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The third public: Hermeneutical key to the theological debate on church and development?²

ABSTRACT

The aim of the paper is to answer the question whether the proposal for a third public mode of theological involvement represents the key to overcoming the current deficiency in theological thinking about the strategic role of the churches in addressing the problems of poverty and underdevelopment in South Africa. In the light of a twofold exploration into (i) historical ecumenical development discourse and (ii) the so-called generational perspective in the NGO development debate, the paper concludes with a positive answer. At the same time, however, it is argued that there is also an important role to play for the modes of the first and second publics, and that a greater interplay between the various publics is required in order for Christian theology to be effective in the field of development.

1. INTRODUCTION

In my view one of the most important and useful publications to have emerged from the post-apartheid public theological debate in South Africa is an essay by Stellenbosch religious studies professor Bernard Lategan on "Taking the Third Public Seriously". Published as part of the proceedings of the founding conference of the South African Academy of Religion (SAAR) in January 1994 on the theme of "Religion and Civil Society" (see De Gruchy 1995), this essay by Lategan raises the kind of issues that, in my opinion, are crucial to our current task of conceptualising the effective role of Christian theology and the churches in the plaguing problems of poverty and underdevelopment in our country.

My point of departure in this paper is a critical one. Having made the theological issue of development my own focus of research during the last ten years, my concern, similar to that of Lategan, is that we have to date not sufficiently thought through the *mode* of involvement or discourse that is required if we want to effectively address the poverty and development problem (see Lategan 1995:217-226; cf Swart 2002). Indeed, my argument at this point is that we should not neglect the sincerity of our theologians and church people in the current poverty and

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development debate. The new commitment and theological reflections that are emerging on these issues today are certainly encouraging.³ At the same, however, I want to reiterate Lategan's concern that we are dealing with a prevailing "structural deficiency" in our efforts "to participate meaningfully and effectively in the public arena" (Lategan 1995:218), especially where such efforts concern the issues of poverty and underdevelopment.

To become more specific at this point, my own thinking about the churches' role in development has very much developed along the lines of the "pragmatic debate", a sub-debate in the historical ecumenical development debate in which the churches' preoccupation with a project-centred mode of involvement in the sphere of development has been strongly problematised.⁴ Clearly, this very same problem also surfaces in the writings of our own theologians and the public discourse of our church leaders on the poverty and development theme; that is, their inability to move beyond a project-centred language in their concretisation of the role of the churches and local congregations in addressing the issues of poverty and development. Such a move is necessary in order to conceptualise a development praxis that would be more *authentic* in terms of the nature and competence of the churches as faith- and value-based institutions (see Swart 2000; cf Korten 1990:223) – essentially, a development praxis that would be more radical, ideologically critical and sophisticated in the light of the *complexity* of the problems of poverty and underdevelopment. Indeed, I want to argue at this point that Charles Elliot's criticism of the churches' historical involvement in development some years ago seems just as relevant to our own theological context, i e that there is a gap between our own rhetoric on the issues of poverty and development and our actions to combat poverty and underdevelopment (Elliot 1987:30);⁵ moreover, that we need to start realising the simplicity of our own thinking about the problems of poverty and development and the practical solutions that we are currently offering. In Elliot's words:

[T]o continue to act as though the poverty of nearly a billion people can be eliminated by aided projects is to fail to take seriously both the nature of the problem and the nature of the world. It does not take seriously the nature of the problem because it ignores the structures within which mass poverty is set – and by which it is perpetuated. It does not take seriously the nature of the world because it ignores the Powers that, as it were, hold

3 This new commitment is, for instance, evident in the growing number of publications by South African theologians in recent years on the themes of poverty and development in scholarly journals and monographs. To add to this one may also point to the new emphasis on these issues in the public discourse of many church leaders in South Africa.

4 See in this regard especially my discussion of the writings of Charles Elliot (1971:Chap 10; 1987) and C T Kurien (1974) under the heading of the "radical pragmatic debate" (Swart 2003; 2001; 2000:Chap 3).

5 (i) I find the problems raised in the pragmatic debate (especially by someone like Elliot) particularly well illustrated in the recent writings on the poverty theme by the well-known South African practical theologian H J C Pieterse. In all his writings Pieterse presents a penetrating socio-economic and theological discussion of the problem of poverty (theory). Yet, in his offering of strategic and practical solutions in which the churches should engage (praxis) he seems unable to escape the project-centred mindset problematised in the pragmatic debate (see Pieterse 2001a; 2001b; 2002). (ii) See in addition to my critique of Pieterse my criticism of a project mindset in the documentation and literature (Koegelenberg 2001; NRASD web page) associated with the National Religious Association for Social Development (NRASD) and the Ecumenical Foundation of Southern Africa (EFSA) (Swart 2003). For concrete case studies in which the local church's confinement to a project-centred mode of development involvement (i e to so-called first and second generation development strategies) is highlighted, see furthermore Swart and Venter (2001) and Venter (2001).

the world in thrall. More damningly than either, it consequently ignores the *scale* of the work of Christ in Cross, Resurrection and Pentecost. (Elliot 1987:179-180)⁶

At the core of this paper lies the question of how the current deficiency within Christian theological and church circles (as, for instance, appropriately highlighted by the pragmatic debate) to deal effectively and authentically with the problems of poverty and underdevelopment in our society can be overcome. In seeking an answer to this question, Lategan's proposal for a *third public* mode of involvement (*vis-à-vis* the modes of involvement assumed by the so-called first and second publics) will particularly be considered and evaluated in the light of (i) considerations about the mode of theological discourse in the historical ecumenical development debate and (ii) the perspective on generations of development engagement in the NGO development debate that has also been applied in recent South African theological reflections to strategic thinking about the role of the churches in development. On the basis of this evaluation I will more pertinently attempt to answer the question whether the mode of involvement assumed by the third theological public (society at large or civil society) should be considered as the key to the theological debate on church and development in South Africa; as such, the issue is whether we should conceive of the church's role in development rather exclusively in terms of the third public mode of involvement or whether the modes of involvement assumed by the other publics of theology (the first public, the academy, and the second public, the community of faith or the church) should also be taken into account in our conceptualisation of an effective church praxis in development.

