

The Centrality of Christian Ethics in the Transformational Development of Society

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Abstract

Ethical foundations play a significant role in achieving a country's development. Well-founded moral standards of right and wrong prescribe what humans ought to do, their rights, obligations, and societal benefits. In society, biblical values can transform the development agenda of any given local community. This paper highlights the critical nature of Christian ethics in the transformational development of communities by examining the participation of Christians in transformational development. The article also reviews ideas that have shaped the understanding of transformational development. The study proposes practical Christian ethical values that Christian development practitioners must use in the transformational development of society. Finally, the paper recommends Christian ethical foundations for authentic transformational development.

Keywords: Christian Ethics, Transformational Development, Justice and Advocacy, Society

Introduction

The term *transformational development* is understood as the recovery of our true identity as human beings created in the image of God and discovering our true vocation as productive stewards, faithfully caring for the world and all the people in it (Myers, 2011). The recovery of this true identity is necessary because of the effects of the fall of humanity (Gen 3). Furthermore, transformational development enables God's vision of society to be actualized in every arena of life and society for God's will to prevail and for his love to be experienced by all people in communities (Vinay, 2012).

This model of transformational development refers to the Christian faith in the development of communities in all dimensions of a human being. The role of faith-based organizations in transformational development plays a vital part in spurring sustainable development of the world. Marshall (2005) points out that faith-based organizations and development agencies across the globe have been identified as sharing a concern for dealing with the issue of poverty and social justice. They have been proactive in the global struggle for social, political, and economic change. Based on this understanding, the Christian transformational development model seeks to challenge the classic theories of development, mainly characterized by its sole emphasis on economic growth and negative view of the poor and their potential (Myers, 2011). It challenges this understanding by looking at the value of Christian ethics in influencing development through the transformation philosophy of being light of the world (Matt 5:13–15). It also reviews the role of Christianity in the transformational development of society.

Understanding the Background of Transformational Development

In this paper, the term *transformation* refers to a substantial or complete change in the life of an individual or community (Hornby, 2010). Development is often narrowly understood as social transformation, which involves the motivation of awareness and behavioural change in individuals and groups without external influences or manipulation (Burkey, 1993). It is critical to note that social transformation differs from development. According to Erasmus, development is based on the principles of quantitative growth, measured with the Human Development Index. Social transformation is the global process of change in local and national communities. In other words, to transform means to change appearance, condition, nature, and character, while social transformation involves human relations with each other in their communities. Erasmus believes that change must come from within the individuals and groups and should not be imposed from the outside.

In this sense, social transformation affects interpersonal relationships. Erasmus explains further that: “for societies to be sustainable, there is a need for deeper changes, which encourage people to conserve resources, share their wealth and opportunities, protect each other’s rights, and cooperate to advance the common good, namely the long-term health and welfare of the planet and its social fabric on which all our futures depend” (Erasmus, 2005). Korten (1990: 4-5) affirms that a people-centred vision embraces a transformation agenda emphasizing the return of control over resources to the people and their communities.

These resources are to address three basic imperatives, namely: justice, sustainability, and inclusiveness. Social transformation, therefore, means returning power to the people and their communities, thus enabling them to meet their basic needs. The above definitions show the general view of development in non-faith-based development circles, which is wrongly assumed to be holistic development.

The term development was problematized in Christian circles due to its negative association with development theories, such as Modernisation theory, and the failure to effectively address poverty (Bowers du Toit 2010). This has prompted a growing need for a Christian response to human needs (p. 291-274). The biblical response demands Christian development practitioners to model the character and ethics of Jesus Christ. The ethics of Jesus can be derived from the life and teachings of Jesus (like the Beatitudes). Christian practitioners ought to be salt and light to their communities (Matt 5:13) and bear the fruit of the Holy Spirit— love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—Galatians 5:22–23. These ethical values espoused in the scriptures are critical for community transformation.

Nkansah (2013) argues that the ethics of Jesus Christ is the model of Christian development practitioners (p. 2013: 94). In addition, Myers correlates the ethics and practitioners of transformational development and explores the characteristics of transformational development and holistic practitioner. The work argues that transformational development affirms cultures, contexts and indigenous knowledge, evangelism in context, just and peaceful relationships, human dignity, self-worth empowerment, self-reliance, sustainable development, total freedom, and spiritual development as crucial characteristics of transformation. It also examines the attitudes and attributes of a holistic practitioner (Myers, 2011).

