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**Christian Humanitarianism Through the Lens of the Church in the Majority World**

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*Fundamental to any definition of spirituality is that it can never be something that can be isolated from the rest of our existence.* David Bosch (Bosch 1979:13).

**Abstract:** Humanitarianism which has its roots in the Early Church has today moved away from its spiritual and missional foundations and is very much secular in what it does. Christian humanitarian agencies find themselves straddling the divide between being professional and relating to local churches and the mission of God. In the eyes of Christians in the Majority World it raises questions about what it means for an organization to be Christian and exactly what these Christian agencies hope to accomplish within the mission of God.

Humanitarianism, which is the response to human need in times of crisis, has deep roots in the Early Church, but today has become a secular global enterprise. Western Christian humanitarian agencies sometimes use the language of ministry, missions, and Kingdom work, but on the field operate no differently than their secular counterparts. While they speak about integral mission and holistic ministry, any kind of spiritual ministry is not integrated with their poverty alleviation and disaster response programs. The partners they work with in the Majority World have adopted the same values and ways of operating.

This is challenging for the church and Christians in the Majority World, because for them the spiritual is interwoven with the realities of daily life. To separate addressing spiritual issues from responding to human needs for food, shelter, water and a life lived with dignity is not part of their worldview.

Responding to human need, whether it is in times of crisis or the needs of those who are destitute or marginalized in society, is a universal value embodied in most religious traditions. However, the complexity of poverty had not been studied or understood till recently.<sup>1</sup> The theoretical term “poverty” is not common in sacred texts or among religious communities. Instead they refer to the “poor,” a term that is used widely in religious texts, or to a state of “ill being” in the tribal societies of Africa and the First Nations in Canada. This reflected the very deep traditions in the world religions of addressing human needs in one’s own community. (Brackney and Das 2019; Das 2018) The Bible consistently refers to the poor. However, the poor and poverty described in the Bible is much more complex than just a lack of resources. (Das 2016:43-92). Gustavo Gutiérrez writes,

Poverty is a central theme in both the Old and New Testaments. It is treated both briefly and profoundly; it describes social situations and expresses spiritual experiences communicated

only with difficulty; it defines personal attitudes, a whole people's attitude before God, and the relationships of people with each other... [it] is a scandalous condition inimical to human dignity and therefore contrary to the will of God. (Gutiérrez 1988:165)

Poverty is complex and is experienced by people in various contexts and cultures differently. There is no one definition of poverty. However, there are different types of poverty. *Chronic* poverty usually lasts throughout the lifetime of a person and may also be generational. Chronic poverty is usually addressed through development projects, community empowerment, and economic policies. *Event-based* poverty refers to the fact that people may be pushed into poverty as a result of unfortunate events (such as conflicts, forced displacement (refugees), loss of family members, failed harvests, hyperinflation, divorce, etc.). Humanitarian action addresses human needs in the midst of conflicts and natural and man-made disasters. It is time bound and is not concerned with chronic poverty, social change, or transformation.

Humanitarian need has reached unprecedented levels since World War II. Displacement is one of the key indicators of the severity of any crisis and today is a telling reality in the Majority World. In 2018 the United Nations reported that the number of people forcibly displaced had reached 70.8 million. (UNHCR 2019) It is the highest global number since World War II. The United Nations in 2018 also identified conflict as the main driver for humanitarian need over the long term, while natural disasters continue to affect people for periods of time. The report stated that out of 135.3 million people affected by disasters and requiring aid, assistance was provided to only 97.9 million. In order to provide this aid, US\$25.2 billion was required. (UNOCHA 2018) The magnitude of the present humanitarian crises, the funds needed, and the personnel required to respond effectively is putting significant pressure on the humanitarian community as a whole, especially at a time when the major donor countries are withdrawing from global involvement and are becoming more isolationists.<sup>2</sup> (Beaumont 2019) The decline of the church in the west has translated into fewer funds for Christian missions and humanitarian aid.

Over the past few decades, as Christian humanitarian agencies have grown in size and impact, a number of questions have surfaced as to what makes a humanitarian agency Christian, and whether humanitarian action is part of the mission of God or simply the compassionate response of being human. The more specific questions are:

- What is the relationship between evangelism and providing humanitarian aid? The 2001 Micah Declaration explained the relationship between the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20) and the Great Commandment (Matt. 22:37-40).

Integral mission or holistic transformation is the proclamation and demonstration of the Gospel. It is not simply that evangelism and social involvement are to be done alongside each other. Rather, in integral mission our proclamation has social consequences as we call people to love and repentance in all areas of life. And our social involvement has evangelistic consequences as we bear witness to the transforming grace of Jesus Christ. (Micah Network 2001)

The Micah Declaration finally provided the right balance between the verbal proclamation of the Gospel and the demonstration of its reality. Neither operates independently and each has

significant implications for the other. While acknowledging that proclamation and acts of compassion are integrally linked, *it did not clarify how both can be operationalized without perceptions of manipulation or conditionality.*

- Is socio-economic transformation, what Christian NGOs aim for, a biblical concept? How different is it from the Social Gospel and its roots in Liberal Theology?
- Finally, what is the relationship between Christian humanitarian agencies and the local church? This has raised questions about ecclesiology and accountability.