2. THE THIRD PUBLIC MODE OF INVOLVEMENT

It can rightly be claimed that Lategan, in his contribution to the public theological debate in South Africa, has gone further than most other theologians who have participated in the public theological debate.⁷ Having taken American theologian David Tracy's distinction of the three publics of theology (the academy, the church, and society at large) as analytic starting-point,⁸ he basically came to argue that we have so far in our post-apartheid theological endeavours not taken seriously enough *the question about the mode or style of discourse that would be required to deal effectively in the realm of the third public – wider society or civil society*. This neglect, according

6 I have argued elsewhere (Swart 2003; Swart 2000:Chap 4; Swart and Venter 2001) that the theological development debate needs to pay closer attention to and learn from the NGO development debate in development studies, as a project-centred mode of engagement by (secular) NGOs in development is similar to the pragmatic debate also problematised in the NGO development debate. Cf, for instance, the following formulation by NGO development expert Michael Edwards with the above statement by Elliot: "The logical corollary of a world-view which sees development as a series of technical transfers mediated by experts is that, given a sufficient number of situations, or projects, in which these transfers can be made, 'development' will occur. But, as Sithembiso Nyoni has pointed out, no country in the world has ever developed itself through projects; development results from a long process of experiment and innovation through which people build up the skills, knowledge and self-confidence necessary to shape their environment in ways which foster progress toward goals such as economic growth, equity in income distribution, and political freedom." (Edwards 1989:119-120)

7 With this statement I do not intend to neglect the useful contributions made by many other theologians to the public theological debate, especially in post-apartheid South Africa (see e.g. Koopman 2003). Rather, I acknowledge that my appreciation of Lategan's contribution is subjective and is directly influenced by my own methodological preferences through which I have attempted to make sense of the theological debate on church and development (see e.g. Swart 2002; 2000).

8 For Tracy's own discussion of the meanings of the three publics, see the first chapter of his book, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (Tracy 1981:3-46). Though

to him, is “the main reason for the ineffective operation of theology” in the matters that concern South African society most in the post-apartheid era (Lategan 1995:217).⁹ For this reason he argues that:

In context of a society in transition, this public is of critical importance. It is the acid test for the contribution many are expecting theology to make and which theology itself is claiming to be able to make. However important other tasks and challenges for theology might be, this is the terrain which, to a large extent, will determine its future and the role it is likely to play in a new and fundamentally different society. (Lategan 1995:220)

It is important to note that Lategan, in the further development of his argument, makes special reference to a discussion by another South African theologian, Ernst Conradie, on the so-called ‘Chicago-Yale debate’ in American theological circles (Lategan 1995:223-225; Conradie 1993:32-45). However, whilst Lategan is clearly very appreciative of Conradie’s article, he also goes a step further in his evaluation of the relevance of the Chicago-Yale debate for the post-apartheid South African theological context.¹⁰ For him, more still than for Conradie, the problem with both the Chicago and Yale schools lies in the way in which they, although differing in their approach, remain preoccupied with “preserving the integrity of the Christian faith” and defending “the ‘truth claims’ of Christianity” (Lategan 1995:224).

It follows from the above that Lategan also adopts a critical stance towards Tracy’s interpretation of the third public. According to him the problem with Tracy’s interpretation, which features prominently in the Chicago school of thought, is that it basically remains stuck in an apologetical mode of theological discourse, like all other traditional theological interpretations (Lategan 1995:224). It is a mode of involvement that a theological focus on the third public cannot escape, as Tracy, like the proponents of the Yale school, is not interested in subjecting theology to any criteria “external to theology itself” (Conradie 1993:33). Although, in Tracy’s case there is a greater emphasis on rational thought and dialogue with the outside world (compared to the Yale school) (see Conradie 1993:32-45), successful communication is also for him (Tracy) “only possible in terms of criteria acceptable to both theology and its publics” (Conradie 1993:33).

Tracy follows a different sequence in his discussion of the three publics in this book (society, academy, church), I will closely follow Lategan’s application of the various publics, more specifically his reference to wider society or civil society as the ‘third public’.

9 It can furthermore be noted that, for Lategan, this current neglect is enhanced by the historical traditions of both apartheid theology and liberation theology. According to him, both traditions have promoted a mode of engagement that cannot be considered conducive to the construction of an effective public theology in the post-apartheid South African context. Whereas the former has rather discredited “all further attempts at developing a public theology”, the latter, though far more credible and still of important relevance, promotes a style of engagement that is unsuitable to the proactive mode required from theology in the post-apartheid era (Lategan 1995:222-223).

10 My own interpretation of Conradie’s article is that he does not to the same extent as Lategan problematise the apologetic nature of both the Chicago and Yale discourses. Thus, whilst he, towards the end of his article, stresses the need for theologians to “become bilingual or multilingual” and “learn the languages and forms of life of the arts and the sciences, of politics and economics” (Conradie 1993:44-45), he essentially appears to be a good Tracian scholar. This is especially evident from the final section of his article, in which he addresses the relevance of the Chicago-Yale debate for the post-apartheid South African theological context predominantly in terms of the criteria set out by Tracy. In a nutshell, there is no evidence in Conradie’s article of a similar overt pronouncement on the shortcomings of Tracy’s theological position for the theological challenges in post-apartheid South Africa (see Conradie 1993:45-46).

For Lategan the position taken by Tracy (and others) seriously hampers theology's prospects of being innovative and effective in larger society. He comments that even when Tracy insists that Christianity's own terms, rules and methods "can be translated into the conceptual universe of any reasonable person who is genuinely open to the subject of conversation ... the presupposition remains that the task consists of the translation of a given [Christian] entity in some publicly accessible form":

However desirable this translation may be, a fundamental condition is that the integrity of the belief system is not violated in the process ... [T]he aim is to demonstrate the reasonableness of the truth claims of theology. This is an end in itself, not the first step in a further process (Lategan 1995:225).

It needs to be stated at this point that the purpose of Lategan's proposal for a third public mode of involvement was not meant to replace or undermine the existing modes of theological discourse – by implication, neither Tracy's own interpretation of the third public mode, nor the first and second public modes assumed by the Chicago and Yale schools, or the traditional theological and faith discourses in general. Rather, the argument could be seen as "one of 'horses for courses'". In the ongoing theological enterprise the various modes "all have their validity and function" and the issue is to determine which mode or modes best suit a particular purpose or context (Lategan 1995:225).

