

REPORT

THE ETHICS OF DEVELOPMENT

**17th Waigani Seminar,
University of Papua New Guinea,
September 7-12, 1986**

The Waigani Seminars have made a significant contribution to Papua New Guinea's path to independence, and its subsequent development since their inception in 1968. At the time of the tenth anniversary of independence, which was celebrated on September 16, 1985, the country was going through what Fr John Momis (then Deputy Prime Minister and now Deputy Leader of the Opposition) called "post-independence depression", a crisis of confidence fuelled by revelations of rampant crime and corruption. People were beginning to ask whether the values, both traditional and Christian, enshrined in the preamble to Papua New Guinea's constitution had not been sacrificed on the altar of development.

The Melanesian Institute, maintained by the four major churches (Roman Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran, Anglican, and United), for research into the dialogue between Melanesian traditions and Christianity, was thinking along these lines in planning a seminar to be offered to Melanesian leaders. Sensing this mood, Professor Garry Trompf (then Professor of History at UPNG, now Associate Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Sydney) proposed that the next Waigani Seminar concentrate on the ethical implications of development, and that the Melanesian Institute seminar in November, 1985, prepare the ground for it by treating a similar topic (the papers read at this seminar have been published in the Institute's *Point 9 as Ethics and Development in Papua New Guinea*, Gernot Fugmann, ed.).

The response to this suggestion was enthusiastic, and led to a stimulating and many-sided Waigani Seminar. The topic, "The Ethics of Development", was divided into five sections covering

Communication, Society, Economics, Environment, and Politics. International authorities in each of these fields were invited to give keynote addresses and take part in workshops with local academics and leaders. In this report, I cannot hope to include more than a fraction of what was said, though I shall begin by trying to summarise some important insights into the present situation of Papua New Guinea (I). I shall concentrate on the three main approaches to development ethics, which became apparent at the seminar (II), and I shall conclude by drawing together some of their implications for both ecumenical theology and religious studies (III).

The Situation: Papua New Guinea Comes of Age

Speeches by two very different political leaders served to set the parameters of realpolitik, within which discussion at the seminar moved. The youthful President of Kiribati (pop. 64,000, land area 700 sq km, Mr Ieremia Tabai, flung down a challenge to his Papua New Guinean hosts in his opening address. He said he was puzzled to have been invited to speak on ethics simply because his tiny country was negotiating a fishing deal with the Soviet Union, “because I believe there are no deep ethical questions involved”. For him, the ethical issue is undue dependence on powerful nations, whatever their ideological stamp, “including our traditional friends”. The contrast with Papua New Guinea’s aid relationship to Australia was apparent when the Australian Foreign Minister, Mr Bill Hayden, delivered a major policy speech designed to justify substantial reductions in that aid, not only because of the recent fall in value of the Australian dollar against the Papua New Guinea kina, but also in the light of a reassessment of the role of aid in development. Noting that “Australia still provides 85 per cent of PNG’s total aid receipts – and 26 per cent of its total budget revenue”, he asked: “Has this huge transfer and budget support, in fact, been a distorting influence on the development of PNG?”

UPNG economist Dr Roman Grynberg maintained, in a background paper, that the present coalition government under Prime Minister Paias Wingti and Finance Minister Sir Julius Chan is the first since independence in which economic policy is guided by a discernible ideology. He identified this ideology as a free market, supply side, even *laissez-faire* approach, in most, though not all, areas.

In a workshop presentation on transfer pricing (the practice by which transnational corporations avoid making profits in countries where taxation is high), Grynberg followed this up by documenting extensive malpractice in Papua New Guinea's timber industry, ranging from the government's disregard for world prices when setting its minimum export price, thus forfeiting millions of kina in excise, and aiding and abetting the transnationals in avoiding unwanted profits, to the bribing of timber inspectors by companies so that high-quality logs are exported under inferior classifications. The ethic of individualism, promoted by the present government, he implied, provides no answer to such economic exploitation.