These are not new questions, but in each generation they assume a fresh sense of urgency. There is a need to answer these questions again as the culture, the contexts, and the times change.<sup>3</sup>

Because most of the humanitarian action is focused on emergencies and disasters in the Global South, it is important to see how humanitarianism is viewed through the eyes of the Majority World. Humanitarian action is primarily driven by international agencies based in the Global North and funded by western donors and governments. They meet critical lifesaving needs during disasters and emergencies. Christian humanitarian agencies awkwardly straddle the secular professional world that operates on international standards, humanitarian principles, and international law, and the world of Christians and faith communities who are concerned with Christian mission. For Majority World Christians the confusion lies in trying to understand what makes any organization Christian when it does not engage in Christian faith-based activities, ignores the local Christian community, and only does what secular humanitarian agencies do.

This chapter will first look at the historical origins of humanitarianism and then will explore the question of the place of humanitarianism within missional theology. It will then look at two specific issues. The local church is the focal point of a Christian community in the Majority World. When a Christian organization comes in and ignores the local church, it is making a statement it doesn't realize it is making. The first issue is what is the relationship between Christian humanitarian agencies and the local church. Secondly, God is working through world events to accomplish His purposes. The second issue is that the world is experiencing a *Kairos* moment in Christian missions. Do Christian humanitarian agencies recognize that and are they able to respond to it? In this chapter, when referring to the church and Christians in the Majority World, it is referring to Protestant, Evangelical, and Pentecostal churches and not the Catholic and Orthodox churches. The observations do not reflect any particular doctrinal stance of a specific denomination, but are the observations and insights from the author's own experience and drawn from his conversations with Majority World Christian leaders. When referring to the Majority World, the author is referring to conflicts and natural disasters in parts of Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and the Caribbean.

### **Humanitarianism in Historical Context**

Though compassion has deep roots in the world religions, responding to humanitarian needs *outside one's immediate community* was not a value that was common in the ancient world. This obligation was always limited in practice to the immediate group, family or clan and very rarely included anyone beyond it.<sup>4</sup> Abu Zayd 'Abd al-Rahman Ibn Muhammad Ibn Khaldun al-Hadhrami

(known as Ibn Khaldun), the 14<sup>th</sup> century North African historian wrote, “Only tribes held together by group feelings can live in the desert...” (Quoted in Gellner1981:x) since the group ensured the survival and well-being of the individual belonging to the group. Biblical scholar Bruce Malina writing about collectivistic societies states, “Should a group member fall ill, the goal of an individual’s healing is group well-being. Focus is on the ingroup...” (Malina 2010:23) In sharp contrast to this attitude, a concern for the foreigner in their midst, as described in the Mosaic Law, was unusual in the ancient world and made ancient Israel distinct from the practices of the surrounding Kingdoms as described in their written Codes and Epics. (Das 2016:49-62)

The notion of charity towards the poor who were not Roman citizens was not something that was common or valued in the Roman Empire. *Euergesia* (good works) in classical culture as something that the wealthy did, was a civic virtue and contributed to the general wellbeing of society. They gave to institutions like the city or the temple, but not necessarily to the poor. Some poor did benefit through the services that were funded this way. But the poor were never the focus. Church historian Peter Brown refers to the Christians in the Roman Empire (300-600 A.D.) providing for the needs of the poor as a revolution that impacted the social imagination of the times. (Brown 2002:1) It was the Christians, and particularly the bishops who were expected to be “lovers of the poor”. (Brueggemann 2003: 30-31) This radically altered social values and the practice of charity within the Roman Empire.

The earliest humanitarian response to people who were displaced was first seen in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries as poverty increased in the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire and the cities were unable to absorb the poor, who were not citizens. The assassination of Emperor Severus Alexander in 235 A.D. precipitated not only a political crisis that split the Empire into three, but also an economic collapse which reached its peak by the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century when the currency no longer had any value. This was followed by the forced displacement of the Goths in 376 A.D. and the Battle of Adrianople (modern day Turkey) in 378 A.D., resulting in significant suffering.

Brown writes, “The existing structures of the city and the civic model that had been associated with them collapsed under the sheer weight of a desolate human surplus, as the cities filled with persons who were palpably “poor”. They could not be treated as citizens, neither could they be ignored....” (Brown 2001:8) It was the Christians who responded to the needs of the poor. Brown writes about them, “They [lay and clerical alike] were themselves, agents of change.” (Brown 2001:8) Adolf von Harnack in his monumental book *The Mission and the Expansion of Christianity*, writes that the “Gospel of Love and Charity”, where the church demonstrated the love and compassion of God by helping those in need, was one of the main factors in the rise of the Church during this time. (von Harnack 2005) The growth and impact of the Early Church was due to the fact that they addressed both the physical and spiritual needs of the poor and displaced.

