

In what ways can Christians in the West address the problems associated with poverty in the non-Western world?

This essay provides a short reflection upon the Christian response to global poverty. The immensity and persistence of global poverty can both depress and overwhelm us, yet the approach taken here will be a positive one: to imagine a better future, to promote a faithful, biblical response to poverty, and to stand in a long Christian tradition of hope for a better world, through the transformative power of God's Kingdom. The first section introduces the Christian imperative to fight poverty, and is followed by a brief review of what is actually meant by global poverty. This review is followed by three sections which categorise the anticipated Christian response: economic (Section III), ecclesial (Section IV) and political (Section V). The 'practical' and 'spiritual' responses of the Church cannot be disentangled, and are combined in Section IV. The essay concludes by reflecting on the fullness of life and the Christian message of hope, as we try to live with the twin truths that "The end of extreme poverty is [possible]... if we grasp the historic opportunity in front of us" (Sachs 2005, 25) yet "The poor you will always have with you" (Jesus Christ in Matthew 26:11).

Section I

It is not sufficient to ask "in what ways *can* Christians in the West" respond to non-Western poverty. The Christian response should not be optional, selective, a lifestyle choice. Rather, it should be a natural and inevitable outcome of our faith, and it would be better to talk of how Christians *must* or, preferably, *will* respond to poverty if they are living as true followers of Christ. Numerous passages in the Gospels demonstrate the emphasis that Jesus placed on helping those in need, and even the briefest review of them would take considerable space. However, two passages are particularly instructive.

Firstly, in Matthew 25:31-40, Jesus clearly states that the 'blessed,' those followers of Him who will 'inherit the kingdom,' are precisely those who acted to relieve the poverty, marginalization and suffering of others:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the King will say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?" The King will reply, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."

These verses show that followers of Christ will be expected to help those afflicted by hunger, thirst, homelessness, illness and other characteristics of poverty.

Secondly, in Luke 10:30-37, Jesus elaborated on the command to love one's neighbour as oneself, using a definition of neighbour that effectively universalised the term:

Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.' Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

These two passages (and many others besides) show that the teaching of Jesus contained a message of love that was active and involved, and an insistence that we enter the perspective of those in need as we consider who is *their* neighbour. Those who choose to follow Christ must

respond to both His example and His instruction, and “Go and do” as the Good Samaritan did. The strength of this connection between our right-belief and right-action is underlined by James, who writes unequivocally that “faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead” (2:17).

Section II

In this section we articulate, albeit briefly, what is meant when we speak of poverty in the non-Western world. In the last decade or so, there has been a paradigm shift in the field of development studies, as well as significant changes in the specifically Christian interpretation of what such development (or ‘transformation’) should entail. The greatest change has been a general acknowledgement that development – whilst unquestionably an economic issue – has other, critical dimensions. The brilliant and influential development economist Amartya Sen has stipulated (1999, 87) that “poverty must be seen as the deprivation of basic capabilities rather than merely as lowness of incomes, which is the standard criterion of identification of poverty.”

Within Christian circles, a similar shift has occurred: Michael Taylor, a leading Christian development worker, defines poverty as not simply an absence of the basic necessities of life but also a social and psychological phenomenon.¹ Bryant Myers (1999, 69ff) has built on the work of Jayakumar Christian and Ravi Jayakaran, noting that poverty can be understood as disempowerment and a lack of freedom to grow, a conclusion which overlaps considerably with Sen’s concept of ‘capability’. Where Myers differs, however, is his appreciation that there are *spiritual* factors involved. Indeed, Myers (1999, 88) argues that “The cause of poverty is fundamentally spiritual.”²

We should also note the fact that, to a very large extent, poverty in the world is inextricably linked to richness in the world. Such an understanding leads Hughes (1998, 64) to confront us thus: “there is a great need for rich Christians everywhere to ask themselves whether or not they are enjoying their very comfortable lifestyle *at the expense of others*” (emphasis added). Similarly, White and Tiongco (1997, 63) argue that poverty is “something that is caused by a system founded in injustice. The reasons for poverty lie in the relationship between poor and non-poor: the poverty of some and the wealth of others spring from the same source.”

