WORLD FAITHS DEVELOPMENT DIALOGUE

A Different Perspective on Poverty and Development

'It is the invisible which makes the visible world possible'

Introduction

In the face of the wide-spread injustice, physical poverty, violence and environmental destruction characteristic of our age, many people and institutions are becoming increasingly aware that we are failing in our responsibility towards each other and towards the planet on whose life our lives depend. There is an urgent need to change the way we set about living in our world. And we can no longer merely cast the blame on others. The time has come to make alliances, to share with one another our different experiences, ways of thinking, technical skills, hopes and dreams, and, by changing the present, to lay the foundations for a different future.

One such alliance is the World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD), which was set up in 1998 as a dialogue among the religions of the world, and between the religions and the World Bank, on the subject of poverty and development. Our aim is not to reach agreement, or even a consensus, since one of the world's richest inheritances is the diversity of ways in which the people who live in it understand it. But our aim is to reach conclusions which can make a difference, and this will be done, not only by talking, but by acting in dialogue together.

This "Different Perspective on Poverty and Development" is a revised and abbreviated version of a Comment written by the WFDD on the first outline of the World Bank's World Development Report 2000. The original version (26 pages) is still available from WFDD. The focus is on values, and the religious communities' understanding of development and poverty.

This may be the first time that such an inter-faith effort in this field has been made. However, in order to temper unwarranted expectations of the content of the "Different Perspective", it is important to highlight two principal limitations. Firstly the document does not pretend to provide a consensus of the core tenets and visions of the different religious traditions, or their application to development and poverty issues. Such a consensus does not exist, either among the religions or within each one of them. Secondly, in view of the need for brevity, we could not engage with all the different issues which need to be addressed, nor could we provide much detailed argument for the conclusions drawn.

The "Different Perspective" is the fruit of many hours of discussion among people from different religions all over the world. We hope very much that it will lead to further debate and action as part of the process of the WFDD.

Our gratitude goes to Roger Riddell, who wrote the first draft, and to all those who contributed to the subsequent debate, which resulted in this final version. There have been well over a hundred contributors. The names of those who arranged conferences and seminars and those from whose written material we have drawn are listed at the end.

The coordination of the work has been in the hands of Wendy Tyndale, but the authorship of the "Different Perspective" belongs to everyone who has been involved. We would also like to thank the Swiss Agency for Development and Co-operation, as well as the UK Department for International Development, for their moral and financial support.

1. Vision of Development

1.1. Development embraces all dimensions of human existence

The starting point for the religious traditions in this discussion on poverty and development is their belief that all human activities fall within the sacred ordering of the universe. For the Hindus, this is expressed through the concept of Sanatana Dharma, the eternal truths which lie over and above any specific religious interpretation. The vision of the Jains and the Buddhists is that nothing escapes the cycle of cause and effect. Other religions speak of God's will or commandments. Since all human activity is encompassed by this divine, or eternal, order (which for all the faith communities is based on values such as love, compassion, self-discipline and generosity), there can be no meaningful separation between the social, economic, political, environmental, cultural and spiritual dimensions of life.

Economic activities, for example, trading, are just as much a part of social relationships as family celebrations or religious festivals. Money lending rules are just as intimately linked to community justice as an education or legal system is, and they are subject to the same moral laws, even if the interpretation of these laws, or values, varies widely from culture to culture.

In the light of this, there is a general consensus among the faith communities that development can only have a meaning if the concept embraces all dimensions of human existence. If emphasis is placed only on economic development, this will fail, as the balance necessary for human well-being will be lost. As the Jews say: 'Where there is no bread, there is no Torah, and where there is no Torah, there is no bread'.

1.2. Development is based on moral values

The source of vision and motivation for people of religious belief is their experience of the supreme reality, the transcendent, or the divine. Thus one point on which full agreement is likely to be found is that both the ultimate aim and the underlying foundation of any development process must be the strengthening of the spiritual life and moral values of individuals and societies.