The shadow side of supply-side economics was revealed when Sr John Paul Chao (anthropologist at the Melanesian Institute, Goroka) gave a detailed description of the powerlessness and destitution of settlement dwellers on the outskirts of Port Moresby. In common with such squatters throughout the Third World, they hate the police, mistrust the government, and are cynical about the churches, seeking their salvation in the only security they know: their traditional kinship bonds. Those who accompanied Sr John Paul on a field trip to the settlement were moved by the dignity with which the community leaders received the group and tried to explain their needs in halting English, but, personally, I was shaken to see, for the first time, hopelessness and defeat etched deep in the faces of Papua New Guineans.

The predominant impression left by the various workshops, however, was positive and hopeful. A team of medical researchers reported how traditional institutions, such as the men's house and the menstrual hut, are falling into disuse as villagers move closer to the huge Ok Tedi mining complex, causing the birthrate to double in one year; but, at the invitation of the company, the situation is being monitored and remedial policies elaborated. A Mt Hagen businesswoman recounted with verve and charm how she and her group have achieved success in a male-dominated society. Mr Tony Power (Office of Economic Services, East Sepik Provincial Government, Wewak) showed how customary land tenure, far from being the chief obstacle to development, as is frequently thought, can, in fact, provide a

basis for development acceptable to Melanesians if clan ownership of common land and shares in businesses is recognised. Ms Jean Kekedo, of the Ombudsman Commission, gave a spirited defence of her fight against corruption, and Mr Tony Deklin, of the UPNG Law Department, insisted that moral values provide the criteria for law-making, and not the other way round. Yet, underlying the debates on these and many other issues, such as, care of the environment, education policy, decentralisation of political power, freedom of the press, the introduction of television, and the status of women, were the more fundamental questions of development ethics, to which we must now turn.

The Remedies: Utilitarian, Humanitarian, or Religious?

I propose to hack three paths through the jungle of ethical presuppositions and ideological assumptions, beneath which the participants' ethical commitments were often concealed like mangrove roots in the shadows of more exotic growths. Not all contributors will be happy at being discovered along the particular path which led me to their basic positions, but the paths do not stop there: they are meant to lead us out of the ideological jungle into the sunlight of clearer ethical discernment.

“Development” is Not the Solution, but the Problem – and “Ethics” is Not a Solution to the Problem Posed by Development

Professor Serge Latouche (University of Lille, France) led the attack by maintaining that “development” is neither a universal value, nor value-neutral, but a code name for Westernisation. Despite the endorsement of development as a basic human right, and, correspondingly, a duty of governments, by the UN, and as “the new name for peace” (Pope Paul VI), the need to “moralise” development by stipulating that it must be “integral” and “human” is symptomatic of a basic contradiction. The idea of development, which goes back to that of “progress”, as understood by Condorcet, and the Enlightenment, implies a thoroughly utilitarian and materialistic ethic.

Plausible as this intellectual demolition of development may seem in the salons of Paris, however, it rather overshoots the mark when addressed to Pacific Islanders, for whom development, in some

shape or form, is a matter of sheer survival. This is not to deny that, in its capitalist form, it is, at the same time, a threat to their survival. It occurred to me that Latouche's thesis would make an excellent basis for a statement of the present French policy towards Kanaky (New Caledonia).

A more useful approach was that of Professor Gavin Kitching (North London Polytechnic), who uncovered some of the puzzles and paradoxes involved in applying ethic devised for individual morality to the behaviour of collectivities, such as transnational corporations, governments, and social institutions. The chains of cause and effect, interposed between intentions and outcomes, can make it virtually impossible to allocate responsibility or blame. Marx, realising this, yet moved by moral outrage in the face of capitalist exploitation, concluded that the economic system itself must be changed. Kitching, noting that, in practice, a utilitarian ethic predominates, and that this is only too compatible with the clan-based ethic of tribal peoples, concluded that "ethics is not an illuminating way of thinking about development". Politics, which is interested in outcomes rather than intentions, is our only recourse. But does not "the concept of a good society", which, for Kitching, would be implied by such politics, itself entail an ethical value system, based on some form of social consensus and its institutionalisation? Background papers by Fr Ennio Mantovani (The Melanesian Institute) on the rationale behind clan-based systems, and by Professor Max Charlesworth (Deakin University, Australia) on the way pluralism in Western societies dissociates institutions from a moral/religious consensus, are necessary complements to Kitching's provocative, but ultimately unsatisfying, thesis.