At the same time, however – and this becomes the fundamental motivation for the proposal – beyond the preservation and pursuance of theological and faith discourses in the other publics (including Tracy's third public mode), there ought to, and could, be a legitimate and necessary place for a *different* type of (third public) theological discourse – a type or style of discourse that would *complement* (and not oppose!) the other (more) traditional modes of discourses. Essentially this type or style of discourse would *focus on the needs and demands of the third public, of wider society or civil society*. In a South African context it would (proactively) respond to the new challenges and opportunities presented by this society, most specifically "the need to contribute to the establishment of a new public ethos in civil society" (Lategan 1995:225).

For Lategan, finally, it would be extremely important to spell out in more concrete terms the conditions and characteristics of the new kind of discourse asked for:

Firstly, such a discourse could only become possible if theology was willing to abandon its "privileged position" and move beyond its preoccupation with itself, its concern with the validity of its own truth claims, its defensive attitude, its experience of marginalisation and its resignation to not being able to influence civil society (Lategan 1995:225-226).

Secondly, such a discourse requires from theology a *change of style* whereby it would move beyond what is conventionally understood as theological discourse and explore the possibilities of a form of language that is not primarily interested in preserving the integrity of theology. In short, theology would be willing "to serve a wider cause" (Lategan 1995:226).

Thirdly, in such a discourse theology would demonstrate the ability to become *policy* specific, "to recommend or prescribe quite particular courses of action about quite specific issues". Furthermore, in this mode theology (and by implication the churches) would not take an external position, but would take full responsibility for what is proposed – through appropriate action (Lategan 1995:226-227).

Fourthly, for such a discourse to succeed, very specific characteristics would be required (Lategan 1995:227-228):

- i. Theology would be required to adopt a *non-prescriptive* mode of discourse, whereby their attitude “should rather be one of joint discovery ... letting issues and formulations emerge before directing and confining the discourses”.
- ii. Theology would be required to adopt an *inclusive* style of discourse, whereby it becomes open to the flow of ideas, to the fundamentally new and unexpected, and to *all* possible contributions.
- iii. Theology would be required to adopt an *interactive, participatory* style of discourse, which is no longer developed and conducted in the protected environment of its “own group”. “It implies the willingness, not to claim a privileged position for theology, but to become vulnerable, and to be challenged.”
- iv. Theology would be required to adopt a discourse that gives evidence of *hermeneutical* competence, “that is, familiarity with different discourses, but also the ability to move between these discourses and to mediate and interpret the issues as they are expressed and experienced in different contexts”.
- v. Theology would be required to adopt a *servicing* mode of discourse, whereby it loses and transcends itself “to become liberated in service to the other”.
- vi. Theology would be required to adopt a new kind of *constructive* discourse, which goes beyond resistance and protest and display “a willingness to reach out, to build, to take responsibility, and to jointly map out a possible course of action”.
- vii. Theology would be required to adopt a new mode of *anonymous, secular or camouflaged* discourse, which is no longer formulated in recognisable theological language and effectively translates theological concepts in a public discourse accessible to participants from other discourses – “in a form that is genuinely ‘public’”.

3. ASPECTS OF THE THEOLOGICAL DEBATE ON CHURCH AND DEVELOPMENT

In this section I now more specifically direct our attention to the theological debate on church and development. However, whilst we are specifically interested in this paper to answer the question about the relevance of Lategan’s proposal of a third public mode of involvement for the theological development debate in South Africa – a debate that today stands at the centre of theological inquiry about the issues of poverty and underdevelopment in South Africa and (importantly) the contribution of the churches towards combating these problems¹¹ – we will take our point of departure from the historical debate on development in the ecumenical movement.¹²

11 In addition to my observation in footnote 3, it should be noted that the concept of “development” dominates theological reflection on the issues of poverty and social upliftment in post-apartheid South Africa. As such traditional concepts like “diakonia” and “diaconal studies” appear rather outmoded in current theological reflection and new teaching positions and research centres in the specialisation areas of “theology and development”, “community development” and “religion and development” have been established at theological faculties and schools.

12 With “the historical debate on development” I refer here to the authentic starting-point of the theological debate on development. Thus, whereas the theological sector in South Africa, for instance – but also that group of theologians who explicitly referred to themselves as representatives of the “evangelical” movement (see Samuel and Sudgen 1987; Sider 1981) – was a noticeable latecomer to the theological development debate, a lively and sustained discussion on the theme of development was already being conducted since the mid-1960s by Christian theologians and intellectuals from the broad ecumenical movement and an organisation such as the World Council of Churches (for overviews and

Taking this historical debate to be an important source of learning also for our own debate on development in South Africa,¹³ we will more specifically confine ourselves, in accordance with the focus of this paper, to those theological considerations that paid particular attention to the question about the mode of theological discourse in the debate. In the following sub-section we will then take a closer look at the so-called generational perspective in the NGO development debate, which has influenced the church development debate in South Africa and, in an own peculiar way, poses questions about the effective modes of involvement in development.

3.1 Historical ecumenical development discourse

It is not correct to say, as Steve de Gruchy claims in his introduction to the recent special issue on “Theology and Development” in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* (No. 110, July 2001), that the development debate in the ecumenical movement came to an abrupt standstill in the early 1970s due to liberation theology’s rejection of the idea of development (De Gruchy 2001:1). Although the liberation theology paradigm certainly played a role in influencing ecumenical thinking about development (see e.g. De Santa Ana 1975; Dickinson 1991:270-271; 1975:31-34, 68-69, 99; Itty 1974:12-13, 16-18; Parmar 1975; Tolen 1975¹⁴), a more lasting impression was made by another group of theologians and Christian intellectuals, who were instrumental in the same period but also in the late 1960s in giving shape to a “theology of development” and mode of discourse that spoke about development in a predominantly positive way.¹⁵

In what should certainly be regarded as one of the most profound and clear-cut essays on the topic in the above-mentioned period, the German theologian Trutz Rendtorff observed that the incentives to an ecumenical “theology of development” emanated especially from two great ecumenical conferences – one in Geneva in 1966, and the other in Uppsala in 1968. Rendtorff, however, also went on to point out an important difference in emphasis between the two conferences. Although the development problematic already dominated proceedings at Geneva, the discussions were still very much couched within the conceptual and ideological framework of the so-called “theology of revolution”. Thus, the catchword was still “revolution” and the churches centred their practical and theological focus on the idea of revolution.