No society can be truly developed until the people within it have made their own the attributes which are commonly known as 'virtues'. These include trust, solidarity, altruism, companionship, honesty, respect for others, tolerance, forgiveness and mercy. Development processes which are not based on virtues are not only useless, they are potentially dangerous.

1.3. Development implies engagement with this world

On the basis of the premise that these moral values are essential for the well-being of any society, there is now a growing tendency within most religions to embrace a vision, too, which extends through the personal to the economic and political as well as the social and natural world. The Bah�'�s, for instance, have defined the process of development in terms of laying the foundations for a new social order which can cultivate the potentialities latent in human consciousness. The present discussion is focused on this engagement with the world.

Since there will always be a tension between an emphasis on spiritual experience on one hand, and taking action to build up a better world around us on the other, the degree and nature of this engagement varies greatly, both among and within the religious communities. But many religiously-inspired people are making an increasing effort not only to contribute to practical improvements in the lives of the poor, but also to try to understand the nature

and causes of poverty, and to analyse the values and goals of development programmes.

1.4. Development is an open-ended process

Many people from the faith traditions are ready to recognise that no religion can claim to possess the entire truth about God or the origin and purpose of the universe, and the place of human beings within it. This implies a certain degree of provisionality, as the meaning of life is understood and deepened by interaction with the world and with people; by the interaction of what 'is' with what 'ought to be', as perceived by the faith communities.

It is on these grounds that those people from religious traditions who think about these issues hold the view that development is a continuing process, but one whose parameters lie open to revision. In this respect the notion of development encompasses the notion of 'vision'.

2. Understanding Poverty

2.1. Poverty is a multidimensional phenomenon

Poverty is usually understood first and foremost to be about the lack of the basic material necessities for life. But in many societies the people who lack social networks are considered to be the poorest. For yet other communities the most dire kind of poverty arises from environmental destruction.

Poverty often involves living in a situation of social and political conflict and violence, and it is frequently linked to the loss of self- and group-esteem. Exclusion is a key cause, as well as a result, of poverty, probably found in its most severe form in the elimination of self-identity through the destruction of culture. The absence of work and of fair returns on one's labour is directly linked to poverty. Poverty is also expressed in an inability to participate in social, political and economic life.

But other extreme forms of poverty can lie in the spiritual domain. An impoverished spiritual life leads to a lack of awareness of the presence of the divine or inviolable spirit within each person, and thus of human dignity. It also leads to personal emptiness, which causes people to look for substitutes for spirituality, of which the most common today are money and consumer goods. We should constantly remind ourselves that materially poor people often possess valuable types of wealth, which should not be depleted by the developmental process.

At the end of the day, all religious traditions would agree that it is the absence of those human traits without which interpersonal relationships and social life break down - the virtues -which not only constitutes poverty in itself, but also contributes to the continuation of poverty in our world. The more the need for cultivating the virtues in people and in societies is downplayed, the greater is the risk that development processes will be influenced by their opposites: greed, selfishness, blindness, dishonesty, intolerance, isolation, and individualism.

2.2. Poverty is a widely varying process

It is the perspective of many religions that poverty can also be understood as the absence of what people need to fulfil their (God-given) potential. This suggests that poverty should be seen as a process. Rather than describing different features of the current poverty of particular individuals or groups, this approach seeks to explain either how these people became, or were made, poor, or why it is that they have remained poor when others have not. This historical approach to poverty has strong resonances within the Judeo-Christian faiths, whose understanding of what they perceive as the 'hand of God' in the world has been profoundly influenced by historical reflection.

Given the heterogeneous nature of the poor, the complexity of poverty, and the need to examine the historical characteristics of particular poor people, individually and in their social setting, care should be taken not to assume that poverty is the same everywhere. It is inaccurate to imagine that all dimensions of poverty, even extreme poverty, can be understood merely by referring to a cluster of common indicators. Nor should it be assumed that poverty can be reduced by applying uniform policies across societies and countries.