In the process of community transformation, the transformational development model is critical to achieving the mission of the church or reaching out to those in need. Myers critiques development theories as materialistic, often technocratic, and reflects a firm belief in human reason, technology, and money as the key factors to solving the problem of poverty (Myers, 2011). However, he states the term *transformational development* involves the recovery of our true identity as human beings created in the image of God and discovering our true vocation as productive stewards, faithfully caring for the world and all the people in it (Myers, 2011). In his theory on transformational development, he emphasizes the importance of affirming the joint roles of God and human beings and the need to focus on restoring relationships in all dimensions of a human being (Myers, 2011). Bruce Bradshaw

uses Colossians 1:15–20 as a foundation for this theological argument. He views transformational development as a Christian concern for both “proclamation and incarnational, co-opting the term shalom as a way of life that characterizes the covenant relationship between God and his people (Bradshaw, 2011). Additionally, Vinay (2012) offers a more theological definition of transformational development, defining it as “the enabling of God’s vision of society to be actualized in all relationships, social, economic, spiritual, and political so that God’s will may be reflected in human society and his love experienced by all communities, especially the poor.”

As essential elements of transformation, transformational development affirms cultures, settings, and indigenous knowledge; contextualized evangelism; just and harmonious relationships; human dignity; self-worth empowerment; self-reliance; ultimate freedom; and spiritual development. The ideas of transformational development can be used to evaluate any development paradigm (Vinay, 2012). According to Luke 4:18–20, to fulfil their purpose of transforming societies, Christians must emulate Jesus Christ, whose ministry was holistic. He addressed both the spiritual and physical needs of human beings. He revealed his agenda in this biblical passage by citing Isaiah 61:1, 2: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour” (NIV). This research focuses, however, on Christian ethics from the evangelical perspective because evangelical theologians emphasize that the cause of poverty is both personal and social, and that the mission of the church entails proclamation and demonstration. As a result, the Christian notion of transformation has also been defined as the change from a condition of human existence contrary to God’s purpose to one in which people can enjoy the fullness of life in harmony with God (Samuel, V & Sugden, 1999).

The term transformational development was coined in the early 1980s by Christian theologians, development professionals, and practitioners such as Bragg Samuel and Sugden. The matter was broadly discussed within evangelical circles at the Wheaton consultation of 1983. The consultation forum drafted a proposal stipulating the nature and practice of development from a biblical perspective (Surgeon, 2003). In support, Bowers notes that evangelical theologians coined the term *Transformational Development* to denote development work from a theological perspective. However, many theologians felt the term development had secular connotations (Bragg, W.G, 1987). Subsequently, transformational

development came into the evangelical Christian development paradigm focused on explaining the relationship between evangelism and development or social action.

According to Myers, the term transformational development reflects a concern for seeking positive change in the whole of human life materially, socially, psychologically, and spiritually (Myers, 2011). In addition, Byworth Writes from the perspective of World Vision's framework and policy that development as transformation is the process through which children, families, and communities move towards wholeness of life with dignity, justice, peace, and hope (Byworth, J., 2003). Transformation is not merely changing economic, social, and political conditions. Instead, it is about changes from a level of human existence that is less than that envisioned by God to one in which a person is fully human and free to move to a state of wholeness in harmony with God and the environment. The transformation proposal provided an alternative framework for understanding human and social change from a Christian perspective, including human, societal, and spiritual change. Therefore, a meaningful transformation agenda should include changes in the human condition, relationships, and whole societies in developed and underdeveloped people.

In the secular approach, the focus is geared toward the economic, political, and social development of the materially poor, while spiritual poverty, which could also be found among the non-materially poor people, is overlooked. However, Myers (2011) adds that the evangelical agenda for the poor and the non-poor is the same, but each should be addressed differently. The materially poor suffer from a marred identity and a degraded vocation, while the non-materially poor suffer from god complexes and inflated vocation. All are made in the image of God with different talents and gifts, so there should be no superior and inferior relationships (p. 178). Therefore, according to Bragg (1993), transformation is holistic as it involves both material and spiritual changes and recognizes that transformation is a part of God's continuing action in history to restore all creation to himself and its rightful purposes and relationships. Therefore, transformation is a process toward a world that aligns more with God's original purposes and moves actively and creatively toward the future through the church's mission. In other words, transformational development addresses human needs holistically, aiming to restore God's original plan for creation, which had been distorted.