However, at the Uppsala conference a decisive shift of emphasis could be detected from the “theology of revolution” to a prospective “theology of development”. Although this shift did not imply a rejection of the demand for social change inherent to the idea of revolution, “development” was regarded as a much *richer* concept that denoted “something more and something other than social change”. The concept of development, in short, was seen as “more

discussions of the origin and unfolding of this debate in the ecumenical movement, see Dickinson 1991; 1983; 1975; 1968; Itty 1974; Swart 2000; Van der Bent 1986:Chap 14; Van Drimmelen 2003).

13 In South African theological reflections to date this debate has been somewhat neglected, despite its historical importance and the wealth of publications that have emanated from sustained debate (as pointed out in the previous footnote). In taking this debate as point of departure, this paper represents a deliberate attempt towards rectifying the current neglect.

14 I am listing here a group of writers in the ecumenical development debate who have all been influenced by liberation theology. The important point, however, is that in all the cases this influence has only been partial, as none of the writers have outrightly rejected the idea of development.

15 In the discussion that follows I by no means pretend to do justice to the complete literature in this category of publications. Rather, the selection of literature is intended to highlight the broad contours of certain aspects of the historical ecumenical development debate, in line with the stated objective of this sub-section.

rational and more comprehensive than the idea of revolution”, based on the practical reality that it provided “the impetus to projection, to planning, and to positive reflection and consciously ratified change”. It was “no less dynamic than the concept of revolution, nor less political” (Rendtorff 1971:89-91; cf 1970:206-208¹⁶).

But it is more complex, because “development” includes consideration of the interdependence and the participation of all productive forces. In this context, on ethical, human, and theological grounds, certain tendentious procedures have to be encouraged, the validation of which is provided by the phenomenology of development processes. Scientific analysis and practical motivation to action pertain in equal measure to the rational core of the idea of development. (Rendtorff 1971:92; cf 1970:208)

In an attempt to describe in this sub-section the impact that those initial reflections on a “theology of development” had on ecumenical development thought and the mode of discourse that it promoted, Rendtorff’s historical perspective thus becomes important. In the ecumenical movement the historical unfolding of theological development discourse suggests a *positive* or proactive embracement of the idea and processes of development rather than the negation of the term in those modes of resistance theological discourse associated with the theologies of liberation and revolution. As another prominent ecumenical scholar of the earlier period, C I Itty, put it in somewhat euphoric terms, development indicated “the most crucial concern of our time. It signifies the concern of communities to change and improve their living conditions, including socio-economic structures by deliberate, rational and planned efforts” (Itty 1967:349).

In Itty’s formulation, then, a further dimension in the ecumenical understanding of development can be observed. Development, beyond Rendtorff’s technical and more general description, anticipated a new Christian involvement with the existential and structural issue of *poverty*. According to Itty, it was the poverty of the Third World, representing two-thirds of the world’s population, which made development an urgent necessity. In turn, it was the consciousness of poverty and the conviction that it can be overcome, through a combination of the poor’s own efforts and the capabilities of science and technology that made development a possibility. For the churches, moreover, development was also a matter of deep moral concern and had deep spiritual implications. To care for the poor and the needy was part of their divine obligation. To be concerned about the development of the Third World was the most active expression of the Christian imperative for love and social justice (Itty 1967:349-351).

Indeed, it is along the positive lines emphasised by earlier ecumenical theologians such as Rendtorff and Itty that the ecumenical discourse about development predominantly developed. Whereas we, in later years, encounter voices in the debate that emphasised the human and holistic element in development¹⁷ (see Itty 1974:9-10; Robinson 1994; Swart 2000:40-41), others warned consistently against defining development too broadly as the total or integral liberation of the human person. Although this latter group did not want to forsake the principles of a human perspective, which naturally has to define the ultimate objective or outcome of an authentic

16 I am in effect referring here to one and the same essay. First published under the title, “A Theology of Development?”, in the Sodepax publication, *In Search of a Theology of Development* (1970), a revised version of this essay/paper was published under the title, “Christian Foundation of Worldly Commitment”, in the book, *Theology Meets Progress: Human Implications of Development*, ed by Philip Land (1971).

17 According to this emphasis “people are crying not for food alone; they need and demand freedom, dignity, justice and participation as well” (Itty 1974:9).

development process, it was pointed out that such a wide term of reference also robbed the word of any specific and workable meaning (Elliot 1970:21). The cutting edge of any liberating development process, it was emphasised, had to remain the *economic* entry point of development. *Development is specifically about “the conscious struggle against mass poverty”. It is the lack of a minimum of economic goods and services that holds people captive, causes their spiritual and human enslavement, and remains the decisive link with the other dimensions of human well-being that are fundamental in the ecumenical understanding* (Thomas 1972:36; see also Itty 1974:10; Kurien 1972:16; Elliot 1970:21).

Through the stimuli that the earlier thinkers provided, we can, therefore, confidently speak about a basic consensus in the historical ecumenical debate regarding the meaning and purpose of development, as well as the churches’ proactive commitment to the cause of development. Yet, the issue of the churches’ *actual, concrete engagement* in development remained a bone of contention. As Richard Dickinson noted in his documentation of the ecumenical development debate, for most people in the ecumenical movement, already at a relatively early stage in their concern with development, the issue was not *whether* the churches should be involved in socio-economic development, but *how* (Dickinson 1991:269; 1983:71). In other words, what has also (i.e. similar to our current quest) been a constant intellectual struggle in the ecumenical development debate, based on a positive commitment to the cause of development, is the question about the *modes* through which the churches can most effectively engage in development (cf Dickinson 1983:71-75). Where and how could they be involved most effectively and appropriately? What is their *authentic* role in development?