It has been found helpful to distinguish between:

-- absolute and relative poverty

-- temporary and more permanent poverty

-- vulnerability (specifically, the vulnerability of those not currently considered poor to become poor, and of those in some poverty to move into extreme poverty).

In the experience of faith-based organisations, the differences to be found among people who are poor are greater than the similarities. Strategies planned on the basis of the latter run the risk of diminishing the wealth of a culture, undermining spiritual values and destroying survival networks

3. Three approaches to poverty

3.1. Immediate alleviation

Within the diversity of the religious organisations' views on the poor and poverty, the most traditional approach has been to provide the poor with the goods they need merely to survive.

3.2. Self-reliance or "empowerment"

There is, however, a growing awareness among faith communities that 'charity' in the sense of benevolence handed out from above to below, as it were, perpetuates the lack of dignity associated with poverty. Thus, except at times of emergency, a second approach gives higher priority to enabling the poor to become self-reliant. This is done by working with them to acquire material goods as well as skills.

Many religious-based institutions would argue that unless the poor are actively engaged in the development process, there is a high risk that the process itself will undermine what they hold to be of most value. One example of this has been the breakdown of common land ownership and collective ways of working through the undifferentiated introduction of private property. Related to this, is the increasing tendency to demand remuneration for any service rendered.

In order for people to engage actively in their own process of development, they need to be able to participate effectively at different levels of society, through formal and informal associations and networks. Many of the faith communities advocate decentralisation from central to local government, provided that there is local competence to ensure good governance. Strong civil society organisations have a key role to play in ensuring transparency and accountability to the people. Without them, widespread corruption is likely to continue to be a major impediment to reducing poverty in many countries.

Genuine participation in democratic processes will not occur merely by ensuring that fair elections take place and by taking steps to create a 'free press'. It is often necessary to address the ways in which different groups can

influence decisions at the national level and, in doing so, to set in motion a dialogue on the very nature of the state and its constituent parts. Finally, it cannot be taken for granted that the Western model of democracy will necessarily be the best way of empowering people at all times, and in all cultural contexts.

The issue of empowerment is also related to markets. A free-market system which does not acknowledge the problem of the power structures it embodies cannot fail to cause major harm to the weakest actors within it. Many economists within the International Financial Institutions, including the World Bank, have recognised this and are proposing stronger regulations. These are welcomed by the faith-based organisations. However, we propose that nothing short of a restructuring of the international trading system is needed, in order to enable poor countries, and poor communities within them, to enter markets on an equal footing with others.

With regard to the whole issue of empowerment, a strong challenge must go out, too, to the religious institutions, to replace bad habits of exercising authoritarian control with genuinely liberating ways of incorporating their adherents. This applies particularly to their treatment of women.

3.3 Link between poverty and wealth

The third approach to poverty adopted by faith-based organisations focuses on the link between poverty and wealth.

3.3.1. The responsibility of the rich towards the poor

All religions would see the extreme material poverty in the world today as a moral indictment to contemporary humanity and a breach of trust within the human family. For many, such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism and the Bah�'� faith, the focus on poverty is a matter of justice. Indeed, the Hebrew word for 'charity' is the same as the one for 'justice'. For others, such as Buddhists, the emphasis is more on the duty to care for the poor.

Some indigenous spiritual traditions reject outright the accumulation of individual wealth. However, most religions accept or even encourage it, as long as it is shared or held in trust, and as long as it is earned honestly and without causing harm to others. In the case of some, such as the Jains, this means not harming any living creature or plant. There is no religion in the world which does not condemn the hoarding of riches by some, while others live in misery, particularly because of the causal relationship between the two conditions. This is summed up by the Hindu adage: 'Whenever you take more than you need, you are stealing from someone else.'