This essay utilises the insight of Sen, Taylor, Hughes and Myers, recognising that poverty is a multi-faceted and complex phenomenon, which must be understood not just in terms of what people lack, but also in terms of their ability to make choices and power to change the status quo; and alongside a critical awareness of the structures that create and maintain such arrangements. These structures may reflect (often unacknowledged) spiritual realities and powers.³

The diagrams on the following page permit cautious optimism, as the percentage of the world’s population living in absolute poverty (defined as less than \$1 per day) has fallen between 1981 and 2001. Worryingly, though, sub-Saharan Africa has become worse off during this period, and Latin America has made no improvement. Sachs (2005, 20) quantifies the overall trend as follows: in 1981 there were 1.5 billion people living in absolute poverty, which had fallen to 1.1 billion in 2001.⁴

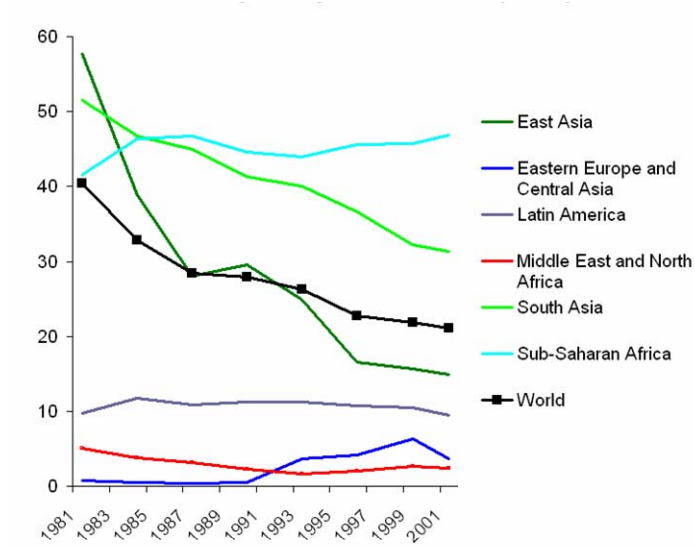
¹ For Taylor, “Social poverty means exclusion from the mainstream of life” and “The psychological dimension of poverty... has to do with the inner feelings of poor people and their states of mind” (2003, 4).

² In contrast to this perspective, the UN’s millennium development goals (MDGs) focus exclusively on more traditional aims (although note the reference to the empowerment of women): eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; achieve universal primary education; promote gender equality and empower women; reduce child mortality; improve maternal health; combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; ensure environmental sustainability; and develop a global partnership for development. These goals were agreed by all UN member states in 2000, with a target completion date of 2015 (see <http://millenniumindicators.un.org> for further information).

³ In discussing poverty here in the abstract, I do not wish to be neglectful of the profoundly personal and individual experiences of each of ‘the poor’. As Myers (1999, 57) rightly observes, the poor are “human beings who have names, who are made in the image of God, whose hairs are numbered, and for whom Jesus died. The people who live in poverty are as valued, as important, as loved as those who do not.”