My contention is that we may at this point fruitfully return to those initial reflections on a “theology of development” in the ecumenical movement that we took as a point of reference at the beginning of this sub-section. Although we can by no means speak of an absolute consensus in the debates or reflections on a “theology of development” (cf Itty 1974:16), we basically find in them a common recognition that a “*theology of development*” – *in other words, a theology whose task is to empower the churches towards an effective role in development – could not be devised from the traditional ways of doing theology*. The point was perhaps best argued by Rendtorff in his above-mentioned essay:

The complex, diverse, and far-reaching problems of development are, as we well know, far beyond the competence of the churches to solve. They can play only a modest part in the task confronting us here. Any development work undertaken exclusively by the churches would be either arrogant or naïve. Here, if anywhere, the need is for cooperation with all social, national, and international bodies engaged in development work. The urgency of cooperation makes it essential to reach agreement about the goal and content of development in a framework that is accessible to all and understood by all. The human basis and purpose of development work must therefore furnish also the frame of reference for its theological interpretation. *The cooperation factor means that we cannot construct a theology of development from existing church dogmatics and doctrines alone. This factor imposes on us a new concept of theology, one which is, as it were, supra-ecclesiastical.* (Rendtorff 1970:210; cf. 1971:95; italics added for emphasis)

It follows from Rendtorff’s statement that the need for reflection on theological *method* was urgently called for in the ecumenical reflections on a “theology of development”. (Alszegehy and Flick 1971:112; Land 1971a:ix; cf Bennett 1970; Löffler 1970:72-73; Rendtorff 1971:94; 1970:208). Thus, there was the common recognition that a “theology of development” could at best be constructed by a new *dialectical* interaction (Alszegehy and Flick 1971:125; Elliot 1971:82;

Löffler 1970:65, 72) between the traditional context of theology (the Biblical tradition, theological subjects such as dogmatics, the church and its doctrines) and the secular context of development (the various social science disciplines feeding into the subject matter of development, the various themes arising from the secular development debate, the secular actors engaged in development) (see Abrecht and Land 1969; Alszeghy and Flick 1971; Bennett 1970; Elliot 1971:Part II; Land 1971a; b; Rendtorff 1971; 1970).

However, within this hermeneutical framework of dialectical interaction the most outstanding feature could be regarded the emphasis placed on the context of *development* as point of departure for theological reflection. As well defined by Zoltan Alszeghy and Maurizio Flick in their definition, the essential task of a “theology of development” was *to relate the description of present human conditions (development) to the Christian message* (Alszeghy and Flick 1971:119; cf Land 1971b). Whilst the churches found the motivation for their participation in development in the Christian principle of “love” (Abrecht and Land 1969:137, 140; Dickinson 1968:39; Elliot 1971:83-92; Itty 1967:350-351), it was recognised as a fundamental point that *the traditional Christian sources were in themselves insufficient to guide the churches towards an effective praxis in development* (Alszeghy and Flick 1971:113-115, 119-120; Land 1971b:1; Rendtorff 1971:98; 1970:212). At most, such a point of departure would lead to a simplistic mode of involvement defined by the notion of *charity* (Dickinson 1968:37),¹⁸ an obedient response to Christ’s law of love through which nothing more but some basic necessities of life could be met (Abrecht and Land 1969:137-138).

Essentially, therefore, an ecumenical “theology of development” involved the quest for new *social understanding* in order to empower the churches for a development praxis responsive to “the life problems of the modern world” (Rendtorff 1971:86; cf Dickinson 1968:37). According to Rendtorff, this implied nothing less than locating a “theology of development” within “the field of the theory of development” (Rendtorff 1971:103; 1970:215). From a strategic point of view, this perspective placed new emphasis on the importance of theological *research*. It confronted the churches and their theologians with a twofold challenge: on the one hand, to acquire an objective understanding of the complex problems involved in development and, therefore, to actively enter the process of *development* research; on the other hand, on the basis of such an inquiry, to form an opinion and influence congregations and Christians in view of their practical engagement in development (Rendtorff 1971:97; 1970:211-212).

Indeed, it becomes important at this point not only to mention the above-mentioned strategic orientation in an ecumenical “theology of development” but also its *ideological* orientation. Taking one’s point of departure from the point of view of secular development implies a fundamentally new theological attitude towards the *world* (in contrast to traditional theology) (see Alszeghy and Flick 1971; Abrecht and Land 1969; Bennett 1970; Gutierrez Merino 1970; Land 1971b; Rendtorff 1971; 1970). Based on a new understanding of the “continuity between human and salvation history” (Abrecht and Land 1969:138), it meant that the themes of (secular) development could now also be accepted by the churches and theology “as their own themes”

18 Some ten years later the same point would be made in the important WCC study, *Separation Without Hope: The Church and the Poor During the Industrial Revolution and Colonial Expansion*, ed by J De Santa Ana (1st ed 1978; 2nd ed 1980). It was because of a lack of proper social theoretical understanding, more than one author concluded, that the churches since the earliest period of the industrial era were unable to transcend a mental attitude and mode of social involvement that could be defined best by the notion of “charity” (see esp Biéler 1980; De Santa Ana 1980a; Zabolotsky 1980; see also Swart 2000:22-27).

(Rendtorff 1970:205; cf 1971:85, 88). In this awareness, furthermore, the special identity of the church was no longer the first consideration, but the development of the *world* in all its aspects (Rendtorff 1971:86-88; cf 1970:205-206).

It may be said, in conclusion, that the initial reflections on a “theology of development” in the ecumenical movement have left the ecumenical development debate, but also the theological development debate in general, with an important legacy. More than any other contribution to the debate, those reflections point out to us that the questions about effective praxis, which have dominated theological discussions over the last number of decades (i.e. Dickinson’s question about *how* the churches should be involved), are in fact a false starting-point – as illustrated by the churches’ prevailing inability to adopt a more sophisticated mode of development praxis in the light of such discussions.¹⁹ Consequently, those reflections challenge ongoing theological debates about the role of the church in development to take a step back and ask questions, firstly, about the mode of theological discourse, the *mode of doing theology* that ought to determine and inform the anticipated modes of effective ecclesiastical praxis in development. In this sense, they leave Christian theology and the churches with a radical hermeneutical challenge: to take the *secular* context of development (cf Abrecht and Land 1969:138) as their starting point of interaction²⁰ and to engage in serious dialogue with the theories and actors of that context (cf Alszeghy and Flick 1971:125-128; Land 1971b:23-35). From such a vantage point they once again expect theology to become *explicit*, to speak a new kind of *theological* language by which it would engage *critically* with the world and its own tradition, *motivate* the churches sufficiently to take up the task of development, and *guide* them towards effective modes of discourse and practical action (Rendtorff 1971:101; 1970:214; cf Tufari 1971:249, 261).