The modern practice of humanitarian response to the needs of people in a crisis *beyond one’s immediate community by an independent organization* first emerged with the experience of Swiss businessman Jean-Henri Dunant as he witnessed the suffering of the soldiers in the terrible aftermath of the Battle of Solferino in Italy in June 1859. He and some friends founded the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) on 1863 to protect human life and health, and to prevent and alleviate human suffering. In 1919 Save the Children was established to respond to the humanitarian needs of children in the aftermath of World War I. Numerous other organizations

were set up across Europe to respond to the needs of refugees from the Russian Revolution and the Spanish Civil war. In the early days of World War II, Oxfam was formed in the UK to get aid to women and children in Greece. In the years following World War II and the founding of the United Nations, several UN agencies were established to address humanitarian needs such as food (World Food Program), needs of refugees (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) and those of children (UNICEF). Though Henri Dunant was a devout Christian, the organization he founded was secular, operating purely on humanitarian principles with no religious affiliation. This provided a model for the other agencies that were established during this period.

Christian humanitarian agencies have been at the forefront of humanitarian responses. In the post-World War II years, according to a 1953 study 90% of all post war relief was provided by religiously affiliated agencies. (Ferris 2005: 315) In the decades that followed, though Christian agencies were pioneers in a number of humanitarian responses,<sup>5</sup> the religious motivations for humanitarianism were replaced by a secular worldview (Barnett and Stein 2012:5), as religion came to be seen as a hindrance to progress. (Jones and Petersen 2011:1292) The suspicion (sometimes overtly stated) is that local religious institutions because of their communal and evangelistic nature would not be able to adhere to the humanitarian principles of impartiality and non-conditionality. (Kraft 2015:395-421) As a result, there was a significant rise in secular non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that operated on humanitarian principles and international humanitarian law. In order to be relevant and respected in a changing professional context and to be able to access funding from governments and the UN, most Christian humanitarian agencies separated the spiritual dimensions of ministry from temporal assistance and as a result there isn't much that differentiates them from their secular counterparts.

In the past few decades, as the role of Christian humanitarian agencies has changed with little separating them from their secular counterparts, there isn't a proper understanding yet of how they fit into the mission of God. In a chaotic world, there is an increasing concern to respond to human need. Yet, within significant sections of western Evangelical Christianity, there is still confusion as to how to prioritize this within Christian missions and integrate it with proclamation. Part of the confusion arose from the fact that many Christian humanitarian and mission agencies started using terms such as *transformation* and *liberation*, concepts coopted from the Social Gospel and Liberation Theology. Many Evangelicals who were Dispensationalists or NeoReformed felt that Christian humanitarianism had betrayed the fundamentals of Evangelical beliefs.

### **Trying to Find a Place in Missional Theology for Humanitarianism**

A major challenge that Christian humanitarian agencies face is the lack of a comprehensive theology that grounds them in the biblical narrative of God's work in this world. Christian agencies, like their secular peers, respond on the basis of human need and do not understand how that fits within *missio Dei*, the mission of God. This is highlighted in the first five principles of *The Code of Conduct for The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief*<sup>6</sup> which articulate the fundamental assumptions of humanitarian assistance being non-political and impartial in terms of religion, creed, race, and nationality. The emphasis is on aid being unconditional and based only on need. Yet, this needs to be balanced with a respect for local culture and customs, which invariable includes religion, religious values and worldviews, and religious institutions in society.

The origins of the missiological question of whether ministries addressing humanitarian needs and socioeconomic issues related to poverty should be part of Christian missions, are in the Liverpool Missionary Conference of 1860. Over the first 70 years of Protestant missions, the focus was almost exclusively on evangelism, church planting, and Bible translation. It was only in 1860 that the missionary agencies agreed to address medical and educational issues related to poverty. (The Secretaries to the Conference 1860:100-108, 118-120) Then, with the emergence of the Social Gospel in the late 1800s, Fundamentalist Christians disagreed with the Postmillennial theology of the Social Gospel. Being Dispensationalists, they did not believe in social transformation on this side of eternity and focused on a salvation based on forgiveness of sin and one that only addressed life after death. This has deeply divided the church till today, though efforts have been made to bridge the theological divide.<sup>7</sup>

For most non-western Christians, poverty is a glaring daily reality that cannot be ignored. Does the Bible and their faith have any relevance in the world they lived in and have anything to say to the poor and about poverty? The struggle of the Church in the Majority World addressing spiritual versus temporal needs was played out in Latin America from 1960s through to the 1990s as Liberation Theology and Pentecostalism emerged among the poor as competing visions of God's heart for the poor. Liberation Theology drew deeply from images of God's liberating acts in the Old Testament and saw a world where there would be freedom and justice for the poor. The poor through a process of *conscientization*<sup>8</sup> win the right to "say his own word, to name the world" (Shaul 1968:13) thus moving from being marginalized or oppressed victims to being agents of change. This is the beginning of social justice and the quest for social transformation. For Gustavo Gutiérrez, salvation is communal in nature. He writes it is "conversion to the neighbour." (Gutiérrez 1988:194) Thus a person is saved when he opens himself up to God *and* to other people. (Stott 1975: 141)

Pentecostal missiologist Wonsuk Ma presents a different vision of the role of the church among the poor. He writes, "Pentecostalism is a religion *of* the poor and not *for* the poor." (Ma 2007: 29) John Burdick writing in the 1990s critically assesses Liberation Theology based on his observations in Brazil. "I did not doubt that many people were having their consciousness raised by the Church. Yet I found myself puzzling over the implications of Brazilian field reports sent by parish priests to the Church's Commission on CEBs,<sup>9</sup> which made clear that in any given town those who participated actively in the Catholic Church comprised only a very small minority." (Burdick 1996: Kindle Location 12) Burdick goes on to state that in any given town in a predominantly Catholic country, there were more Pentecostals in the town than there were Catholics involved in CEBs. He wondered why "hadn't the CEB swept all these other people off their feet?" (Burdick 1996: Kindle Location 21)<sup>10</sup>