Some participants were disappointed that Professor Brian Brogan (Director, Institute of National Affairs, Port Moresby) steadfastly refused to be drawn into a discussion of the moral responsibility of the economist. His stimulating review of the history of economics as a discipline, issuing in its new openness to empirical research, did not lead him to concede that the economist has any responsibility for defining goals and setting priorities. Yet, as Gavin Kitching insisted in his rejoinder, the concept of "cost" inevitably involves social, and, therefore, moral aspects. Economic thinking apparently continues to

suffer under a theoretical deficit in this respect. A perceptive background paper by Dr Peter Sack (Law Department, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University) suggests one possible approach to making good this deficit. Taking a hard look at “development,” in practice, Sack concludes that it is “no longer primarily an economic but a political and ideological enterprise”, which “is not and cannot be aimed at raising the quality of life in the villages”, but “is necessary to pay for a salaried, but economically unproductive, and essentially urban (public and private), service industry”. This analysis was born out by Professor Cranford Pratt (University of Toronto) in his account of decolonisation and independence in African countries. Sack’s counter-strategy to the kind of pseudo-development that leads to what Pratt called “fictitious states” does not involve “making the process of ‘development’ ethically accountable” but “political and social reforms, rather than economic reforms”, in which “constitutional law must be the target rather than the instrument of reform”.

Perhaps, because of the twin influences of traditional Melanesian ethics, which tends to allocate personal causes to what Westerners would call “natural” events, and Christian moral preaching on Melanesian societies, none of the above positions emerged as completely convincing at the seminar, though their critique of the concept of development was certainly valuable.

Development Can be Humanised if Only Traditional Values are Allowed to Play a Part in it

Denis Goulet (O’Neill Professor of Education for Justice, Notre Dame University, USA) argued vigorously for the indispensability of traditional values in the development process, for otherwise, people have no means of preserving identity and cultural integrity while undergoing social change, and are bereft of “criteria for accepting or rejecting the outside influences brought to bear upon them”. Goulet also offered a critique of development, but, unlike previous speakers, he concentrated on its ethical deficiencies rather than placing it beyond the pale of ethics altogether. He stressed the paradox that values, whether ethical, cultural, or religious, only have this humanising effect on development when they are regarded non-instrumentally, i.e., are not

exploited to shore up preconceived ideologies in a utilitarian way. He was well aware, however, that traditional values inevitably enter into unpredictable hybrid forms when intermingled with non-indigenous values introduced from outside, that value conflicts may result, and that change agents must perform the difficult feat of being selective without being manipulative in assessing the relevance of traditional values for development. Goulet's conclusion was that "to build development from tradition is the very opposite of a reactionary position".

Goulet's more abstract argumentation was nicely complemented by the very down-to-earth presentation of Fr F. X. Hezel (Micronesian Seminar, Truk, Caroline Islands). It was based on years of experience in dealing with the social problems caused by modernisation in small traditional communities, especially as it affects the kin group, the extended family and the relationship of the sexes. Despite the appalling problems that result, Fr Hazel's conviction that such societies "are capable of healing themselves" was much appreciated.

We were also offered fascinating case studies of traditional values at work. Dr Peter Eaton (Faculty of Law, UPNG) maintained that there is in Melanesia a traditional "land ethic", based on the Melanesian worldview which, if reinforced, would make conservation and wildlife management feasible. But Dr Brian Allen (Department of Human Geography, Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University), whose sympathy for, and empathy with, rural Melanesia are above reproach, did not feel able to affirm that there was anything in traditional culture that could be regarded as the equivalent of a "conservation ethic", thus giving the lie to the idyllic descriptions of "Melanesians in communion with nature" one so frequently encounters. These were extremely thought-provoking contributions, and I think it could fairly be said that the values-in-development approach, if it did not predominate in the public lectures, pervaded most of the discussions at the seminar.

