgy of Sunday worship forms Christians working in the field of

international development, and counteracts the formative power of secular liturgies (The Episcopal Church 1979). This is based on my own tradition within the Anglican Church, specifically I examine the liturgy of the Holy Eucharist from the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, according to the use of the Episcopal Church of the USA.

Christian liturgy is enacted by the *ekklēsia*, the called-out ones: people who have been called out of the world in order to live according to a different telos shaped by Scripture.⁷ The congregation gathers together to become the body of Christ, a transformed community engaged in the redemptive task of Christ in the world. The purpose of gathering at church is to be shaped for the life of the world: to see the reality of the world more clearly, in the light of Christ, and to be sent back into the world as witnesses to that Light. The liturgy can be understood as a journey that brings those gathered into the life of the triune God. The destination of this journey is announced at the beginning of the service: “Blessed be God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And blessed be his kingdom, now and for ever. Amen” (The Episcopal Church 1979, 355). The Church is the gathering of those to whom the destination of all life has been revealed, and who choose to re-orient their lives toward the kingdom of God. The kingdom is not a utopian vision derived from within humanity; it is a telos imparted by God and accepted by humanity as a gift. For those working in international development, this declaration signifies an acceptance of the kingdom of God as the master discourse that trumps the teleological claims of all other ideologies.

After declaring the telos of the kingdom, the congregation kneels in repentance, confessing individual and corporate failures to live in alignment with God’s kingdom. Mainstream development discourses have an inadequate explanation of the human condition, as they do not recognize the power of sin. This results in an underestimation of the brokenness of the world, and an over-reliance on systems and techniques to bring about solutions. The confession is a reminder that even if the best possible system or program is implemented, the human condition remains broken and under the power of sin and death. Therefore, confession of sin counters secular liturgies of self-reliance and human progress. Through confession, there is an acknowledgement that the problem lies within the human heart, which is

⁵ For example, Philippians 3:20; Hebrews 12:22-24.

⁶ In this seminal work, Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann highlights that Christians are in danger of either becoming ‘spiritualists,’ where the spiritual life is placed as solely important, or ‘activists’ who focus on social action. He highlights the importance of liturgy in forming Christians for their life in the world.

⁷ *Ekklēsia* is the Greek word translated as “church” in most English translations of Scripture.

deceitful above all things (Jer 17:9). The sin of the congregation is absolved through the declaration that all sins are forgiven “through our Lord Jesus Christ” (The Episcopal Church 1979, 353). Sin is met by grace, because Jesus Christ absorbed all of human brokenness in himself, and defeated the powers of sin and death. Christ did not come to offer a program for a world gone wrong, but offered his own body as a sacrifice for sin, and his transformative presence to create new hearts. Confession and absolution remind the congregation both of their own complicity in the brokenness of the world, and the promise of the transforming power of Christ, given through the Holy Spirit.

During the prayers of the people, the congregation intercedes for the Church and for the whole world. Through the act of prayer, God’s people acknowledge that they cannot fix all the problems of the world, let alone their own selves, and thus place themselves and the world into the hands of the Almighty God. The Lord’s Prayer, the prayer taught by Jesus to his disciples, guides the life of Christians in the world. The petition “Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as in heaven” undermines the activist mentality that human agency can save the world. The Lord’s Prayer also undermines an over-spiritualized view of the world, as the congregation are asking God for his kingdom and his reign to come “on earth as in heaven.”

The central part of the liturgy is the Eucharistic prayers, which bring the congregation both to look back to Christ’s death and resurrection, and look forward to the marriage supper of the Lamb, the eschatological feast that will take place at the consummation of God’s kingdom (Rev 19). The Eucharistic prayer begins with the *sursum corda*: the celebrant declares “lift up your hearts,” and the congregation responds “we lift them to the Lord” (The Episcopal Church, 361). In the lifting up of their hearts to the Lord, the congregation are “stretched out of the comforts of immanence” (Smith 2009, 298). They acknowledge that communion with the transcendent God is possible, because the transcendent has already entered the material world. This liturgical action counters development ideologies, which enclose humanity within the immanent frame of the material world.

The prayer of anamnesis, “we celebrate the memorial of our redemption, O Father, in this sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving,” recalls Christ’s command and invitation to eat the bread and drink the cup “in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19) (The Episcopal Church 1979 363). Looking back to Christ’s death, resurrection and ascension, frames the next part of the liturgy where worshippers offer up the gifts of bread and wine, and their whole lives, to God. As the worshippers offer up themselves, they remember that Christ has already offered all. The myth that humans can save the world, or that the end of poverty will come about

through human agency alone, is shattered in the remembrance that Jesus Christ has already won the victory. This puts any engagement in the field of development within a framework that in an ultimate sense the suffering of poverty will be resolved when God ushers in his kingdom at the eschaton.