Burdick called this the paradox of numbers. For a mass movement that was supposed to transform Brazilian society and politics, studies in the 1990s in a number of archdioceses showed no more than 3-4% of the adults were involved in CEBs while the Pentecostals made up 8-10% of the local population. (Burdick 1996: Kindle Location 111)<sup>11</sup> While Liberation Theology experienced through the CEBs was attractive to some, the Pentecostal experience apparently addressed issues that many of the poor responded to. The Pentecostal experience in Latin America by the 1990s

could probably be summarized by how the Chilean Pentecostals viewed their role in the midst of the poverty and turbulence of their times.<sup>12</sup> Christian Lalive writes about them.

The large painting which adorns Pentecostal sanctuaries depicts a restless sea surrounding an island upon the rocks of which a Bible lies open, illuminated by a ray of light from heaven...The symbolism is obvious. In a deeply evil world of misery and perdition, the Christian communities stand like islands of peace and repose. The task of the elect is to give refuge to the drowning, without a thought for how the angry sea might be calmed. (Lalive 1968:24)

However, what became increasingly clear is that the divide between the experiences of Liberation Theology and those of the Pentecostals in Latin America were not clear-cut and exclusive of each other, but were much more nuanced. Brazilian sociologist Cecilia Mariz writes that both groups promoted similar practices (such as biblical reflection leading to praxis, developing networks of solidarity), attitudes, and values (the human worth of the individual, overcoming the dualism of faith and life) that enabled the poor in their midst to overcome the problems of poverty. (Mariz 1994:131-148)

Michael Bergunder refers to the social transformation that resulted when individuals got involved with Pentecostal churches. It was not just a religion of escapism from the problems of society, but the status of women in their domestic life changed, there was behaviour change with the resulting economic benefits to the family when alcohol, drugs and tobacco were renounced, and there was social engagement in communities when they had the opportunity. (Bergunder 2002:163-86) While they may have been less politically engaged than other communities initially, this began to change as their numbers grew and they became aware of their importance in society. (Bergunder 2002: 171-72)<sup>13</sup>

The tensions in Latin America between addressing spiritual needs versus the physical and sociopolitical realities of life were reflected at the International Congress on World Evangelization in Lausanne 1974 where Majority World theologians Rene Padilla, Orlando Costas, and Samuel Escobar insisted that responding to human need, and not just evangelism, was part of the mission of God. Samuel Escobar wrote, “We can no longer afford a missiology that refuses to take seriously the social and political realities.” (Escobar 1982:111) Rene Padilla elaborated what that meant even further.

The most important questions that should be asked with regard to the life and mission of the church today are not related to the relevance of the gospel but to its content. To be sure, there is a place for the consideration of ways in which the gospel meets people’s needs in the modern world, but far more basic is the consideration of the *nature* of the gospel that could meet people’s needs. The *what* of the gospel determines the *how* of its effects in practical life. (Padilla 1985:83)

Both Escobar and Padilla were not espousing a Social Gospel, an Evangelical version of Liberation Theology, or a Christian humanitarianism that only responded to the physical and social needs of people. What they wanted was a Gospel proclaimed in words and actions that encompassed the

totality of God’s redeeming work of His creation. Human beings are physical, social, and spiritual, living in a created world, and God’s redemption transforms all these areas.

As Christian humanitarian agencies separated responding to the physical needs of people in crisis from any spiritual and missional paradigm, they were only reflecting a basic premise of western society, which was Plato’s dualistic understanding of reality that separates the physical from the spiritual and the supernatural. Missiologist Paul Hiebert writes about a two-tiered western view of reality consisting of the natural world governed by the laws of science, and the world of religion dealing with faith, the supernatural, and the sacred. The two are distinct and do not necessarily intersect.

For people, cultures, and religions in the Majority World, there is no distinction between the secular and the sacred, between the natural and spiritual. The natural world and daily life are infused with the spiritual. The *excluded middle*, which connects the two tiers, helps people find meaning and answers for the issues they face in this world by connecting them to their faith and the sacred. They do this by relating to the unseen reality of the spirit world. According to Hiebert, the questions of the *excluded middle* focus on the uncertainty of the future, the crises of the present life, and the unknowns of the past.

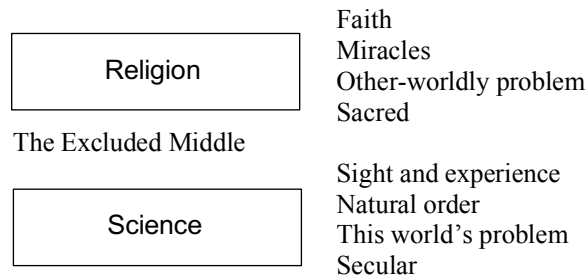


Figure 1: A Western Two-Tiered of Reality (Hiebert 1982:43)

Western humanitarianism operates in the secular natural world of science and does not entertain or address the questions of the excluded middle, the realm where people through the lens of their faith try to make sense of what is happening to them during a time of crisis. Hiebert explains this as depersonalization, which has a significant impact on how ministry is done.