3.2 Generational perspective

An important feature of the South African theological development debate of the last decade or so has been the way in which an NGO perspective has been integrated in the reflections on the role of the churches in development.²¹ Taking a closer look at the various contributions that have been made, the influence of David Korten’s thinking on shaping the debate especially stands out (see Bonbright 1992; James 1992; Swart 2000; Swart and Venter 2001; 2000; Venter 2001; cf also Schenk and Louw 1995). An internationally renowned expert in the field of alternative development theory, Korten’s work appeared attractive to South African scholars not only for its promotion of a *people-centred* development philosophy (see Swart 2000:113-121; cf Schenck and

19 See footnote 18 again.

20 It is exactly on this point that the ecumenical approach to development distinguishes itself quite radically from the so-called evangelical approach and scholars referred to in footnote 12. Whereas scholars of the ecumenical approach realise the importance of taking the secular context of development as the point of departure, the evangelical theologians appear in turn to vigorously defend the theological and *Christian* foundation of development. Thus, it can be said that the latter group’s aim has been to *reverse* the whole process again and convert the concept of development from its secular, Western origins to a meaning that is truly *Biblical* and *Christian* (see e.g. Sine 1987; The Wheaton ‘83 Statement in Samuel and Sudgen 1987:255-258).

21 The valuable contribution of the Ecumenical Foundation of Southern Africa (EFSA) should especially be mentioned in this regard. At its conferences on “Church and Development” in the 1990s various papers dealt with the topic of NGOs in development. The theme of the third conference was also significantly entitled, “The Reconstruction and Development Programme: The Role of the Church, Civil Society and NGOs” (see Koegelenberg 1992; 1994; 1995).

Louw 1995), but especially also for the perspectives it offered on different modes or *generations* of NGO strategic intervention to realise the goals of the people-centred development paradigm. For these scholars Korten's differentiation between various strategies of NGO development intervention seemed directly relevant to the churches, who, like their NGO counterparts in post-apartheid South Africa, stood before the challenge to move beyond their conventional welfarist and local project-centred modes of intervention (first and second generation strategies) towards more sophisticated modes of development intervention (third and fourth generation strategies) (see esp Bonbright 1992; James 1992; Swart and Venter 2001; Venter 2001; cf Nkondo 1995).

Table 1: *Korten's framework of four generations of strategic NGO intervention in development* (Korten 1990:117; 1987:148; De Senillosa 1998:44-45):

Generation	First	Second	Third	Fourth
Defining features	<i>relief & welfare</i>	<i>community development</i>	<i>sustainable systems development</i>	<i>people's movements</i>
Year of reference	1945	1960	1973	1982
Problem definition	shortage	local inertia	institutional and policy constraints	inadequate mobilising vision
Time frame	immediate	project life	ten to twenty years	indefinite future
Scope	individual or family	neighbourhood or village	region or nation	national or global
Chief actors	NGO	NGO plus community	all relevant public and private institutions	loosely defined networks of people and organisations
NGO role	doer	mobiliser	catalyst	activist/educator
Management orientation	logistics	project management	strategic management	coalescing and energising self-managing networks
Development education	starving children	community self-help	constraining policies and institutions	spaceship earth

In seeking to make further sense of Korten's generational perspective I have argued elsewhere (along with Dawid Venter) that third and fourth generation strategies could be taken as a cluster vis-à-vis the first two generations (Swart and Venter 2002:53). Such a division is not meant to negate the ongoing importance of first and second generation modes of intervention to meet basic human needs and create local self-help initiatives (cf Korten 1990:128-129, n 5; 1987:149; Swart 2000:138-140), yet the argument is nevertheless sustained that the third and fourth generation modes are much more *effective* strategies. Consequently, for development actors such as churches and NGOs, they become indispensable in reaching the ideals of people-centred communities and a people-centred world in general. A standard question that churches and NGOs need to ask themselves, therefore, is how they can move from first and second to third and fourth generation strategies (Swart and Venter 2002:53; cf. 2001:487).

We may note at this point how Korten, in his own argumentation, has valued second generation strategies for their contribution towards self-reliant community initiatives, with the intent that benefits will be sustained beyond the period of NGO assistance (Korten 1990:118; 1987:148). *Third generation* strategies, however, “look beyond the individual community and seek changes in specific policies and institutions at local, national and international levels” (Korten 1990:120; italics added for emphasis). They are based on the realisation that second generation strategies are likely to be sustainable “only as long as they are linked into a supportive national system” (Korten 1990:120; 1987:149).

Of particular importance for our line of argumentation in this paper is Korten’s perspective on the new types and levels of *competence* required from NGOs (and by implication churches) to act as “catalysts” of third generation goals. In this role NGOs and churches have to be guided by more than good intentions. Scaling up to this mode of engagement means that they are now to enter the world of hard-core and skilled *professionalism*, notwithstanding their possible critical disposition to the underlying values of such professionalism. They are to recognise that some of the most important of the organisations with which they will work, including government, “will be large, influential, and staffed by highly credentialed professionals”. Hence, they need “to obtain the *respect* of those who control the relevant technologies” (doctors, engineers, lawyers, politicians, administrators, community leaders) by showing them that “they offer a useful technical and political resource” (Korten 1987:155; italics added for emphasis).

Korten also elaborates by applying Robert Chambers’ distinction between “*normal* development professionalism” and a “*new* development professionalism” to his argument. He argues in this regard that a scaling-up to third generation strategies does not mean that NGOs (and churches!) need to identify with the narrow disciplinary specialisation associated with the former kind of professionalism. This should be seen in the light of the fact that the new professionalism is “not necessarily less sophisticated, less effective, or less disciplined”. On the contrary, it is based on alternative values,²² offers a variety of alternative technologies, organisational forms and research methods, and displays “a more sophisticated understanding of the nature of social and development processes” (Korten 1987:155).