Within this general principle, methods of sharing vary widely, from being the foundation of an economic system based on reciprocal giving (as in many indigenous communities) to setting rules of obligatory giving (as in the Muslim zakat) or encouraging voluntary giving (as in most Christian churches). Dana (sharing, or giving) is one of the main pillars of Buddhist religious practice. Another Muslim rule which gives powerful protection to the poor, and extends to the Muslim banking system, is that money lenders should share the risk to their capital by receiving a proportion of the profits made, rather than by charging interest.

The faith communities are convinced that a more equitable distribution of the world's wealth is needed for an effective reduction of poverty. We suggest that, if there were the political will, viable mechanisms to achieve this could be worked out fairly easily.

3.3.2. Social, political and economic structures need changing

Much poverty exists because current development processes often bypass many poor people. The powerful and the wealthy are frequently disproportionately favoured. This enables them to use their relative strengths to build up institutions to further their wealth and position in society to the disadvantage of many poor people. The resolution of poverty therefore requires forms of engagement which extend beyond providing the means for the poor to increase their participation and capacities. Structures and institutions must also be changed.

The Roman Catholic Church teaches, for example, that private ownership of property is subject to social responsibility. This means there must be a change of lifestyle among the rich, and changes in the models of production and consumption, as well as in the established power structures that govern society today. Muslims, Taoists and many others support this. They argue that models of development which disregard the relationship between the rich and the poor, or the powerful and the weak, will inevitably fail to bring any long-lasting changes for the majority of impoverished people.

It is their lack of identification with the poor which enables so many of the most powerful actors in the international community to avoid taking full responsibility for the dysfunctional aspects of the current economic policies and market mechanisms. These include the expectation that poor countries and poor people should compete on the uneven playing field of the open market, as well as the destruction of the very planet that sustains us. They also include the imposition of unpayable debts on some of the poorest countries in the world (an issue that has been the subject of vigorous campaigning by many religious groups).

3.3.3. International Aid

Only when those with most power are able to view the whole of humankind as a family will the full horror of allowing so many to perish while others are overwhelmed by a surfeit become clear. However, it is not only a question of morality, but of practical interdependence. Globalisation is surely teaching us that none of us will survive unless peace, based on international, as well as national, social justice becomes the aim of development.

It is in this context that the issue of international aid should be considered. Discussions with religious bodies have enabled the poor to voice their anger about the pitifully small amounts of aid which reach the people who need it. Moreover, aid strategies still tend to have a top-down approach between donor and receiving countries and within receiving countries. This has tended to undermine the dignity of those who receive aid, and has thus had the opposite effect of 'empowerment'. Another problem is that all too often the priorities set, and the conditions imposed, are unsuitable to the situation of the receiving country, and alien to its culture. Yet a further major unsolved problem is corruption.

4. Human rights

The present articulation of human rights is a secular formulation of the spiritual notion of the dignity inherent to each person, and thus has its grounding in the basic principles of all the religions. Fully aware of the diverse opinions among and within the religious communities, we would nevertheless like to recommend that development strategies consider people's rights. A focus on rights is important in view of the growing consensus that it is unacceptable for some human rights to be set aside in the interests of development. Moreover, a multi-dimensional view of poverty must incorporate, at one and the same time, economic, social, cultural, civil, and political rights.

5. Focus on people

5.1. People are the primary concern

If development is to 'bring good news to the poor', as Christians would put it, rather than focusing on economic processes, it must be concerned, above all, with the well-being of people. Development is a process which should be initiated and carried out by people as well as for people, and it cannot be reduced to technical abstractions.

5.2. Development includes everyone

Most religions share a central concern not merely for people in general, but for all people and peoples. The Sikhs teach that God loves all, without distinction of place, creed or social or economic standing of individuals or groups. This belief is to be found explicitly in many other religious traditions as well, giving basis to the belief that all people are of equal value, and should be treated as such. For religions, too, which teach that past action affects one's birth conditions, there is a need to ensure that all have an equal chance to improve their lives. The Hindu castes were conceived of originally as a division of labour. Only over time has the caste system tended to become synonymous with exclusivity based on hierarchy.