Depersonalization also occurred because western theology dichotomized people into supernatural and natural beings. Some saw people as spiritual objects to be converted, others as creatures needing social and material aid. Neither viewed humans from a holistic perspective. To be fair, it must be recognized that on the ground level most missionaries were deeply involved with programs of evangelism, relief, education, hospitals, social uplift and development. For example, faced with famine, most did all they could to care for the needy. But a theological dichotomy often led to fragmented programs that ministered to one or another human need, and not to integrated programs that served whole people. Theologically the problem was how to deal with people's humanness and its relationship to their divine calling.” (Hiebert 1978:167)



Humanitarianism that originated with the Early Church and was able to meet the needs of people outside one's immediate community, has drifted from its spiritual and missional moorings. The large Christian humanitarian agencies operate like their secular peers and often find themselves unable (sometimes unwilling) to relate to the spiritual priorities of other mission agencies and the local church. While God uses both Christian and secular agencies to demonstrate His compassion for people in desperate situations,<sup>14</sup> these agencies are not clear if and how Christian humanitarianism is part of the mission of God. Because they are unable to integrate the spiritual dimensions of Christian ministry into their humanitarian responses either directly or through partnerships, or identify openly with the local church, Majority World Christians wonder what makes a humanitarian agency Christian and how does it accomplish God's purposes, other than the way He uses secular agencies.

### **Humanitarian Action and The Local Church**

A few decades ago in the 1990s, most Christian humanitarian non-Governmental organizations (NGOs) walked away from partnering with local churches<sup>15</sup> because they felt that they did not have the capacity or technical ability to manage projects, and had questions about manipulation and conditionality when churches do evangelism and recruit members in the midst of humanitarian crises. On another level, disassociating themselves from local churches and any type of spiritual activity reflected the Platonic dualism of their worldview, where they made clear distinctions between addressing physical needs versus spiritual needs.

In the cultures of the Majority World, places of worship are an integral part of society. They provide a focal point to define the religious identity of a particular community that distinguishes them from other communities around them. Anglican theologian John Inge writes that a local church in a specific place in a particular time in history is more than just a building where people come to worship. He writes,

Should not all churches be places wherein there is a history of divine self-communication, of 'sacramental encounters' with the worshipping community that inhabits them? Should not their presence in the midst of that community nourish the faith of that community? Should they not proclaim to the secular world in which they stand that God is present and active in the world? (Inge 2003:115)

Just as a temple or a mosque in a specific location identifies the existence of people who worship that particular deity, a local church affirms the presence and identity of the Christian community. In the Majority World, places of worship are sacred ground.<sup>16</sup> For the Christian community, the church is a place for Divine encounters and spiritual renewal, and stands as a witness that the living God has people in that location who worship Him.

As some segments of western Christianity have embraced Plato's dualism of reality as part of their theology, church has come to be understood as a spiritual body that is concerned primarily with the afterlife and a place of refuge away from the concerns and realities of the world, with little relevance for life during times of crisis. What is not properly understood by western Christians is the fact that a local church in the Majority World is also a part of the social fabric of the community.

A local church along with other institutions in the community (both religious and secular) helps create the community's identity.

Social scientists acknowledge that religious institutions such as churches, mosques, and temples are an integral part of communities. They not only address matters of spirituality but also provide and build social capital, besides being venues through which social services are provided. (Bodenhamer 1996:1) Plamen Sivov, writing from the context of post-Soviet Bulgarian society, asks whether institutions such as churches can have a role as agents of community development, when previously the welfare state provided services and managed change. While acknowledging that the local church as an institutional service provider has no distinct advantage compared to other NGOs or the government, Sivov instead describes the local church as a distinct community. He writes, "Whenever a communal spirit, high level of personal motivation or a personal approach to the sometimes dehumanized 'target groups' is needed, the church has a lot to offer. The church cannot compete on the grounds of quantity, but it has no match on the grounds of quality or holistic personalized approach, when it comes to provision of different kinds of care for the vulnerable groups." (Sivov 2008:214-15)

There is now a new awareness of how humanitarian agencies can partner with local churches, where each brings their strengths and expertise to work together to maximize impact. An indigenous Lebanese Christian NGO<sup>17</sup> with international funding, developed and implemented an extensive response to the needs of Syrian refugees in Lebanon and those internally displaced inside Syria, all through local churches. (Das 2015:43-50) This provided a local identity to the humanitarian response rather than that of an international agency and strengthened the credibility of the local church. It enabled a local faith community to demonstrate compassion. It empowered the local church to expand its understanding of ministry. It also gave the churches credulity in the eyes of the local municipal authorities. And finally, it ensured a long-term ministry to the refugees after the initial needs were met.

It forged a new type of relationship between Christian humanitarian agencies and the local church. The indigenous NGO provided the back-office functions of program design, proposal writing, accessing funds, procurement of supplies, monitoring, and reporting. They were able to do what the local church is often unable to do – provide the technical expertise needed in specific humanitarian sectors (water, food aid and food security, shelter, nutrition, economic development, etc.). The local church in turn could be a church and do what churches do – show compassion, evangelize, teach, preach, disciple, equip, and pray.