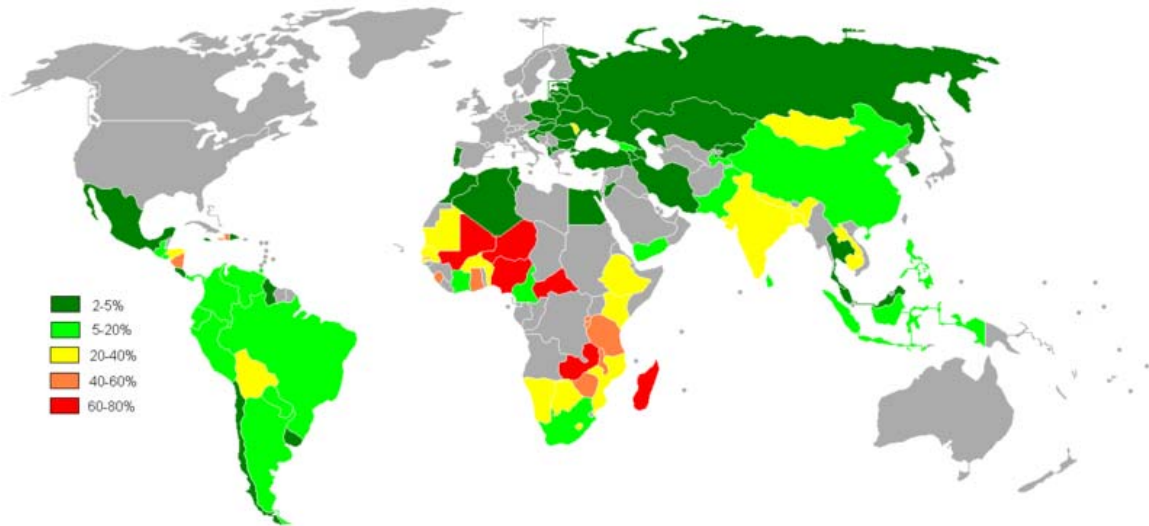
⁴ It is sobering to note that in Sachs’ inspiring call for the world to work towards *The End of Poverty* (2005), there are precisely no references to “churches” or “Christianity.”

Figure 1. Percentage of the population living on less than \$1 per day, 1981-2001



Source: Chen & Ravallion (2004, 31)

Figure 2. Geographical distribution of those living in absolute poverty, 2006



Source: World Resources Institute, 2006

Section III

In this section, we consider some appropriate *economic responses* by Christians to poverty in the non-Western world. Australian ethicist and Anglican priest Alan Nichols (1995, 25) observed that “Many Christians in Western societies... have virtually given up trying to influence anything... They have become discouraged,” before making a twin appeal to our Christian duty and our living as a community of hope. Since that appeal, there has been a small but not insignificant Christian effort to oppose economic injustices, to promote awareness of the consequences of rampant consumerism and, most importantly, to change lifestyles to those which are more sensitive towards the global poor (and the planet we share with them). Influenced by the green/environmental movement of the 1980s, this trend has seen opposition to child labour, exploitative work practices, unfair trade, unaccountable multinational corporations (MNCs) and environmental abuse which typically affects the poorest most. Some of these factors will be looked at in the political section below, but here we will focus on three economic responses to global poverty.

Firstly, Christians must *spend justly*. This principle recognises that, due to the interconnectedness of the global economy, how we spend our money will have ramifications in countries around the world. Part of this argument is that fair prices should be paid for goods – a clear challenge to the traditional assumption made by most economists that markets themselves determine what the ‘right’ price will be. In an age of greater consumer awareness and accessibility of information, there is little excuse for not being interested in where our goods originate, what conditions they are produced in, and what price their producers receive. Fair trade goods (including but not limited to primary products such as tea, coffee, sugar, fruit, rice etc.) are now available in many churches and, due to consumer pressure, in many shops and supermarkets. Greater pressure should be applied on shops to supply such fairly traded products, and to give transparent information concerning prices given to producers. To broaden the principle of fair trade, Christians should try to consider all the social costs, or ‘externalities’, of their purchases, which will not necessarily be reflected in the market price of a good.

