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# Further Discussion on Tough Questions About Transformational Development

Moderated by David Bronkema, with Contributions from Ravi Jayakaran, Philip Powell, Katie Toop, and Richard Slimbach.

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On June 27, 2023, the Accord Research Alliance Faculty Group organized a webinar to provide a space for discussion on Richard Slimbach's article "[Asking Tough Questions About Transformational Development](#)," published in this journal in the summer of 2023 (Slimbach 2023). The webinar was moderated by David Bronkema, co-editor of the journal, and started with remarks by three main discussants: Ravi Jayakaran (president of Medical Ambassadors International) who tackled Slimbach's questions around faith and development; Philip Powell (co-director of the Justice Conference, UK, and also Theology and Network Engagement Manager with Tearfund, UK) who responded to questions involving faith and political economy; and Katie Toop (senior director of transformational development with World Concern), who addressed the questions of faith and field partnerships. These three responses, published separately in this issue of the journal along with Slimbach's comments on them, were followed by a moderated discussion between the author and the three respondents, which is reproduced below in a lightly edited version. The specific and detailed questions posed by Richard Slimbach are found in the original article, and the full recording of the webinar can be found at <https://vimeo.com/844345288/e970fe8826?share=copy>.

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## David Bronkema

A question for Philip: It seems that one undercurrent in Rich's article is that Christian development NGOs engaged in relief, development, and advocacy should in some way be wrestling with the degree to which they are complicit with capitalism, militarism, and also ecocide or environmental problems like climate change. So, Phillip, since you addressed the structural aspects in your response, what do you think the role of NGOs should be in tackling this issue of whether they are or are not complicit in this? Are they facilitating the perpetuation of these structures and systems Rich has mentioned? To what degree should NGOs be self-reflective in terms of what Rich has argued?

## Philip Powell

I guess the answer would be "yes" to your question. It is working out the details of if that self-reflection happens, where do we go with it? What are your ways to measure that you're making some progress to do things differently? So, for example, if you say you care about the destruction of the planet and you want to do something about it, are you avoiding air travel? There are some small steps we can

take. But the bigger question is about systems and it is hard to generalize about capitalism, because the more you study the phenomenon, you realize there is more than one kind of capitalism in the world. There are different ways in which capitalism is being done in China and the Scandinavian countries and the United States. Therefore, what I'm expecting of Christian NGOs is both to be self-consciously critical and reflective, but also to avoid thinking that we've solved the problem when we promote a Muhammad Yunus model of free enterprise in places like Bangladesh. Ultimately, gains at the community level are going to have to be worked out in relation to all the meta stuff that is going on. Inequality in the world has increased dramatically. Until we deal with such meta questions of structural injustice and how it eats into the small gains we make at the local level, I don't see how NGOs can simply say we are happy distributing clean water in plastic bottles when we have not dealt with the fact that the wells have been polluted in the first place.

## David Bronkema

Katie, I wonder if you could respond to what Philip just said. You spoke today about partnerships at the local level. Obviously, there are dire needs there,

survival needs, for relief, but also in development. Do you think there is time for NGOs to be self-consciously critical and reflective? Should time be made?

### **Katie Toop**

This is indeed a great question. We were just engaging in conversation with our teams in Bangladesh and looking at our principles, and so many of the things that oppose our principles are time and time restrictions. We are so driven by the tyranny of the urgent. Should we be considering this? Absolutely. Will we? This is another question. I think we can look at the history of the work in development as an example, and if we take an entirely different topic and think about the importance of community ownership, well, we have known about that for decades. But has that shaped the way that we approach community engagement? Not in a lot of ways. In some places, yes. And in small pockets, yes. Is there time and space? There is the time and the space that we make for it. I should say that when we consider issues like climate impact, this is what communities themselves are crying out for. They are feeling the weight of this, and it what comes up all the time. We recently had an external evaluation and, again, this is what comes up from communities, saying “we don't know what to do about extreme climate issues and we don't have an answer. This is what we need.” If we can be genuinely responsive to that and recognize that we are called to serve those who are disproportionately feeling the effects of this, then yes, but we have to choose to make those shifts, and we have to choose to ask those potentially costly questions and be willing to change the way that we do things and ask ourselves if we are ready to do that.