Importantly, however, in Korten’s thinking on strategic NGO development action the concept of a *fourth generation* strategy would eventually be added to complement his initial framework of three generations of strategic action.²³ According to Korten, this addition was motivated by what he recognised as the “need to energize decentralized action toward a people-centred development vision on a *much broader scale* than is possible with the more focused interventions of either second or third generation strategies” (Korten 1990:124; italics added for emphasis).

22 That is, values alternative to the values and methods of normal development professionalism that, according to Chambers, favour the powerful over the weak, rich over poor, urban over rural, industrial over agricultural, things over people, standardisation over diversity, the controlled over the uncontrolled, quantitative over qualitative, precise measurement over visual assessment, project blueprints over adaptive learning, large scale over small scale, market-oriented producers over subsistence producers, modern technology over traditional technology, laboratory studies over field experience, control-oriented organisations and technocratic decision-making over people-centred organisations and decision-making (Korten 1987:155).

23 Korten’s original confinement to a third generation perspective is clearly evident from his article, “Third Generation NGO Strategies: A Key to People-centred Development”, which was published in 1987 in the journal *World Development*. In his book published three years later, *Getting to the 21st Century: Voluntary Action and the Global Agenda*, he added the fourth generation perspective to his original framework.

It follows that the fourth generation strategic orientation is informed by a theory of action that identifies an inadequate *mobilising vision* as the root cause of contemporary development failure (Korten 1990:127). The breakthrough of people-centred development to become the dominant, *global* (and by implication also national) paradigm (Korten 1990:124) could, according to this orientation, only be achieved through processes that might *influence the public consciousness* towards “an alternative vision adequate to mobilise voluntary action on a national or global scale”. A process of transformation is emphasised that “*must be achieved primarily through the power of ideas, values and communication links*” (Korten 1990:127; italics added for emphasis).

For Korten such an idea- and value-centred perspective inevitably points to a *social movement approach* to development. Development, in so far as it aspires to ideals of large-scale transformation, could find in the communicative power of the contemporary people’s or social movements the greatest potential for social change. The challenge for actors of the people-centred development movement, therefore, becomes the formation of “alliances with other people’s movements that deal with related elements of the global crisis” (Korten 1990:128). Whilst not losing their specific identity as a movement of *development*, the considerable overlapping of their people-centred agenda with the other new social movements needs to be recognised. These movements constitute the most important allies of a fourth generation people-centred development movement. The various issues around which they are mobilised (environment, human rights, women, peace, population, etc.²⁴) comprise *aspects* of people-centred development and secure its sustainability. In this sense, people-centred development can be taken as the overall and integrating term for the discrete issues that define the various movements. There is a *common denominator* shared by all the new social movements, including the people-centred development movement: they all represent value- and idea-centred processes directed towards the well-being of *people* and the environment; they represent processes in which *people* are the actual subjects (owners) of change (Korten 1990:124-128).

Following this brief exposition of the third and fourth generation perspective, the thesis may well be proposed that an institution such as the church is potentially far better suited to make a meaningful contribution to Korten’s fourth generation mode. Contrary to the technical demands that the third generation imposes on them, it is in the fourth generation mode, one can argue, that the churches would be able to do what they do *best*: to appeal to the attitudes and consciousness of people across boundaries and cultures; to promote the alternative ideas and values of the new social movements and civil society (local and global) (Swart 2000:8-10; 2002:598-599; Swart and Venter 2001:489-490; 493-494; cf Korten 1990:168-169; 223). But also, in this sphere their role as *voluntary* and *people’s organisations* (the two most important institutional types of the fourth generation – see Korten 1990:96-104; Smillie 1995:31-32; Swart 2000:147-154) would be valued most highly: to activate a broad mass of voluntary activism (see Korten 1990:127); to serve the emancipatory strivings (economic, political and social) of the movements of the poor (see Duchrow 1995:281-283) and act as “mediating institutions” between people and bureaucracies, people and business (James 1992:80-82; cf Korten 1990:102); to function as democratic spaces for social movements’ self-expression (see Korten 1990:100-102); to act as the support base and facilitators for people’s alliances across boundaries (see Korten 1990:124, 127, 204-207).

24 Ulrich Duchrow, the well-known ecumenical theologian from Germany, elaborates on this list by referring to the following social movements that are relevant to the churches: women’s movements, homeless movements, farmers’ movements, indigenous movements, environmental movements, peace movements, workers’ movements, and trade union movements (Duchrow 1995:181).

Yet, whilst it is certainly so that the potential of churches may lie in the fourth generation sphere (vis-à-vis the third generation), there is also the danger of presenting a false dichotomy in such a juxtaposing of the third and fourth generation orientations. It should be emphasised here that the challenge and promise of the fourth generation do not imply that the churches could again go on to do business-as-usual, that they can escape the rather rigorous challenges also of the third generation. As I indicated above, the third and fourth generation strategic orientations should be seen as a *cluster*, a *complementary* unit (see Swart 2000:162-170, 209-211). Whilst we may rightly prioritise the fourth generation as spelling out the most fundamental conditions for social change, this orientation does not imply bypassing the skills and professionalism emphasised in the third generation, but builds on them. Indeed, there is just as much the need here for proper *development theory*, for sense-making, for becoming more policy-specific about the alternative society that we aspire to, for organisational and mediating skills, for earning the respect(!) of those whom we seek to engage with (cf Swart 2000:210). And, in so far as churches, as a dimension of their social calling, aspire to become NGOs in development that seek to go beyond the first and second generation modes, the challenge of the “new development professionalism” in the third generation mode is not less relevant. It is in fact an area in which one would expect the churches to make a meaningful contribution, an area that may also well be regarded as an important condition for the churches to become meaningful fourth generation actors.

4. HERMENEUTICAL KEY TO THE THEOLOGICAL DEBATE ON CHURCH AND DEVELOPMENT: A CONCLUSION

In post-apartheid South Africa a debate on church and development has come to stand at the centre of theological inquiry about the deep-rooted problems of poverty and underdevelopment in the country. It is especially through this debate that it is expected of the discipline of theology to empower the churches to make a meaningful contribution towards solving these problems.