Secondly, Christians must *live simply*. This is not to argue that we are expected to live as hermits or paupers. Rather it is a call for Christians to resist the excesses of consumerism and the seduction of persuasive advertising, which has created a throwaway culture of rolling obsolescence. A study conducted in collaboration with the World Council of Churches included a plea from a Jamaican delegation for Christians to develop a “theology of sufficiency.”⁵ One suggestion coming from that same report (Taylor 2003, 78) is that of a “greed line” to stand alongside the familiar “poverty line,” with the implication being that Christians should aim to live somewhere in between. Although I am not aware of such a benchmark being created, I consider it an interesting way of promoting greater wealth equality and would agree that Christians need to embrace contentedness and appreciate sufficiency.⁶ Peter Meadows (2003, 14) reports that 6% of the world consume 43% of its resources: by living simply and consuming less, Christians will leave more natural resources and more goods for those outside of the West, and will be less liable to accusations of greed from non-Westerners.⁷

Thirdly, Christians must *give generously*. I make no apologies for including charity in this list of actions, for despite modern-day emphasis on empowerment and partnership with the poor, selfless and thankful giving still has its place in the Christian development paradigm. Sider (2005, 21) has criticised the fact that giving by US evangelicals fell from 6.15% of income in 1968, to 4.74% in 1985 and just 4.27% in 2001. The picture in other parts of the West is similarly that of Christians failing to tithe and, as Sider goes on to point out, if American Christians tithed at ten percent, another \$143 billion would be available each year. Part of the story of the Good Samaritan was that the Samaritan gave away some of his wealth (“two silver coins,” with the promise of more, Luke 10:35) to help the needy, and we should heed the message that our wealth can be

⁵ Taylor (2003, 65). The report was based on 24 case studies from 19 countries, and was initiated by the Association of World Council of Churches Related Development Organisations in Europe (APRODEV) in collaboration with the World Council of Churches.

⁶ McKibben (in Clapp 1998, 44) rightly notes that “Among the institutions of our society, only the communities of faith can still posit some reason for human existence other than the constant accumulation of stuff.” Clapp himself wistfully observes that “The problem with consumption... is that it has become so all-consuming” (op. cit., 169).

⁷ I remember one Catholic priest claiming that, during his life’s ministry, he had heard every sin confessed, except one – greed. This anecdotal evidence indicates how difficult it is for well-off Christians to recognise their (excessive) wealth from a global perspective.

responsibly given away in order to help others. Whilst businesses, governments and international organisations could give more, that does not absolve the responsibility that ordinary Christians have to use their wealth fruitfully and compassionately.⁸

Section IV

In this section we consider how *the Church as a community* should respond to the problems of global poverty. Harsh words have been written about the Church's response to poverty, for example by Konrad Raiser (in Taylor 2003, ix): "Traditionally, the churches' response [to poverty] has been characterized by the work of charity without challenging the political, social and economic structures that are the root causes of poverty... the Christian churches have been reluctant to address the ethical and spiritual issues related to wealth." We may suspect that this reluctance has much to do with the historical coincidence of Christianity, imperialism, and wealth in the West. What should the Church's response be today?

The starting point must be an acknowledgement, an admission, that the Church has failed to side with the poor. Indeed, in certain historical situations, it has been one of the institutional structures that has oppressed them. The story of the Church and the poor is a complex one, encompassing the poverty vows undertaken by monks since the middle ages, through to the base communities of Latin America today. Nonetheless, where the Church has worked in favour of the rich and not the poor; and where it has failed to use its social and political influence to further the cause of the poor, penitence is due.

The Church has so much to offer the poor (both in this world and the next). We have already noted in Section II that an appropriate concept of poverty includes social exclusion, limited choices and public power, as well as material deprivation. The Church is exceptionally well placed to counter some or all of these problems of poverty, as noted by ex-President of the World Bank James Wolfensohn and former Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey:

"The role of the Church extends beyond the material welfare of its members, and even beyond temporal concerns altogether. But there is an important area of common ground between faith and development. In most developing countries, religious leaders are close to the poor and among their most trusted representatives. Faith communities offer health services, education, and shelter to the vulnerable and disadvantaged. Spiritual ties are often the strongest in societies otherwise rent by ethnic discrimination, conflict over resources, and violence" (foreword to *Faith in Development*, Belshaw et al 2001, vii).