The Eucharistic liturgy continues with the prayer of epiclesis: “sanctify them [the bread and wine] by your Holy Spirit to be for your people the Body and Blood of your Son, the holy food and drink of new and unending life in him” (The Episcopal Church 1979 363). The invocation of the Holy Spirit underscores the eschatological nature of the sacrament. The Holy Spirit is a sign that the powers of the age to come have broken into the present age (Heb 6:5). The celebrant then calls down the Holy Spirit on the gathered people: “sanctify us also that we may faithfully receive this holy Sacrament, and serve you in unity, constancy and peace” (The Episcopal Church 1979 363). They now invite the Holy Spirit to empower their life in the world so as to be used in service to God. While development ideologies place their hope in technocratic programs and systems to transform the world, the promise given in the liturgy is that all suffering will end when God ushers in his kingdom. In this present time, Christians are given the Holy Spirit, a sign of new creation, to empower them as they engage in God’s work in the world.

At the Eucharistic table, the congregation is invited to partake in the bread and wine, the Body and Blood of Christ. In consuming the elements, communicants are in fact being consumed by God (Cavanaugh 2009). They are taken up into the life of the triune God, united with Christ through his Spirit, and united with each other, transformed into the body of Christ. The individual self is decentred and put in context of a much wider community of participation with others in the divine life (Cavanaugh 2009, 54). Aquinas argued that in the consumption of the Eucharist, God’s people cease to become “other” to each other. Pope John Paul II described the Eucharist as “the school of active love for neighbour”: the Eucharist both requires and affects reconciliation, painting a normative picture of how the world should be (Pope John Paul II 1980). The Eucharist proclaims that in God’s kingdom none will go hungry, and none will have surplus; it is a feast where all are filled, a feast of forgiveness and reconciliation.

After partaking in the life of the risen Christ in the Eucharist, members of the congregation are sent to witness to that light. The congregation petitions God: “send us now into the world in peace, and grant us strength and courage to love and serve you with gladness and singleness of heart through Christ our Lord” (The Episcopal Church 1979, 365). Participation in the Eucharist is not an end in itself, but it forms people to engage in the redemptive task of bringing

signs of God's kingdom in the world. After the congregation shares the broken body of Christ, participants are then sent out to be broken for others. They are blessed to be a blessing to others. Monika Hellwig argues that a person cannot be one with Jesus in the Eucharist and then ignore the cries of the poor: "to accept the bread of the Eucharist is to accept to be bread and sustenance for the poor of the world." (Hellwig 1976, 78). The Eucharist undermines the notion that "the world is ours to save," as communicants are reminded that the world has already been saved by Jesus Christ. The Eucharist also challenges an over-spiritualized understanding of the world, as the Eucharist forms believers for the life of the world, not to escape from it.

Conclusions

The goal of this paper is to offer a practical theology for Christians working in the field of international development. I have not sought to create a tidy conceptual model for what Christian development should ideally look like. I have argued instead that Christians engaged in the field, whether they work for Christian or secular organizations, inevitably face tension. These tensions arise from the differences between a biblical view of the world, and the secular assumptions underlying mainstream development discourses. As Christian development practitioners engage in the discourses and practices of the field, they are at risk of adopting these underlying assumptions. One way to resist this formation is by exposing and naming these tensions. There is great value in Christians participating in conversations which identify both the synergies and the dissonances that arise from being people of faith engaging in a field governed by secular assumptions. Forums like this journal provide valuable places for a community of practitioners and theorists to wrestle with these tensions. These conversations help to build both critical analysis of mainstream discourses and encourage Christians towards faithful participation in their development work.

In addition to resisting malformation through naming and describing the dissonances, Christian development practitioners are called to see their participation in corporate worship as formational for their vocation. Christians can sometimes see Sunday corporate worship as separate from their vocation, while I argue that participation in corporate worship forms Christians as an alternate people with a specific calling to live out in the world. It offers a reminder of the missional calling of every Christian and shapes the desires of worshippers towards God's kingdom. The final section of the paper illustrates how a particular form of liturgical worship shapes Christians to engage in the field of international development. I describe

how the liturgy forms worshippers with an alternative telos and understanding of our role in the world, a naming which counteracts the formative power of developmentalist liturgies. It is important to note that enacting liturgy does not automatically lead to transformation. Ultimately it is the Holy Spirit that transforms our hearts and minds as we worship, forming us as Christ's ambassadors tasked with bringing signs of God's kingdom into a broken world.

The question this paper has sought to address is how Christians can engage in the field of international development in a way that is aligned with their faith. I have argued that in the complexity of actual practice, it is not possible to follow a singular idealistic model of Christian development. Yet Christians should also be careful not to adopt wholesale the discourses and practices of mainstream development, because they are rooted in secular ways of imagining the world. Rather, Christians can acknowledge that as they engage with the tools, practices, and discourses of the field, they inevitably face tension. Christians are called both to participate whole-heartedly in the goals of international development of decreasing poverty in the world, but also, as they engage in the field, to remain at a critical and subversive distance and work in a way that is faithful to their faith. This is not easy, but this is in fact the call of every follower of Jesus Christ, as we wait for Christ to return and God's kingdom to come in its fullness. As we live in the midst of a broken world, in the earthly city, we are called to faithfulness to live out our calling as citizens of the kingdom of God, and to let our hearts and vocations be shaped by this calling.

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