

Why is Development in Africa so Hard?

DR. JOHN PATRICK

IN THE 1960s, Ghana and South Korea had similar agriculture based economies and similar average incomes. Today, the average income in South Korea is twenty-seven times greater than in Ghana. The superficial modern explanation is that Korea industrialized its economy and Ghana didn't. But that is simply to place the question at a different level. Why can't African economies modernize?

In his provocative book - *Civilization: The West and the Rest* - Niall Ferguson starts with an unremarkable list of six reasons for the western economic and developmental hegemony: competition, science, property rights, medicine, the consumer society and the work ethic. The "why" question is displaced again - why did these particular intellectual and ethical attributes arise? Ferguson uses two Chinese scholars to provide an answer, which is politically incorrect and, therefore, probably right:

We were asked to look into what accounted for the... pre-eminence of the West over the world... At first, we thought it was because you had more powerful guns than we had. Then we thought it was because you had the best political system. Next we focused on your economic system. But in the past twenty years, we realized that the heart of your culture is

your religion: Christianity. That is why the West has been so powerful. The Christian moral foundation of social and cultural life was what made possible the emergence of capitalism and then the successful transition to democratic politics. We don't have any doubt about this.¹

Another scholar, Zhuo Xinping, recognized that the Christian understanding of transcendence has a very important role:

Only by accepting this understanding of transcendence as our criterion can we understand the real meaning of such concepts as freedom, human rights, tolerance, equality, justice, and democracy, the rule of law, universality and environmental protection.²

Ferguson says, "If that sounds familiar it should. ...those used to be among the key foundations of Western civilization. Yet in recent years we have seemed to lose our faith in them."

He goes on to point to empty churches, banker's greed, children disinterested in science, government violation of property rights, government waste of taxes and he might of

added fabrication of scientific data. We risk being left with "a vacuous consumer society and a culture of relativism." For a literate Christian or a literate Jewish audience this should bring to mind the following passage: "O, that their hearts would be inclined to fear me and keep my commands always, so that it may go well with them and their children forever" (Dt 6:29).

The phenomenal academic performance of Jewish scientists, mathematicians, political scientists and medical researchers is a by-word. Every year they take a significant percentage of the "Hard" Nobel prizes, so there must be a clue in their history. The heart of Judaism is the Torah and its exposition in Deuteronomy (incidentally Our Lord's most quoted book), which can be profitably thought of as the world's greatest commencement address. "That it might go well with you and your children forever." Who would not want that? In fact it would be a good definition of the purpose of real development.

The Ten Commandments are one way of describing what must be "second nature" in order for a culture to flourish. The concepts we now put first, such as equality and tolerance, would not have emerged without our now dismissed Judeo-Christian history. It is logically

impossible, if we are all equal but without a moral consensus, to make effective law. Every law is vulnerable to the charge - says who? The only way out is to accept *de facto* power, but it will only produce submission, not community. The Chinese scholar recognized that there has to be some source of authority to which we all bend the knee if the law is to be the pursuit of justice rather than power. The Jews developed a profound respect for the Torah and scripture which was inculcated into the children so that its moral injunctions and the knowledge of the results of disobedience became second nature - behaviour that could be routinely expected. Nevertheless, the Jewish hope that obedience would be enough "for Messiah to come" was not fulfilled and Jesus showed why. He showed that the law's function was primarily to show us that we are incapable of keeping the law and therefore we have need of a Saviour. Thus, as Pascal puts it;

There are in faith two equally constant truths. One is that man...in the state of grace, is exalted above the whole of nature... the other is that in the state of corruption and sin he has become like the beasts.³

1 Niall Ferguson, *Civilization: The West and the Rest* (Penguin Books, 2012), 287.

2 As quoted in Ferguson.

3 Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin Books, 1966), 131.

When Christ came and died for our sins, the world changed. Conversion was rapid, but character change was slow. It came over centuries and provided the foundations for the success of the West. The explosion of learning began long before the so-called enlightenment.

If this historical process or something like it is a *sine qua non* for development, then our presentation of the faith in Africa has been shallow, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, although in different forms of shallowness. On the Protestant side, being the children of reductionist times, we have reduced the Gospel to

acceptance of a simple set of propositions and an obsession with the immediate process of conversion. Our actual impact has been much more to do with bringing skills of medicine, engineering and simple education, which we naively think have no need of cultural underpinning. By way of illustration, last week I had an email from Africa in which the doctor described a malnourished child brought in by an “educated” mother who had purchased totems from the pagan healer before coming to the mission hospital.

I worked with others for many years researching the best

way to resuscitate 10lb two year olds. The project was successful, so that our protocols properly followed would predictably save almost all children. In the last 35 years I have yet to see a properly run program in Africa. It’s the culture, not ignorance, that is the problem. All people need a way to understand life as it happens, to make sense of suffering death and injustice. Paganism does this very well, at first sight better than Christianity. To believe in a God of love is not a natural response to living in central Africa, but evil spirits and magic make complete explanations easily. But, with this as your road map, the modern

world is impossible. This is particularly obvious in the crown jewel that is the western science experiment, which is connected to universal truth by inductive reasoning and is founded on a belief in a logical creator.

The failure of development in Africa can be reasonably hypothesized to be due to a failure to tell with careful exposition the whole story of God’s dealings with man. It is the story of how we were lead from holy fear to ideas of right living by way of obedience until after Christ were told to use our minds to work out our own salvation because God is at work in us. 

Change is Slow

DR. DAN REILLY

DR. PATRICK’S INSIGHT about the link between worldview and difficulties in development is one of the most important things I have learned from him. When I encountered that truth as a medical student, it started me on a journey of learning about worldview, worldview change, and ethics. One of the most useful resources I have read on the topic is “Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological

Understanding of How People Change” by Paul G. Hiebert.

Dr. Patrick’s observation that conversion is rapid, but character change is slow, is usually as true for individuals as it is for societies. If your missionary goal is character change across a society then you should be prepared for work that will take a few generations. Character change in individuals is possible if you are willing to commit to

long-term discipleship. The only useful short-term missionary work is contribution to a local team already engaged in long-term work.

Given how slow change is in societies and individuals, it is encouraging to see a change in missionary work from short-term efforts at conversion to long-term mentorship/discipleship and building of local capacities. The model is moving from selling

change brought from the outside of a community to partnering with communities to pursue the community’s improvement goals.

There are still many places where the fields are awaiting harvesters and conversion seeking missionary work is desperately needed. There are also many places where the harvest is in the barns and now the task is to make flour and bread! 