Christians in the West should therefore support strategic churches around the world in their crucial role combating poverty and transforming communities. This may take the form of church or pastor sponsorship, church partnering, or through short-term mission teams.⁹

The Church in the West, meanwhile, has a key role in highlighting the prevalence and persistence of global poverty, and the human suffering it causes. Charles Reed (2001, 21) has, perhaps too optimistically, argued that the General Synod of the Church of England has acted "as the nation's conscience" on issues such as development education, fair trade, breast milk substitutes, Third World debt and the arms trade. Especially when speaking boldly and imaginatively (and, dare I say, politically), the Church in the UK is still given significant media coverage, and is obligated to use this fact as an opportunity to speak on behalf of the poor. This is true both nationally for the Church as a whole, and for individual churches within their local communities. The function here is for the Church to speak prophetically, denouncing poverty as a force of oppression and injustice.¹⁰

In this ecclesial section of responses to poverty, I have resisted use of a false practical/spiritual dichotomy. It can no longer be maintained that these are separate realms of life, since all creation is in one sense 'spiritual,' and so-called 'spiritual acts' such as prayer are, if we believe in their efficacy, intensely practical. I therefore continue this ecclesial section with some additional suggested responses to poverty: prayer is the infinite resource of the believer; fasting may be an

⁸ Hughes (1998, 99) compellingly argues that salvation of the rich must be a fundamental aim for the Church, since it releases resources that are needed to help the poor. Hughes cites Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10) as an instructive example.

⁹ I would suggest that such partnerships should not be considered anything but equal, and that the flow of support and encouragement, as well as wisdom and Biblical insight should be bi-directional.

¹⁰ Linden (in Reed 2001, 8) argues that "The first demand of the Church must... be for urgent reform of the existing inadequate international institutions: the WTO, the IMF and the World Bank – in that order of urgency – to create the preconditions for a global economy and a global social contract." Whilst this may seem *too* political a step for some within the Church, I would argue that, as Christians, we simply do not have a choice of where our faith applies and that the Church should not shirk from condemning agents of oppression and injustice, however powerful they may be politically.

appropriate and powerful response to a particular situation; and preaching the Word of God has the power to transform people's lives in a way that awakens them to the suffering of the poor. Elliott (1987, 180) is absolutely right that the Church must also speak about spiritual powers that "hold the world in thrall" (*pace* Wink) – otherwise it will be "to all intents and purposes, indistinguishable from an enlightened liberal humanism." All these measures, therefore, should form part of the response of the community of Christian believers in the West.

Section V

In this final section, we briefly consider what *political steps* ought to be taken by Western Christians in response to global poverty. The actions here are illustrative rather than definitive, and should always be part of a heartfelt response to poverty and suffering, rather than a desire for political influence and power in itself.

In the democratic countries of the West, Christian citizens have a number of opportunities to influence political decisions, including those that relate to the poor. Christians can campaign for specific aspects of poverty to be addressed – and the moderate success of the Jubilee 2000 / Drop the Debt campaign suggests this could be a productive route in the long-term. Campaigning could include demonstrations, lobbying, boycotts, petitioning and other forms of pressure. More direct forms of political action are also open to Christians. These include voting for political parties on the basis of their policies for combating global poverty, and even standing for political office on a platform of global justice. As Hughes (1998, 186ff) has pointed out, there is a long tradition of men and women of faith working from *within* the political system, for example, Joseph, Daniel, Esther, Nehemiah, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea.

The other main form of political action is that of advocacy. This is usually understood to mean "giv[ing] a voice to the voiceless and a face to the faceless" (so Reed 2001, 131) but amongst some African Christians is conceived of as 'emancipatory politics,' a phrase which helpfully keeps in mind the enslaving nature of poverty.¹¹ Christian advocates should speak on behalf of the global poor but, wherever possible, they should also try to make heard the voices of the poor themselves. To do so is the more participatory and empowering option.