I started off this paper, however, by raising serious questions about the current approach of our theologians and churches in their execution of the above-mentioned task. In line with a statement made by prominent religious studies professor Bernard Latagan in the mid-1990s, I have argued that we may well be faced today with a general structural inability in our theological and practical efforts to participate meaningfully and effectively in the struggle against poverty and underdevelopment. In this regard I also found important support in the so-called “pragmatic debate”, a sub-debate in the historical ecumenical development debate that has problematised, on theological and ideological grounds, the churches’ preoccupation with a project-centred approach to development. I argued that this debate seems just as relevant to our own context, given our own entrapment in a project-centred mindset and the rather simplistic notions with which we approach the poverty and development problem.

In the light of such problematisation, the aim of this paper has been to answer the question as to whether Latagan’s proposal of a *third public* mode of theological involvement represents the key to overcoming the current deficiency in theological thinking about the problems of poverty and underdevelopment in South Africa, to empowering the churches towards adopting an effective role in combating these problems. From a hermeneutical point of view, should the third public mode be regarded as the *key* to the theological debate on church and development or should the modes of the other two theological publics – the academy and community of faith – also be brought into the equation?

Indeed, *our exploration of historical ecumenical development discourse and the generational perspective of Korten in this paper cannot but lead us to confirm the relevance of Latagan’s proposal for our own theological debate on church and development.* “Development”, as both

these aspects of the debate suggest, is an extremely *complex* social issue that requires highly sophisticated modes of *conceptual* and *strategic* thinking. As participants in the earlier period of the ecumenical development debate were arguing in particular, development is in the first place about the *alleviation of poverty*. To deal successfully with the issue, the initial task for theology and the churches therefore becomes to obtain a proper understanding of how prevailing *economic* processes play a role in mass socio-economic deprivation and what the economic *alternatives* might be by which the situation can be addressed.

The most fundamental point then to emanate from our exploration of the historical ecumenical development debate is the recognition that the issue at stake here is first and foremost the question about the *mode of doing theology*, the mode by which theology engages in the development problematic. Whilst it is ultimately an issue of praxis, of empowering the churches to play an effective role in resolving the development problematic, the starting point for theology ought to be the quest for sufficient social theoretical understanding, which is to be obtained from the *secular* context of development and to be brought into critical dialogue with the discipline of theology and the churches. It is only from the vantage point of such a level of understanding that the theological and church sector are then challenged to add their own distinctive *theological* and *moral* element to the development issue. For, above anything else, it is on the basis of their faith conviction and moral inclination that Christian theology and the churches recognise the need for becoming involved in development, for taking up the cause of people's right to development (in short, the social justice issue in development), for challenging narrow-minded conceptions of human well-being and for adding a spiritual dimension to people's development.

Our exploration of the generational perspective in the NGO development debate greatly complements the above-mentioned insights derived from the historical ecumenical development debate. In this debate from the secular development literature se, we obtain a very valuable perspective on more *sophisticated* modes of strategic development intervention, modes that are directly relevant to the churches and ought to give important direction to theology's endeavour to empower the former for meaningful development involvement. "Development", as Korten's strategic framework makes clear, involves much more than so-called "community development" activity and cannot be confined by that term and the project-centred mode of involvement that it assumes in the mindset of many people. To address the problem of development responsibly and effectively also requires taking cognisance of the larger picture and a larger dynamics. Quite similar to Lategan's own proposal, both the third and fourth generation orientations in Korten's framework challenge theology and the churches to develop a *policy-specific* discourse, to engage in a competent and professional way with those secular institutions and processes that have a decisive influence on the outcome of development. Clearly, what is required here are knowledge and skills competencies that cannot be provided by the discipline of theology in isolation from the social sciences.

In the final analysis, however, *it is in the sphere of the fourth generation realm that the need for a third public mode of intervention is best reflected*. In this sphere, more than anywhere else, the churches are summoned to become, as Israel Batista puts it so well, a "facilitator, enabler and catalyst" of *others'* agendas (Batista 1994:19), a *servant* of the people's or social movements, the movements of the poor, who are the authentic *agents* of development (see Duchrow 1995:281-283). In so far as theology and the churches are expected to make a value and spiritual contribution in this sphere and to challenge narrow-minded conceptions of development, this ought to be done on the basis of the experiences, discourses and praxis of these movements.

We are left, then, with the question of whether our confirmation of the third public mode as the key to the theological debate on church and development excludes the modes of the other two publics, the academy and the community of faith. My answer to this question would be an

emphatic “No”. Whilst I do not want to dwell here in too much detail on the argument, it is in my opinion at this point where the shortcoming of Lategan’s proposal for our reflection lies. To a larger extent than Lategan has done in his essay, I would argue that *interplay between the various publics* is required in order for theology to be relevant and effective, particularly in the field of development. Beginning with the *first* public, the academy (the university, theological faculty), I would argue that there is a crucial role for this public to play in the development of a curriculum²⁵ that will do justice to what is required in the third public mode, and in the actual empowerment of churches and their leadership to play an effective role in development. Yet, our exploration of the theological debate on church and development in this paper also suggests that a *second* public mode of discourse – the discourse that has traditionally been directed towards and executed by the faith community or church – has a very important role to play. Clearly, the kind of discourse that is required by the churches to play their motivational role in development, to make a value input, to change attitudes and behaviour, to challenge narrow-minded conceptions of development, will also have to be cultivated, with the important assistance of the first public, in the mode of the second public. Spirituality and ethics, as a growing corpus of literature in the development field testifies, matter in development.²⁶ It is a dimension of development that is crucially needed by civil society and that a large section of this sector is not indifferent to. For Christian theology and the churches this implies nothing less than to also take the second public seriously. Yet, the key in this regard would again be the third public mode, to challenge the second public to adopt a spirituality and ethical discourse that is socially relevant and responsive to the complexities of development.

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25 For initial work on this aspect in a South African context, see August (2000; 1999) and De Gruchy (2003).

26 The list of this category of literature is indeed extensive (see e.g Swart 2000:211, fn. 6). For some recent important work in this regard, see e.g Edwards and Sen 2000; Galtung 1996; Goulet 1995; Ryan 1995; Tyndale 2000; Ver Beek 2000.

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