Thus, at different levels, disadvantaged individuals, groups, and cultures need to be protected and supported to engage in the development process, as do disadvantaged nations. This option for the excluded is an absolute criterion for most faith-based organisations when faced with policy decisions and practical choices. We believe that, in the long run, to give priority to the most needy is not incompatible with cost-effectiveness, even if results are not immediately visible. Experience has shown that the use of short-term cost effectiveness as the ultimate criterion has repeatedly left the poorest and most marginalised people waiting in vain for benefits to trickle down to them, and in this way has contributed to the failure to eradicate poverty.

It should be said, however, that, with regard to the inclusion of all, it is not only the development strategists who face criticism. Like all human communities, the religious communities have frequently failed to live up to their own principles. Much of the discrimination and exclusion in the world is practised by religious groups themselves, whose members are called upon to re-examine their attitudes and practice.

Women are of fundamental importance in this discussion. There is no adequate moral justification to be found in any religion for the severe discrimination faced by women in most, if not all, societies, limiting their potential and ability to participate in the development process. As we have already noted, a particular challenge to religious institutions and communities is to review their own treatment of women in the light of their perception of a divine order, in which love and compassion are the ruling principles.

5.3. Listening to the poor

To listen to what poor people have to say about development processes is vitally important because it highlights the fact that poverty is ultimately an issue of, and for, people. However, the following factors must be taken into consideration.

i. Given the limited access to information available to most poor people, the 'voice of the poor' cannot provide a complete understanding of poverty. With this in mind, all the more effort should be made to grasp the truth of what they say about their own communities - a reality that they know better than anybody else.

ii. There is a danger in assuming that the poor want to tell outsiders everything about their poverty, and,

especially, about their fears for the future.

iii. Historical experience suggests that as the lives of the poor change, and as their understanding of what they might be able to achieve changes, so, too, are they likely to articulate their desires and needs in different ways. The priorities of a community during a war, for example, are different from those of that same community in peacetime.

iv. Finally, listening to the poor must involve the first moral dimension of all development work - to build up friendship and trust. Outsiders who are more interested in finding out what poor people think than in meeting their needs, can easily raise unwarranted expectations. To ask if a school is needed, for instance, may all too readily sound like an offer to provide one.

5.4. Development must not harm the poor

One important implication for religious communities of their focus on people is that any process of development which creates or perpetuates poverty is illegitimate, even if the long-term goal is to eliminate poverty. A fundamental principle of 'just' development is that, minimally, it should 'do no harm' to the poor.

In order to place the poor at the centre of the development process, we suggest that prime attention should be paid to ensuring that macro-economic policies do not work in contradiction to local measures being taken in favour of the poor. Again and again the programmes of faith-based organisations have been rendered nonviable by structural adjustment programmes and international financial and market mechanisms.

The link between macro-economic stability and spending on the social sectors and the poor needs careful attention too. In many countries which pursue what the international financial institutions would consider 'correct' macro-economic policies, the gap between the needs of the essential social services and the funds available is often very wide - not least because of the high percentages of national income which are paid out to service the foreign debt.

6. Community

Adherence to a religion involves the interaction of people in groups - in the synagogue, temple, gurdwara, mosque, church, etc., as well as in the family, in communities and within distinct cultures. From a faith perspective, it is not possible to understand humanity merely by focusing on the individual. Indeed, the Buddhist understanding of the origin of suffering lies in the delusion of perceiving oneself as an isolated independent being, existing in a world of isolated independent things.

Development strategies thus need to embrace the notion of community by strengthening the natural social bonds of the poor. Social networks and communities do not only provide help in times of need. They also give a sense of worth, identity, purpose and belonging.