These humanitarian agencies need local faith communities where those in need can feel safe and have a sense of belonging. The local church as an institution in the community naturally has visibility, history, credibility and relationships. It is a natural and logical place from where humanitarian aid can be provided, as long as there is no conditionality or manipulation when the aid is provided. These local churches because of their knowledge of the local community and volunteer base are effective implementing partners for the agencies. (Das 2016) Based on lessons from Europe and Canada where large numbers of Syrian refugees were resettled, local churches were critical in integrating the refugees into the mainstreams of society. (Das and Hamoud 2017)

When a Christian humanitarian agency comes in to respond to a crisis and do not relate to the local church in a meaningful way, the larger community in that location usually has no clue that the humanitarian agency is Christian regardless of its branding. Research on humanitarian assistance shows that beneficiaries are often unable to differentiate between the various agencies that provide aid in a disaster context. (Elhawary and Aheeyar 2008) What this means is that most beneficiaries of assistance would not necessarily understand the difference between what Christian humanitarian agencies do as an expression of their faith in Christ, and what secular NGOs like Save the Children and Doctors without Borders (MSF) do. So, while humanitarian needs are met, it does not necessarily strengthen the witness of the local Christian community. It also leaves the local Christians confused as to why the agency does not relate to them and involve them in some way in the humanitarian response. The Christian agencies miss an opportunity to strengthen the local church by building their capacity and enhancing their witness.

It is important to understand that the political and religious frameworks from within which Christian humanitarian agencies operate are different than the realities that the church in the Majority World faces. Western Evangelical and Protestant Christianity are still very Constantinian, based on a Christianized culture, and access to power and an abundance of resources, rather than being based on models from the New Testament and the Early Church, where Christians were often a persecuted minority. Christians in many parts of the majority world are a minority where the dominant culture is not Christian or Christianized and the government may not be sympathetic to Christians. The question they grapple with is what does it mean to be followers of Christ and citizens of the Kingdom in the midst of hostile or unsympathetic authorities, just as the early Christians struggled to follow Christ in the context of a brutal and unyielding Roman Empire.

What this has meant is that humanitarian organizations are viewed by local Christians as being rich because of the salaries they pay, the vehicles they drive, the houses the expat staff stay in, and the large operations they manage. Too often they lure some of the best staff from indigenous organizations, missions, and churches with significantly higher salaries, thus degrading the quality of local Christian institutions. Because of the significant foreign funds they bring into the country, they are able to influence government authorities to enable them to operate with a greater degree of freedom. However, this ability to influence the authorities is rarely used to enhance the social and political status of local Christians and churches.

Many Christians in the Majority World don't understand how a Christian agency can only respond to the physical needs of people without addressing spiritual needs. For them the spiritual is an integral part of who they are and of their daily lives. A crisis often surfaces existential questions which are part of the excluded middle. People affected by disasters don't necessarily want intellectual answers that religion provides. Instead they live in the excluded middle and want to *experience* the reality and compassion of a God who hears their prayers and will protect and provide for them – the reality of a God who call Himself *Immanuel*.<sup>18</sup> Christian humanitarian agencies by not responding to the questions in the excluded middle miss a missional opportunity. While acknowledging the necessity for legal and operational independence of Christian NGOs which prevent them from using government funding on religious activities, partnering with local churches using private funding raised from Christians and churches would enable there to be a truly holistic witness to Christ and His Kingdom.

## **The *Kairos* Moments of *Missio Dei* and Humanitarian Agencies**

Most Christian humanitarian agencies focus on responding to immediate needs and on long term socio-economic change, just as their secular counterparts do. They see this as ministry, since it demonstrates the love of Christ. Those involved in community development use terms like “kingdom work” or see themselves as “building the Kingdom of God”. The most commonly used term is *transformation*. Their motivation is encapsulated in Micah 6:8. “And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” Beyond that, there is limited understanding of eschatology, no awareness of historical theology and the struggles between the Social Gospel and Liberal Theology versus the Fundamentalists, and little acknowledgement of the mission of God and what He is doing at this point in history. What they are missing is understanding the context within which they operate, namely God’s purposes being worked out in the midst of both man-made and natural disasters. While responding to immediate human needs, they seem to be unaware of God’s move through history at any point in time. They do not consider themselves to be mission agencies but identify themselves as Christian humanitarian agencies and in some vague way believing they are doing “Kingdom work.”

