

God's Servant First: Not by Bread Alone

by Rebecca Samuel Shah

In 1988, in an attempt to woo wealthy middle-class voters, Ramakrishna Hegde who was then seeking the office of chief minister in the state of Karnataka, India, promised to remove 5,000 poor families who were living in the Miller's Tank slum in the heart of Bangalore. Once elected, Mr. Hegde forcibly removed these families and deposited them in an urban poor area beyond the city limits in Lingarajapuram. My parents, who were working among the urban poor as Christian development workers, immediately set out to build a primary health clinic and a school for the newcomers.

One evening, a group of religious leaders from the displaced community came to our home to ask my parents to help them build a mosque, a temple, and a church. Although they were abandoned without housing, employment, and access to water and electricity, the residents felt particularly bereft without a place to worship. Many relief agencies who promised to finance work in the slum refused to pay for places of worship. "Shouldn't the money be spent on a better equipped clinic or a large school?" they asked. After a year, a few businesspeople provided the raw materials to build the mosque, the temple, and the church, which all still stand today.

Like the aid agencies whose unapologetic refusal to take into account the importance of religion in the lives of the slum-dwellers in Bangalore, mainstream development policies that remain reticent about engaging religious factors in a direct and sustained manner and that focus on purely material and physical dimensions of well-being, may have a limited effect on poverty. For millions of the poor who are Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and others, needs related to human fulfillment and transcendence bring a distinctive and irreplaceable value to their lives.

Consider for a moment that what may influence a person to behave in a certain way—to have hope, to practice self-control, and to have aspirations to do better in the future—may have much to do with what she takes to be an ultimate source of meaning in her life. Her beliefs, values, and what animates her flow from deeper springs. Faith and religious beliefs are reservoirs that spill over and across all aspects of one's life, shaping values and influencing behavior. For example, faith may help men stop drinking and lead them to become more committed to their wives and children.

"Development," writes Denis Goulet, the father of development ethics, "is more human and more developed when people are called to 'be more' rather than simply 'have more.'" Goulet goes on to say that there can be "authentic development" only when there is a societal openness to the deepest levels of mystery and transcendence, and when this yearning for mystery and transcendence is recognized and satisfied.

This conception of development was powerfully articulated by the Holy Father, Pope Francis, in his wide-ranging address to the United Nations General Assembly on September 25, 2015: "[G]overnment leaders must do everything possible to ensure that all can have the minimum spiritual and material means needed to live in dignity and to create and support a family, which is the primary cell of any social development. In practical terms, this absolute minimum has three names: lodging, labor, and land; and one spiritual name: spiritual freedom, which includes religious freedom, the right to education and all other civil rights."

The Holy Father continued: "For all this, the simplest and best measure and indicator of the implementation of the new [2030] Agenda for [Sustainable] Development will be effective, practical and immediate

access, on the part of all, to essential material and spiritual goods: housing, dignified and properly remunerated employment, adequate food and drinking water; religious freedom and, more generally, spiritual freedom and education. These pillars of integral human development have a common foundation, which is the right to life and, more generally, what we could call the right to existence of human nature itself.”

To be effective, development policies and programs must attend to all the major dimensions of “human nature” and human well-being: material, social, and spiritual. Public policies and development efforts that seek to ensure all people have essential material goods such as food, clothing, housing, healthcare and so forth, must also go beyond the fulfillment of basic physical needs and take into account the intrinsic value and

importance of other goods related to human flourishing, such as the joy of serving others and the freedom to profess and practice the religion of one’s choice.

Recapitulating words that were probably first written in the 7th century B.C., our Lord turned back the tempter by declaring in the 1st century that “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” Amidst new temptations, the words have lost none of their relevance in the 21st century.

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