

MISSION AND DEVELOPMENT
A Report of a Seminar

For two weeks, February 14-27, an interdenominational group of missionaries working in Latin America met in Bogotá, Colombia to study the meaning of "Mission and Development" and to face today's challenge from the Third World. A Catholic priest from India and a protestant lawyer from Argentina provided input and provoked discussion, assisted by two representatives of U.S. missionary agencies and three outstanding Colombians.

Timely and purely coincidental incidents occurred during the seminar and accented the urgency of these discussions. 1. The fifth anniversary of the death of Colombian rebel priest Camilo Torres evoked both government platitudes and student demonstrations in Bogotá. 2. In response to the new situation caused by the popular election of a Marxist president in Chile, President Nixon declared at this particular time a "new" Latin America policy in which the U.S. recognizes the right of these countries to choose their own forms of government but warns ominously against those who threaten "U.S. interests." 3. The local press ran a series of articles debating the complicity of Catholic and Protestant missions in the exploitation of Colombia's Indian tribes. 4. The statement of an international consultation of anthropologists at Barbados came out condemning governments, sociologists, and missionaries for their treatment of the Indian, recommending specifically that religious missions in Indian areas be terminated. 5. Tanks, weapons, and soldiers circulated through downtown Bogotá the last three evenings of the seminar in sad similarity to the film "The Adventurers," which happened to be showing at local theaters and which was made in Colombia with the help of those same tanks. 6. On the last day of the seminar the government declared a "state of Siege" due to rioting in several cities, peasant invasions of large, rural land holdings, and threatened strikes.

Some Recommendations

The following recommendations are the abbreviated reflections of one participant of the Bogotá seminar. They are an attempt to focus for himself the challenge of "Mission and Development" as Third World spokesmen present it to us.

1. Reflect on and criticize our history and our present position as Christians and as heirs of the missionary enterprise and as North Americans.
2. Listen to the challenge of others' readings of history and try to understand them, learn from them, and dialogue with them in order to see how far we can work with them toward the building of a more human society.
3. Note that our presence and participation in the mission of God in this world (whether in the missionary enterprise or not) is always ambivalent, that there is a universal tendency of imposing not only our cultural patterns and values but also our understanding of the Gospel and of humanization, and that the Gospel and humanization require authentic self-consciousness and freedom to believe and to act.
4. Study specifically the problem of the poor and the oppressed, not as objects of others' service nor as an element to be integrated and developed,

but as human beings who have been subjugated and dominated, who need to be free and to take part in the writing of their own and our world's history, and that only as they do so will they and we find the meaning of development.

5. Reconsider the common idea that the church and missionaries are non-violent, a-political, and unaligned, because we have been and are closely identified with the existing world and national structures, enjoying protection and privileges while the poor continue to be poor and the oppressed continue to be oppressed and exploited. This posture is not only naive and self-deluding but continues to draw others away from the struggle for liberation as it calls them into the church and causes some because of their Christian motivation to leave the church in order to participate in this struggle.

6. Enter into action (whether we return to our previous programs and relationships or turn to new ones) as the focus of the process of discovering the meaning of our mission and of development. We must constantly evaluate this action and change it or modify it in terms of long term, intermediate, and immediate goals of humanization.

7. As persons we have innumerable opportunities for liberating action in our immediate and intermediate relationships. But we can no longer ignore the long term, overall political implications of the search for liberation in relation to existing local, national, and international structures. In this struggle we must eventually decide whether the present systems can be modified or rejected, whether some new kind of society can take its place, and how we can best work for the building of a more just social order.

8. As missionaries we have a particular responsibility for liberation in the churches we serve (both in the U.S. and overseas). Although we are generally placed in a position of power, we may have unique opportunities to participate in the process of conscientization--in terms of local programs, the autonomy of the national churches, the U.S. missionary bureaucracy, the home churches, and in terms of intra-national and national dependence, inter-american relations, and movements within the U.S.

9. As Christians we are called to be free, free not to pursue our own selfish purposes but to participate in God's mission of making a new humanity. This means not only personal wholeness or individual reconciliation with God, not only life in the community of believers, but also liberating participation in the life of the whole human community. In fact, we must ask ourselves if our individual religion and our religious community vitiate our life in the broader community. We must listen to the voices of our time; we must critically examine the institutional church; we must rediscover the Bible--all in terms of the person in community.

10. We need to maintain both a dialectical and a dialogical relationship with the churches and with the social structures and with the oppressed in the praxis of our missionary activity. Our evangelical calling allies us with all men in their search for a new humanity, whatever their historical circumstances, ideologies, socio-economic-political structures, and religious convictions. At the same time the Gospel stands over against every historical experiment, ideology, social structure, and religious expression in judgment on all that is inhuman, unjust and enslaving. Our hope is that God will create a new humanity in history and beyond history.

can be argued that the appeal which the socialists have in many parts of the world is not their altruistic ideal but precisely the selfish personal interest of the poor, who want to have the riches of the wealthy. This is hardly a basis for setting up a utopian collective social order.