Two of the many dominating realities in the Majority World are the forcible displacement of large numbers of people because of conflicts or natural disasters, and migration for socioeconomic reasons. The slums of the cities are filled with people who have moved from other parts of the country looking for work, and with refugees who have fled crises in their home countries. Out of the top ten countries that play host to the greatest number of refugees in the world, nine of the ten countries are in the Majority World. Conflicts and economic crises are also forcing people out from the Majority World to countries in the Global North. Europe hosts 82.3 million migrants and North America 58.6 million. (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2019)

The movement of people (both forced as a result of a humanitarian crisis and voluntary) permeates biblical history, not as a background to the main narrative, but as fundamental to God’s purposes. Old Testament scholar and missiologist Christopher Wright observes:

Migration runs like a thread through the whole Bible narrative. People on the move (for all kinds of reasons) are so much part of the fabric of the story that we hardly notice it as a major feature. Indeed, when the text actually points out that YHWH, God of Israel, has been involved in the migrations of peoples other than Israel, some Bible translations put that affirmation in parentheses – as though to separate it off from the main story, even though it is an integral part of the theological context of the story. YHWH is the God of all nations and all their historical migrations and settlements (Deut. 2:10–12, 20–23). (Wright 2016:1)

The present global refugee crisis and migration is being used by God, as He has throughout history, for the Great Commission and for renewing His Church. Unlike historical missions where western missionaries went to plant churches in the Global South, today Christian immigrants and refugees from Asia, Africa and Latin America are revitalizing the church in the west.<sup>19</sup> Church historian Phillip Jenkins writes about the impact of immigrants on traditional Christianity in Europe, UK, and North America.

Southern influence grows through two distinct but related phenomena. In some areas, Third World churches undertake actual mission work in secularized North America and especially Europe. Commonly, though, evangelism is an incidental by-product of the activities of immigrant churches, an important phenomenon given the large African and Asian communities domiciled in Europe...When we measure the declining strength of Christianity in Europe, we must remember how much leaner the statistics would be if not for the recent immigrants and their children. (Jenkins 2007:113, 115)

Migrants and refugees who are away from all that is familiar to them – lost and alone in their new location – seem to be much more open to God in their desperation than they were in their homes which they had left. Missiological researcher Jenny McGill writes,

Migration blesses insofar as it enables the person to experience God and thus experience a change of self-understanding (Gen. 32:22–32; Ex. 3). The nearness of God is perhaps no more acutely felt than during an experience of physical displacement... (McGill 2016:204-205)

Today, this is most evident in the openness to the Gospel among the Iranian diaspora, Syrian and Afghan refugees in the Middle East and across Europe,<sup>20</sup> Chinese migrants across the globe, and many others. Many indigenous churches and mission organizations in the cities of the Majority World understand this unique ministry opportunity and have planted thriving churches in the slums and informal refugee settlements.

This is a *Kairos* moment in history when the massive displacement of people has made so many of the refugees and migrants yearn for an anchor in the midst of the turmoil and chaos of their lives. They find this anchor in the God who says “he will never leave you nor forsake you.” (Deuteronomy 31:6). Unfortunately, most of the large Christian agencies who work with local partner agencies and churches forbid any form of evangelism or Scripture distribution as part of their aid program, in keeping with the *Red Cross Code of Conduct*.<sup>21</sup> They fear that their local partners will make it conditional having to hear a Gospel presentation or receive Scripture in order to receive aid. However, as noted in the previous section, there are ways that this can be avoided without compromising the presentation in word and deed a holistic Gospel.

Within God’s involvement with His creation, there is a unique role for Christian humanitarian agencies to demonstrate the love and compassion of Christ to people who are in crisis or trapped in poverty, regardless of whether there is proclamation or not. God is compassionate towards all that He has created and not just His people. Jürgen Moltmann refers to the Jewish Rabbi Abraham Heschel’s concept of the *pathos of God*.<sup>22</sup> This *pathos* is not what he calls “irrational human emotions”, but describes a God who is affected by events, human actions and suffering in history. This world is no longer the way He had created and intended it to be. Moltmann writes, “He is affected by them because he is interested in his creation, his people...” (Moltmann 1974:270) This *pathos* is contrasted with the *apatheia* of the gods that Judaism and early Christianity encountered in the religions of the ancient world, and what many non-Christians today experience with the idols and gods they worship. God sees human beings struggle with the challenges of life. Because

of His compassion for His creation, He uses both secular and Christian agencies to ease the suffering of people affected by disasters and poverty.

By being a purely humanitarian agency, many Christian NGOs are missing God's *Kairos* moment in history right now. While they operate out of a sense of compassion through the aid they provide, the impact would be so much greater if they partnered with local churches or mission agencies to provide a more holistic response. By separating the humanitarian and compassionate dimensions of ministry from proclamation and other spiritual ministries, they are missing how God is using disasters and human displacement to strengthen His Church and draw hard-to-reach people to Himself.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Christian humanitarian agencies are not immune from the challenges that Catholic and Protestant missions have faced over the centuries. Contextualization has required mission agencies to understand their own Christian traditions and theology before they could contextualize the Gospel message and its expression in a local worshiping community in the countries and cultures they went to. More recently they are becoming aware of how their own socioeconomic and political worldviews influence their own theology and missional strategies. For Christian humanitarian agencies contextualization has been limited to the kind of food and other aid that is provided. Some will seek to learn the basics of the local language, and try and understand the social structure of the community they are working in. The assumption is that compassion and responding to human need is a universal value and does not need to be culture sensitive or contextualized.

The question is not whether compassion is a universal value, but rather how compassion is demonstrated. There is a growing awareness that aid provided with the best of intentions in the midst of a conflict has unintended consequences. Mary Anderson's work on *Do No Harm* principles provides a framework to create a contextual awareness of how humanitarian aid and humanitarian agencies unintentionally influence the dynamics between the different warring factions. (Anderson 1999) There have been times when Christian relief agencies have unintentionally gotten identified with one side of a conflict and by default the church and Christians in the country have been put at risk. In natural disasters, humanitarian agencies that don't understand local cultures and livelihoods, may end up creating long term dependency and destroy a community's ability to support itself.