### **David Bronkema**

Ravi, what if communities are not identifying a gap that has to do with the political economy, with capitalism, or with militarism? How do we deal with that at the local level? Is it our responsibility to impose those kinds of issues, or are those issues already there and we are just not recognizing them?

### **Ravi Jayakaran**

First of all, the issue is that in terms of the size of organizations, Christian organizations, even the mega organizations, do not have much influence in the global economy, and as Christian NGOs we still play a very, very diminished role in making global change. Second, though, what is important is to look for what and where the points of conflict are for the people that we work with and those who support us. Those specific conflicts for them are the relevant ones for our work. When an issue comes up, when a point of conflict comes up, it might be a purely local issue that needs addressing, but

it might also be connected with something that calls for global change and for engagement in advocacy. That is when you look back to your supporters, and if advocacy in that area is going to cause them to feel conflicted or held back, then you need to reach a decision with them about whether it should be engaged or not. In other words, there are some situations where people talk about social justice, for example an issue of racial problems, that affects everyone. The question is how much would your supporters want you to be engaged in addressing that? Because it would call for changes for them too.

### **David Bronkema**

To close this rich conversation, any highlights and takeaways that jumped out at each of you?

### **Ravi Jayakaran**

It has been a great dialogue-starter for us to more succinctly address the sort of frameworks we use. It also calls for more dialogue on these issues among those of us who are engaged in this work. I am glad that you brought out some of those important questions, Rich. We need to address them. For a long time, we have been engaged with simply doing what we are doing. Like I said, sometimes what we are doing is so small compared to the larger global needs. And no one is questioning us in terms of our framework and what we are advocating. It is important for us to start looking at that, address it, and dialogue on it. So thank you.

### **Philip Powell**

I would like to mention a couple of things. In my own mind, I am trying to make a distinction between the four broken relationships—God, others, self, and nature—but also talk about broken systems and how to deal with those. A big question is how to maintain institutions that sustain justice over time. To Ravi's point that you cannot bite the hand that feeds you, there are times when you have to choose to do something, but you need wisdom for that. Years ago, Tearfund decided to start talking publicly and with supporters about how climate change is affecting communities we are working with. Supporters wanted to know why, if we were there to help communities in poverty, why were we jumping on the green bandwagon. But now, twenty years later, we have earned a role of leadership in making some difficult choices. The last thing I want to say is that Christian and Jewish Christian development leaders can play a role in shifting norms. So even if diversity and inclusion at some point looks like window dressing, over the long term, there can be ways in which you see a substantive difference. I would also highly recommend a book that came out a couple of years ago called *The Enchantments of Mammon: How Capitalism Became*

*the Religion of Modernity* by Eugene McCarragher (2019). It is a long book, about 700 pages, but it helps one see the spiritual and enchantment dimensions of capitalism. I would love to talk about it more sometime.

### **Katie Toop**

I love that there's a curiosity and openness to considering difficult questions. At the beginning of Rich's article, there is a quote that talks about loving questions. I appreciate and agree with that, especially because we are often afraid of questions. Let us not be afraid of questions or of the dialogue. We also recognize in this dialogue that it takes courage to do something differently, to even talk about something differently. So choosing to move ahead in courage is important. Yet as much as we dialogue around our questions, we must also be careful not to love our questions so much that we fail to listen for answers. There will not be one-size-fits-all solutions. But we need to remember there is a Spirit who will guide us and a God who promises to give wisdom if we ask. As we ask questions of each other, we should also remain in a posture of humility before a God who has promised to give us wisdom.

### **Richard Slimbach**

Following up on what Phillip mentioned, you can find a much shorter examination of political economy as a religious system in an early 2000 article by Harvey Cox, "The Market as God." Very, very powerful. It shows how modern consumer capitalism provides an ultimate sense of meaning and purpose in people's lives, a path to fulfillment. It has its own rituals, sacraments, high priests, etc. A more forthright critique coming out of the relief and development community of this global system could help those on the ground. Local churches and their leaders interpret their context both locally and extend it outwardly, nationally and globally, in ways that might lend insight to their well-being initiatives.

### **References**

- Cox, Harvey. 1999. "The Market as God." *Atlantic Monthly* 283 (3): 18-23.
- McCarragher, Eugene. 2019. *The Enchantments of Mammon: How Capitalism Became the Religion of Modernity*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.