4. The most important issue is the problem of power. The socialist identifies the problem of human sin with the private ownership of the means of production. He does not understand the problem of sin in relation to power and the state. He affirms the necessity for radical change and for the concentration of power in the early stages of socialist revolution. But he does not explain how power, once absolutized, can be turned over to the people. And the tragic experience to date has been that totalitarian systems do not give up power. "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Certainly the radicals are right in pointing out the abuses and violence of the existing power structures. But they do not present a convincing case for tearing up the fabric of local, national, and world structures in the name of a social ideology which does not understand the problem of power. Nor can we easily set aside the supposed mass deaths (through deliberate pogroms, cynical indifference, and bureaucratic incompetence) of 30 million Russians during the last 50 years and 50 million Chinese during the last 25 years under socialist regimes.

Development is being defined today in terms of humanization, and humanization is being defined in terms of liberation. Can socialism lead the way to freedom and self-determination for the masses? Recent history seems to say "No." The way of socialism has led to one-party dictatorship and one-man totalitarianism (Russia, China, Cuba--and satellites), planned economies through controlled labor, no civilian control over the police or the military, official control of the press, the arts, public meetings, education, radio and television, religion, and the courts.

5. The radicals insist that a true reading of history points to a socialist future and that we should work toward that future. Once again this sounds like a Marxist cliché rather than a critical analysis of history. Present history is capitalist as much or more than it is socialist. And there are as many signs of developing capitalism in Eastern Europe and Russia as there are of developing socialism in the West. In any case our calling is not to make virtue of necessity. Nor should we be quick to say what "God" is doing in the world.

In protestant theological and ecclesiastical circles it is said that the radical Latin American theologians represent the authentic voice of the Latin American churches even though they only represent perhaps 5% of the protestant believers. And it is said that the conservatives, who are perhaps 95% of the protestants in Latin America, are dominated by the U.S. missionary heritage. Once again it is apparent that the case has been prejudged, the question begged.

6. The radicals, again following the Marxist critique, believe that the churches in general and the missionary enterprise in particular are ideological tools of imperialism, preaching an ethic of obedience to the established, exploitive system and perpetuating a "spiritual," otherworldly orientation.

It has been pointed out, for example, that the missionary enterprise always

goes out from a position of power and has been implicated in the great imperialist movements of modern history. The fact that the missionary was present at the time of Western expansion, however, can hardly be condemnable. That he was often blind to the implications of this movement is certainly reprehensible (and more evident by hindsight). But at the same time we should ask what positive role did he play in terms of humanization and liberation because he was there (e.g. the slave trade).

7. Look more specifically at the protestant ethic. The radicals point out that the basic evils of Latin America reside in the present elitist structures which oppress the poor masses and enrich the oligarchs. They say the protestant ethic serves the ends of the oppressors by teaching individual religion, respect for the established authorities, obedience to the law, hard work, personal discipline, the inviolability of private property, and non-violence.

Now it is true that the protestant ethic can, intentionally or unintentionally, become a tool of an established social order, whether leftist or rightist, and that it has tended to identify itself with Western capitalism. But the ethic itself is not evil. This is quite evident if we turn the picture around. What is essential to the functioning of a socialist system if not these same virtues of the protestant ethic: respect for authority, obedience to law, hard work, personal discipline, respect for (public) property, and non-violence?

8. A pet peeve in political and ecclesiastical circles is paternalism. The radicals rightly point out the fatal paternalism of U.S. political and economic forces in Latin America. And they attack the paternalism of protestant missions in Latin America.

Now let them face the accusation of intrinsic paternalism in socialism. The socialists pretend to rescue the masses from Western imperialism and national oligarchies, but they also plan to impose on them a way of life which is patently and pervasively controlled by a new but nonetheless paternalistic oligarchy.

9. Politically and theologically the radicals claim to be the voice of hope in the Third World. When questions are raised, as we have done in this list of anomalies, they say we don't believe that a new, just, humanizing social order is possible. They say we should not be pessimists, that we should trust the socialists.

On the one hand this is hardly a responsible path to take. Naive optimism can be terribly dangerous. On the other hand, are the radicals any more optimistic than the conservatives? The argument can be turned around. A just, humanizing social order, if possible at all, can be achieved within the present social order. And perhaps we can still avoid the blood bath of the so-called revolution. This would be even more optimistic and hopeful. Perhaps the socialist, radical viewpoint is the pessimistic one.

10. Finally, the radical position is not radical enough. Rather than take a stance over against all social systems, ideologies, and experiments, it tends to fall into a new ideology. It makes use of the Marxist critique of capitalism and then subjects itself to the biased, Marxist reading of history. It is critical of certain positions but not sufficiently self-critical. It is

too often dialectical when it could be dialogical.

This is not to say that the radical criticisms of Western societies are ungrounded. They are all too well grounded. And it is high time that prophetic, biblical, Christian voices raise these criticisms. But the same radical criticisms that are leveled against the institutions of private property and private enterprise must be leveled against socialist societies and particularly against the accompanying power structures.

Human nature, in its individualistic and collective manifestations, in terms of private property and in terms of power, is fatally corrupt. And the God who made man became man Himself in order to remake man into a true humanity.

F. Ross Kinsler
Apartado 1881
Guatemala, Guatemala