However, we would like to sound a note of caution about identifying 'community' with 'social cohesion'. The term must be defined. Since development means change, social relations will alter and historial alliances will shift. Thus the nature of what constitutes social cohesion in different contexts will also change. A problem faced in societies dominated by particular ethnic groups is that 'social cohesion' has been seen to provide legitimacy for limiting the power of minorities. 'Social cohesion' which perpetuates oppression must be challenged, not maintained.

Also of relevance to this debate is the issue of social inequality, which is sometimes seen in a negative light only if

it is negatively associated with economic growth prospects. There are cases in which the poor may have benefited materially from growth, in spite of increased inequality. However, in our experience, such strategies almost always benefit the better off, while often actively harming the poor, and they certainly do not contribute to the building of peaceful communities or to true social cohesion. Faith-based organisations working with people who have been made homeless or landless, or who have been left without work as the result of the increasing power of the rich over against the poor, would question any economic strategy which increases inequality, even if it is accompanied by overall growth.

It appears that the need to build up stronger community organisations is being recognised by the present debate about 'social capital', an area which focuses on how interpersonal relations condition economic behaviour and how they can increase economic efficiency and reduce vulnerability. But the very description of human associations in such economic terms causes us disquiet. Might not the instrumentalisation of community groups for purely economic ends run the risk of eroding some of the most important elements of their intrinsic value?

Our comments on community must include the admission that conflicts between different religious groups themselves have frequently caused a breakdown of community and social cohesion. In many situations, conflicts between religious groups have been exacerbated and have been used by other forces, to cause and/or perpetuate a breakdown. The leaders of the faith communities have a key role to play here, not only in resolving such conflicts, but also in identifying areas of high risk and preventing conflicts from happening.

7. Cultural diversity

The strong tradition among the Muslims and Hindus of welcoming 'the stranger at your door' is, in principle, to be found in most religious communities, even though, being frail, human institutions, they have all too often failed to put such principles of acceptance, or even minimal tolerance, into practice.

For many faith communities, cultural diversity has become a prime issue with regard to the process of globalisation. Some religious groups have reacted to this by retreating into fundamentalism. Others welcome globalisation as a facilitator of greater interaction among the faith communities, and thus of deeper understanding, which could lead to more tolerance than in the past. But even those most open to these advantages share a strong sense of foreboding as the breakdown of different cultures becomes increasingly visible.

Culture may be expressed through art, music or literature, but essentially it is the means by which people give meaning and order to the world. If people's visions and values, their perceptions of reality and their most cherished beliefs are disregarded, their very identity will be threatened. Sacred sites which are desecrated for economic purposes, 'cost-effectiveness', which allows no time for deeply valued rituals, and any other activities which violate what is perceived to be the right ordering of human life within the universe, will either alienate people from their own roots or end in their being excluded from the development process.

Each community should have the right to its own economic systems too, even if these coexist with other models. Collective ownership of assets, exchange on the basis of giving and receiving, and shared work are all ways of conducting the economic life of a community. Each of these ways interlocks with values such as respect, generosity, and the importance of family and social ties, and forms part of the culture and identity of the people involved. An insensitively introduced development programme to 'modernise' such a community can thus lead to its demise. In the end it comes down to the right of every society to conduct its affairs on the basis of the values it most cherishes.

It must, however, be pointed out that cultures are not static. We are not arguing that all existing aspects of any culture should be preserved at all costs, especially with regard to gender relations. But any changes must be allowed to evolve within a culture and according to its own context.

8. Work

Many religious traditions contend that one of the most basic human needs is actively to engage with other people, and the world, in productive and creative work. The purpose of work is not only to produce a livelihood and to maintain society, but also to bring about the personal fulfilment of the worker by his or her participation in the process of production and distribution, thereby giving service to the whole community. This is seen by some faith traditions as the highest form of worship.