Integral Human Development Presupposes Both Economic and Spiritual Liberation, but Such All-embracing Liberation is Ultimately Conceivable Only if it is Supported by Religious Convictions

Of the three positions outlined, this one was the most sketchily represented at the seminar. It came to light most clearly, perhaps, in the panel convened by the Melanesian Institute (Goroka) of Melanesian church leaders and professionals (politicians and public servants, though invited, were conspicuous by their absence) on the integration of Melanesian, Christian, and “modern” values in practical life. Although unsystematic, these responses were impressive in their insistence on the need to marry prophetic vision to lived example, and translate both into the terms of the planning and lawmaking processes. Revd Esau Tuza (Department of History, UPNG) shrewdly put his finger on the role of power in ethical decision-making, while Fr Cherubim Dambui, a Catholic priest and former provincial premier, said that unless laws are informed by ethical values, they will never serve to combat slavery to “the cult of grabbing”. He hinted that Papua New Guinea has been made “over-Christian” by generations of missionaries, without much discernible result in the area of social justice, but Kumalau Tawali (Christian Leaders’ Training College, Banz) called for a “divine ethics” based on the truth of Jesus, if Papua New Guinea is to get beyond the choice between tyranny and anarchy. Both the structures of society and the human heart must change if Papua New Guinea is not to “survive by lying”. The Melanesian Institute is to be congratulated on organising this panel as an original solution to the problem of presenting the complex interactions of Christian principles with the values prevalent in present-day Melanesian societies. Yet it leaves us at the very beginning of the daunting theoretical task of sorting out just what the interrelationships are.

Conclusion: Towards the Development of Ethics

During discussion of a workshop paper by Damien Arabagali, a Southern Highlander, on the effects of development on the total environment, both ecological and cultural, of his people, Garry Trompf suggested that a dialogue between Melanesians and Christians could help to avoid some of the culture conflicts which marred their relationship in the past. Apart from background papers by Gernot Fugmann (Director, The Melanesian Institute) on the role of the church in Melanesian society, and Ron Engel (Meadville Theological School, Lombard College, Chicago), who advocated “a readiness to expand the

multi-faith dialogue on human rights to include environment values”, what is, for me, the crucial issue in development ethics, never got another mention. Is this because many still regard it as a token of academic respectability to trot out the old saw about “the missions destroying culture” and leave it at that?

In an address, which, in its specificity and frankness, was one of the highlights of the seminar, Professor Ron Crocombe (University of the South Pacific, Suva, Fiji), himself avowedly non-religious, saw, in the hope engendered by religious faiths, so long as they avoid the facile solutions offered by fundamentalism, one of the few positive signs pointing to a better Pacific in the 21st century. He concluded by calling for “the development of ethics”. My point is that the two belong together. If this hint had been taken up, the seminar could have achieved more far-reaching results.

Sensible discussion of the issues involved first has to deal with what has become a virtual dogma in Western philosophical circles, the logical autonomy of ethics. The available logical options may be set out as follows:

- (a) The action (x) is good because God wills it.
- (b) God wills the action (x) because it is good.
- (c) The action (x) is good.

While options (a), (b) and (c) do not correspond neatly to positions (3), (2) and (1), as outlined above, those who adhere to position (1), and many of those who advocate position (2), would agree that the judgment expressed by (c) is sufficient to ground an ethic. Proponents of (3), on the other hand, would be divided about adopting option (a) or (b).

Whether or not it can be argued successfully that ethics can be consistent, independently of religious beliefs, in the type of society found everywhere in Melanesia, in which the religious attitude is not the mind-set of a cognitive minority, but permeates just about everything that people do, feel, and think, the whole enterprise begins

to appear rather pointless. Whence else would ethical injunctions draw the force of conviction necessary for them to be socially effective, if not from myths and symbols, which might fairly be described as “religious”? If this be so, is not the really interesting problem today that of the possible conflicts and complementarities of such religious symbol systems in grounding an ethic adequate to our needs?

For the moral and spiritual needs engendered by the process of development are, on closer scrutiny, indeed daunting. Gavin Kitching did useful groundwork here by pointing out the ethical inconsistencies implicit in the behaviour of collectivities, such as corporate actions with both good and bad outcomes, irrespective of the intentions of those who initiated them. But social change, as such, has profound ethical implications, which were barely touched on in the seminar. And what of the relationships to nature implied in the ethics of different cultures and religions, not to mention the whole problematic of ethical decisions, which affect the genetic constitution of human nature and identity, and hence the well-being of future generations? We are indeed only at the beginning of our labours in all these areas.

But, in pointing to these, and a host of other issues, the 17th Waigani Seminar did an inestimable service to all who are interested in the future of Pacific Island nations, not least to those Christians who are struggling to frame theologies that are both indigenous and ecumenical.

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