Conclusion – Hope and the Fullness of Life

This essay has explored, albeit superficially, how Western Christians *must* respond to global poverty. Indeed, if their faith is deep and genuine, they *will* respond to the problems of poverty in a number of ways. These will include economic, ecclesial and political actions, *all* of which are open to the ordinary Christian in, for example, the UK. Doing so will help bring dignity to the poor, will create a moral vision for global society, and will testify to the coming of the kingdom of God. Western Christians must recognise their own part to play in bringing about the fulfilment of Jesus' promise that His followers "may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10).

Since this essay has considered a Christian response to non-Western poverty, it has necessarily focussed on individual and communal agency in the West. It would be mistaken, however, to interpret this as Western Christians being "doers" and people of the developing world being "receivers," since this would undermine the principles of freedom, participation and partnership which form the basis of enlightened Christian development work. As Vallely comments (1992, 144), "One of the deep insights which the Christian tradition offers is that to have control of your own life, to participate in decisions about your future, is part of the fullness of humanity."

Christians have much to offer the poor. Whilst the scale of poverty can seem depressingly vast, the Christian is motivated by hope of a better world to come, and an imperative to work towards that reality. Doing so testifies towards God's love for the poor, with our actions as much as our words being responsible for communicating the Gospel to the world's poor.

Christopher Ducker

May 2007

¹¹ A synonymous Indian phrase was "being prophetic," Taylor (2003, 61).

Bibliography

- Alkire & Newell (2005) Alkire, Sabina and Newell, Edmund (eds.), *What Can One Person Do? Faith to Heal a Broken World*, London: DLT, 2005
- Belshaw (2001) Belshaw, Deryke et al (eds.), *Faith in Development: Partnership Between the World Bank and the Churches of Africa*, Oxford: Regnum Books, 2001
- Chen & Ravallion (2004) Chen, Shaohua and Ravallion, Martin, *How Have the World's Poorest Fared Since the Early 1980s?*, New York: World Bank, 2004
- Clapp (1998) Clapp, Rodney (ed.), *The Consuming Passion: Christianity and the Consumer Culture*, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998
- Elliott (1987) Elliott, Charles, *Comfortable Compassion? Poverty, Power and the Church*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1987
- Hughes (1998) Hughes, Dewi, *God of the Poor: A Biblical Vision of God's Present Rule*, Carlisle: OM Publishing, 1998
- Meadows (2003) Meadows, Peter, *Rich Thinking about the World's Poor – Seeing the World Through God's Eyes*, Carlisle: Spring Harvest, 2003
- Myers (2006) Myers, Bryant L., *Walking With The Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2006
- Nichols (1995) Nichols, Alan, *Christian Hope for a Better World*, Burwood, Australia: World Vision Australia, 1995
- Reed (2001) Reed, Charles (ed.), *Development Matters: Christian Perspectives on Globalization*, London: Church House Publishing, 2001
- Sachs (2005) Sachs, Jeffrey D., *The End of Poverty: How We Can Make It Happen In Our Lifetime*, London: Penguin, 2005
- Sen (1999) Sen, Amartya, *Development as Freedom*, Oxford: OUP, 1999
- Sider (2005) Sider, Ronald J., *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why are Christians Living Just Like the Rest of the World?*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005
- Taylor (1990) Taylor, Michael, *Good for the Poor: Christian Ethics and World Development*, London: Mowbray, 1990
- Taylor (2003) Taylor, Michael, *Christianity, Poverty and Wealth: The findings of 'Project 21'*, London: SPCK, 2003
- Vallely (1992) Vallely, Paul, *Promised Lands: Stories of Power and Poverty in the Third World*, London: Fount, 1992
- Van Drimmelen (1998) Van Drimmelen, Rob, *Faith in a Global Economy: A Primer for Christians*, Geneva: WCC, 1998
- White & Tiongco (1997) White, Sarah and Tiongco, Romy, *Doing Theology and Development: Meeting the Challenge of Poverty*, Edinburgh: St Andrew Press, 1997