In addition, Bragg states that the ultimate goal of transformation is that God's will is realized, as is revealed in the Old Testament concept of shalom harmony, peace, health, well-being, prosperity, and justice, and in the New Testament image of the kingdom, which is both present and coming. He further points out that shalom is not only about the absence of strife but also emphasizes health, wholeness, justice, and other related aspects. Therefore, any

genuine involvement of Christians in development must seek to promote justice, peace, sharing, and free participation for the well-being of all. This is only possible if the church addresses the issues of corruption, operation, exploitation, racism, and discrimination, thereby providing an environment in which love, peace, and justice will reign (p.39).

Christian Ethics and Development Practitioners

The calling for Christian practitioners to be models in the communities they serve should be ethically grounded. In the Christian ethics philosophy, the holistic practitioner's role is to help foster good relationships in the community as part of the transformation process (Reader, 2011). They should serve out of love and concern for the other. Myers states that the fruit of the Holy Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control) should guide the ethics, attitudes and holistic nature of the work of Christian development practitioners (Myers, 2011). For instance, this requires the practitioner to love and be kind to their neighbours wholly, as Jesus taught, "Love your neighbour as yourself" (Mk 12:31, NIV). Jesus is the true model of unconditional love. Also, they must learn to be patient: a successful worker does not rush or try to work to gain human praise; it is about the kingdom's purpose. Hence, they must take time and do their best for the glory and honour of God. Likewise, Christian practitioners can shine their light by cultivating true biblical shalom in people's lives and communities, a peace which is all-around involving peace with God, others and oneself.

The holistic practitioner, therefore, must be willing to be a learner: no or little transformation will occur if the worker and beneficiaries (poor and non-poor) are not ready to learn. Obedience to simple instructions helps workers to maintain their integrity and ensures a true sense of stewardship. Samaan argues that a sanctified Christian, who consecrates, sets apart, and cleanses themselves for God's service, must maintain the evidence of the inner transformation that is characterized by a life of purity, moral integrity, and holy living. Their thoughts and actions must be expressed in an outward life of goodness and godliness. This means that a holistic practitioner's spiritual and moral life must go hand in hand with professionalism (Samaan, 1989). The Christian practitioner should embrace the incarnational model where they are involved with the people; as the Gospel writer puts it, "The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14, NIV). The incarnation of Jesus provides a paradigm of being involved in the realities of others so that there is

transformation and manifestation of God's work. Christian practitioners should be hands-on in their approach and touch people's lives in significant and tangible ways. Therefore, development practitioners must promote biblical values and a holistic approach to development.

Christian Ethics in Economics and Leading Business

In every society, one of the community transformation strategies is promoting the economic dimension for human beings in that community. The Christian ethics applied to social-economic life started with the very beginning of Christianity, as a renewed continuation of Jewish morals, in both intellectual developments and practice (Burkey, 1993). Over time, several Christian thinkers have made significant contributions to ethics in business centuries before the current movement of business ethics, particularly from the thirteenth century (Schlag, 2013).

In the Medieval era, the scholastic doctrine included morality on contracts, financial transactions, just price and market normality, and others (Chafuen, A.A, 1986). Still, scholasticism is alive and can significantly contribute to business ethics. In this issue, Lamberto Zollo, Massimiliano M. Pellegrini, and Cristiano Crappie return to scholastic thought and discuss the interplay between normal intuition and moral reasoning in decision-making. They argue that nowadays, the traditional rationalist framework of ethical decision-making has been challenged by recent psychological and managerial literature, which stresses the importance of unconscious elements of decision-makes recognition, such as intuition and emotions. They interpret moral intuition as an antecedent of the ethical decision-making process, to be blended with traditional moral reasoning or the deliberative and intentional process. In particular, they use the scholastic concept of *synderesis*, defined by Aquinas as “the law of our intellect insofar as it is the habit that contains the precepts of natural law, that is, the first principles of human actions” (John Paul II, 1991).