The world of work is rapidly changing. Millions of people today are forced to earn their living through carrying out largely unrewarding work. Moreover, against the background of an increasingly uneven distribution of wealth, work itself is becoming scarcer. In this context, full employment, or engagement in society, should be the goal of any development strategy.

On one hand, the right to work brings with it the right to fair returns on one's labour, which either means a fair wage or, in some cases, access to markets. Bonded labour, unequal pay for women and wages below certain levels violate all notions of respect for other people as well as of justice. Since labour is the only asset which many poor people possess, an approach to development emphasising full employment would lead to a greater distribution of wealth.

On the other hand, however, space should be made for fully-recognised voluntary work. The ethos of service to others does not only mean self-sacrifice but also brings with it the possibility of self-fulfilment and satisfaction. In the future, voluntary work will become increasingly important, for example, in building up civil society, especially at local levels. In any development programme, voluntary work should be granted the same status as paid work (and different kinds of paid work, such as intellectual work and manual labour, should also be considered of equal worth.)

It is the opinion of the faith communities that policy reforms should, where appropriate, include incentives for labour-intensive small farms and village industries, which produce food for the local market and activate the local economy. We welcome government labour-based schemes, but it would be more fruitful in the long run to make sure that markets are available to the poor. It is not merely a question of trying to return to a former situation. New thinking on the issue of work must take place, to see how people can now be occupied usefully and with dignity.

9. The Environment

Jews, Christians and Muslims believe that the whole world belongs to God, who has given humankind the responsibility to act as good stewards over the rest of nature. Indigenous spiritual traditions and other religions, such as Taoism or Jainism, place more emphasis on the interdependence between human beings and the rest of nature. This interdependence is not merely that of an equilibrium established by laws of nature. It involves the responsibility of human beings to care not only for each other, in the present and future generations, but for the rest of creation too. Indigenous groups the world over have a particular vision of the need to respect and preserve the relationship of the human community with its past and its future though the sacred creation of nature.

Thus, from whatever standpoint they argue, all the religious communities agree that human beings have the duty to ensure the sustainability of the natural world they inhabit. This means that development requires that people's engagement with the world's resources neither creates an unhealthy environment nor leads to the depletion of necessary finite natural resources or the diminishing viability of the eco-system.

All religions see the notion of restraint and the acceptance of limits as a crucial part of what it means to be human. This concept has been the unique contribution of the religions over the ages to an understanding of the relationship between people and nature.

10. Moral education

We end with the most important issue of all: moral education. At the heart of all the faith traditions lies the aim of self-knowledge, leading to personal transformation or perfection, as the only way to draw nearer to the Godhead and/or to the attainment of total peace and contentment. The routes are many. Buddhists seek to free themselves from the illusion that a self-centred, greed-driven way of being will lead to contentment. Christians aim to learn to love God and their neighbour as themselves. Muslims seek to achieve their quest for peace through submission to the will of God. It is the strong belief of the religious traditions that without undertaking these liberating processes, individual people, and therefore, societies, will never be able to make their own the virtues on which true development must be based.

Development is thus first and foremost about spiritual and moral progress. It is not a static, but a dynamic process whose focus is not so much on having more, but on being more. One aspect of this involves the notion of human dignity. (At the same time, we fully recognise that one often needs to have more in order to be more, particularly when one has nothing.)

The religious communities believe that the current emphasis on education as little more than training for a future job is profoundly mistaken. All the technical training in the world will not help a society to advance unless people are given the necessary moral and spiritual education to enable them to use their skills for the good of all. Legal training to the highest standard, for instance, will never produce good judges unless it is accompanied by the development of a sense of justice balanced by compassion.

It has been said that the dissemination of positive ideas is just as important as social action. Today it is more apparent than ever that it is only positive ideas, and the values of love, solidarity, truth and justice, which give social action any meaning. Without the necessary spiritual maturity, which enables people not only to tolerate but to value difference, no development programme will ever succeed in bringing to humankind true prosperity, which means personal and social peace.

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