International humanitarian agencies that identify themselves as Christian, need to understand what the label of "Christian" means. It identifies values that they uphold and describes their motivation stemming from the compassion of God for His creation. What they fail to understand is that they are part of the global Body of Christ. By not relating to local churches and Christians they confuse people about who they are. They often fail to understand the social, political and religious nature of the context and the impact of their presence and how they operate. By adhering to a dualistic platonic view of human beings and focusing on only addressing the physical needs of people in a disaster, they are unaware of missional opportunities and the *Kairos* moments of God working in history.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> It was only in 1901 that the first empirical studies were done by the British sociological researcher, Seebohm Rowntree, at York University, UK. (Maxwell 1999:2).

<sup>2</sup> Humanitarian organizations received 27% less funding in 2019.

<sup>3</sup> John Stott has addressed many of these issues through the Lausanne 1974 documentation and his numerous other writings, as have many others.

<sup>4</sup> For the concept of compassion in the world religions, see Brackney and Das 2018.

<sup>5</sup> In 1979, World Vision was the first agency to bring attention to the plight of the Vietnamese boat people. In 1984, World Vision brought BBC reporter Michael Buerk to Ethiopia and make the world aware of the magnitude of the famine gripping the country.

<sup>6</sup> 1) The humanitarian imperative comes first. 2) Aid is given regardless of the race, creed or nationality of the recipients and without adverse distinction of any kind. Aid priorities are calculated on the basis of need alone. 3) Aid will not be used to further a particular political or religious standpoint. 4) We shall endeavor not to act as instruments of government foreign policy. 5) We shall respect culture and custom. (The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the ICRC 1994).

<sup>7</sup> This has been mainly through the three Lausanne Conferences and the related consultations.

<sup>8</sup> The term was coined by Paulo Freire. (Freire 1970:19). Andrew Kirk refers to this process of education and *conscientization* as “a subversive tool, which would cause the dominated to demand the removal of their shackles.” (Kirk 1979:25).

<sup>9</sup> *Comunidades Eclesiales de Base* (CEB) in Portuguese. Christian Base Communities in Liberation Theology are fundamental social unit for reflection and action. Margaret Hebblethwaite defines base communities as a grass root, bottom-up development (community) that takes a different shape in every different culture and context. (Hebblethwaite 1994).

<sup>10</sup> Michael Bergunder gives two reasons why Pentecostal congregations grew faster than the base communities. See (Bergunder 2002: 171). First, the Pentecostals were not as strongly secularized as the Catholics and had stronger connections with the traditions of folk religions. Secondly, there was a difference between the lay people and the Catholic Church workers. Cecilia Mariz explains, “The Catholic Church opts for the poor because it is not a church of the poor. Pentecostal churches do not opt for the poor because they are already a poor people’s church. That is why poor people are choosing them.” (Mariz 1994:80). This is similar to the observation made by Wonsuk Ma.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Freston states that in 1998 between 11-15% of the Latin American population was Protestant and that most of it was Pentecostal. (Freston 1998:335-338).

<sup>12</sup> It must be noted that Pentecostalism in Latin America has moved beyond the poor communities and is now firmly entrenched in the mainstreams of society.

<sup>13</sup> American Pentecostal theologian Cheryl B. Johns proposed integrating into Pentecostal spirituality Paulo Freire’s method of liberation pedagogy. (Johns 1994:11-15). Others have noted how Liberation Theology is making inroads within Latin American Pentecostalism. See (Sepulveda 1998:189-203). (Petersen 1991:44-58). (Villafane 1993).

<sup>14</sup> God uses both Christian and secular organizations to be compassionate to people in crisis. “He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” (Matthew 5:45)

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<sup>15</sup> It is important to remember that this chapter is referring to the Protestant, Evangelical and Pentecostal churches. The Catholic Church works primarily through its own disaster relief organization called Catholic Relief Services (CRS), which is known as CAFOD in the UK and Development and Peace in Canada. The Orthodox Churches work through their own agency known as International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC).

<sup>16</sup> Even International Law (The Geneva Conventions) protects places of worship during conflicts because they are sacred to the community.

<sup>17</sup> Lebanese Society for Educational and Social Development (LSESD).

<sup>18</sup> More on this in a soon to be published book by Das based on field research entitled “The God that the Poor Seek”.

<sup>19</sup> The author has numerous first-hand examples of Burmese Baptists being integrated into churches in Finland, Syrians in Sweden, Iranian and Afghan refugees in Germany and Austria, of Ghanaian, Caribbean, and Nigerian immigrants in the UK, etc.

<sup>20</sup> There is an unusual movement of the Spirit of God among Muslims in so many parts of the world. See (Garrison 2014). Since the book was published there have been new movements among Muslims from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

<sup>21</sup> *Red Cross Code of Conduct 3*) Aid will not be used to further a particular political or religious standpoint.

<sup>22</sup> Heschel’s discussion on the pathos of God is from *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).

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