This explanation that innates human faculty is constantly in line with decision-makers toward the discovery of the human good and, consequently, universal moral principles. The authors integrate *synderesis* into a framework that combines intuitionist and rationalist perspectives with virtue ethics and then apply the result to ethical decision-making. Related to scholasticism, a second paper, authored by Grant Michelson and Sandrine Fremeaux, analyses two emerging business models through the lenses of the common goods, a central concept in scholasticism with Aristotelian roots and humanistic management: conscious

capitalism and the economy of communion. The authors try to show how the pursuit of the common goods of the firm can serve as a guide for humanistic management through two principles: first, community good is a condition for the realization of personal good; and second, community good can only be promoted if it is oriented toward personal good. They argue that both conscious capitalism and the economy of communion strive to participate in the common good. However, they differ in their respective manners of linking community good and personal good.

In the sixteenth century, theologians of the school of Salamanca, such as Francisco de Vitoria and Bartolome de las Casas, strongly defended universal human rights with implications for labour (Hollmann, 2019). In addition, some authors of this school actively worked on moral issues of business and finance, such as how to do business by Christian ethics.

In the twentieth century, Christian churches, particularly the Roman Catholic Church, championed many relevant moral issues connected to business ethics (Benedict XVI, 2022). A personalist view of work within organizations and some labour rights were defended by Pope Leo VIII. More recently, the Catholic Church magisterium promoted other significant insights and formulated principles for reflection, criteria for judgment, and guidelines for action. From the fundamental commandment of love and natural law, Catholic Social Teachings (CST) energetically defend human dignity, innate human rights, integral human development, and the relevance of the common good as a reference for the moral legitimacy of the social order (Benedict XVI, 2022). In addition, CST has pioneered several relevant concepts, some of which are now patrimony of Business Ethics.

Among these, we find the consideration of business as a community and the common good as a criterion for the legitimization of business and the market (John Paul II, 1991). The principle of subsidiarity, the centrality of human development beyond economic development, integral human development, the education of consumers in the responsible use of their power of choice (Pius XI, 2022), the principle of gratuity in business, and business as a noble vocation. More recently, Pope Francis has introduced concepts such as our “common home” by referring to our planet, the concept of “integral ecology”, and stressed the ideas of responsible stewardship over nature and sustainability. This issue contains three papers establishing a dialogue between Catholic Social Teachings and theoretical and practical approaches to business management. This dialogue opens horizons to improving theories and practices. Thus, Martijn Cremers argues that three pillars of Roman Catholic Social Teaching—human dignity, solidarity, and subsidiarity— can help rethink corporate

governance and even provide an alternative to “standard” agency theory. He finds this mainstream management theory problematic due to economic limitations (asymmetric information, contract completeness, and the need for coordination through explicit power or hierarchies) and human limitations (bounded rationality, opportunism, and behaviourism).

Cremes argues that these three pillars can affect three functions of corporate governance: the compass function, providing the set of values to guide the firm’s strategy toward its contributions to human flourishing; the commitment function, which involves the coordination (the ‘binding’) toward cooperation with all stakeholders in solidarity; and the criteria function, which defines that constitutes excellence in the firm’s practice both regarding external markets and international performance. On his part, Horacio E. Rousseau shows how establishing a dialogue between the ethical perspectives of Catholic Social Teachings on environmental ethics and the managerial view of the natural-resource-based view of the firm (NRBV) raises new possibilities for studying the complex, multi-dimensional process of corporate sustainability. In particular, he proposed integrating Catholic Social Teachings into this latter approach by considering the importance of Catholic Social Teachings in developing executive moral competencies, which include moral sensitivity, moral cognition, and motivation for ecology and sustainability.

These moral competencies, in turn, influence the organizational selection of environmental strategies, giving the leaders the intrinsic motivation to promote both a longer-term stance on corporate sustainability efforts and a relentless search for greener business models. Finally, a paper written by Benedictate de peyrelongue, Olivier Masclef, Catherine Gbedolo, and Vale’ rie Guillard focuses on “gratuitous giving” as a relevant concept anchored in Catholic Social Teachings and ultimately in Christian love to rethink consumer behaviour. They argue that “gratuitous giving “is not only a normative matter. On the contrary, gift exchange theory, based on the circular relation of “giving”-receiving-returning,” remains insufficient to explain consumers’ gift-giving behaviour. This is due to an exaggerated focus on the mainstream theories on individual behaviour and reactions motivated by material satisfaction, without considering that the person can act gratuitously on their account without regard to stimuli. They suggest the need for a complete anthropological perspective and highlight the importance of considering gratuitousness in all business activities, including marketing.

According to the actors, gratuitous giving is a valid theory to explain consumer behaviours and an argument for adopting a more realistic anthropology to conceptualize the consumer as a person. This offers a new way to understand consumer behaviour and opens a

new avenue of inquiry into gift marketing research. These three papers align with other works that have taken the Christian or, more precisely, catholic perspective to analyze or develop some aspects of economic and business ethics.

As we have noted, an increasing interest in Christian ethics and spirituality in business and management is motivated by the desire, to be honest in business settings; treat people right in business; be fair in business practices; invest wisely in business; and donate to worthy courses (Bluefield University, 2021). As a result, numerous Christian programs and projects have been developed to take moral and spiritual life about business more seriously. Nevertheless, despite the achievements, more research is necessary to develop the potentiality of Christian ethics and spirituality in business and peacebuilding (Alexander, 1989).

Christian Ethics in Justice and Advocacy in Society

Ethically, Christian development practitioners understand and promote just and peaceful relationships to achieve holistic human community development. Therefore, their responsibility is to promote just and peaceful relationships to achieve holistic development of the human community. These are fruits of Christians, and transformational development practitioners are to demonstrate these values in their communities. In this view, Robinson argues that development is a matter of human relations and justice. That is the proper relationship between God and His people in which domination, oppression, and exploitation are abnormal (Robinson, 19994). This means that unjust relationships are the root causes of societal disparities and inequalities. Therefore, development is liberation in an economic, social, and spiritual sense. True development is the development of people, the release of people from their enslaved conditions so that they can have rightful dignity of participation in making decisions that affect their lives and labour (Robinson, 2022).

In the human fall in Genesis 3, the right relationship with God, fellow human beings, and nature is distorted. A healthy relationship with God is the basis of all other relationships with humans and nature, and these relationships are an integral part of holistic development. Hughes and Bennett rightly argue that to do God's will now is to practice righteousness or justice in all human nations (Hughes, 1998). Migliore adds that the missional activity of the church is to foster a just and inclusive community in which members use their ministerial gifts for the well-being of the whole (Migliore, 2004). In this context, the scholar Myers also explains the levels of these relationships as the relationship with the triune God, with oneself, and with the community (Migliore, 2004). In this view, Bragg, for instance, points out that

transformation provides a ground where human beings, no matter their race, religion, or nationality, may live a fully human life, free from domination and oppression by other people. In addition, equity is a sign of the post of transformation because it provides equal access to goods and services and equal opportunities for all people (Robinson, 2022).

Conclusion

This paper has investigated the critical role of Christian ethics in the process of transformation development in society. It considered transformational development as a model that empowers individuals to recover their true identity and vocations and allows for building and maintaining peaceful relationships. It explored Jesus' ethics and the fruit of the Holy Spirit as a guide in practising transformational development. By applying these values, Christians and the church, can be the salt and light of the world. Society needs meaningful and holistic development; thus, Christian practitioners should step forward and model true transformation through their values. The knowledge helps the church and non-church development agencies to uphold Christian ethics in their development programs and projects. Christian development practitioners and managers must consider Christian ethics in their daily life and emulate Jesus Christ as the model of transformational development (Luke 4:18–20). They must be honest in business settings; treat people right in business; be fair in business practices; invest wisely in business; and donate to worthy courses in their business of transformational development of the communities.

Regarding Christian ethics in economics and leading business, increasing interest in Christian ethics and spirituality in business and management has recently led to several initiatives and scholarly discussions. Nevertheless, more research is needed to develop the potentiality of Christian ethics and spirituality in business, justice, and advocacy.

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