

## Is globalisation bad for the poor? If so, what can Christians do about this?

*“The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it,  
the world, and all who live in it.”*

Psalm 24:1

Globalisation is a powerful force, considered by many to be the single most important issue in the world today, and a process affecting billions of people. This essay considers whether globalisation is ‘bad’ for the poor – something which requires an understanding of what globalisation is (Section I), who are the ‘poor’ it impacts (Section II) and how it affects them (Section III). Having outlined answers to these questions, this essay then explores what Christians can do in response, given their particular understanding of both the world and its poor (Section IV). The approach of this essay is predominantly conceptual, rather than empirical.

### Section I: Defining Globalisation

Although many would agree with Ellwood (2001, 8) that “globalization is the buzzword of the moment” and even that “globalization has become the defining process of the present age” (Khor 2001, 1), there is remarkably little consensus over what globalisation actually is.<sup>1</sup> There is disagreement over its scope (economics? politics? culture? technology?); its origins (industrialisation? capitalism? imperialism? modernity?); its processes; and, especially, its consequences. To a large extent this debate has become polarised between those who believe globalisation to be undoubtedly a good thing, e.g. Bhagwati (2004, ix) claims “globalization is in fact the most powerful force for social good in the world today”; and those such as Bello (2002, 18 and 30), who has claimed “globalization is a process marked by massive corruption” which is creating “instability, resentment and crisis” as well as poverty and inequality.<sup>2</sup> Other areas of disagreement are whether globalisation is a deliberate and “comprehensive plan” (McNurtry in Ellwood 2001, 4), or whether it is even happening at all, with Rugman (2001, 1) claiming “globalization is a myth; it never really occurred.”<sup>3</sup>

Faced with such disagreement, it is a difficult task to assay globalisation’s merit. For the sake of clarity and consistency, we here utilise Kiely’s (1998, 3) concise definition of globalisation as being “a world in which societies, cultures, politics and economies have, in some sense, come closer together,” as well as the process itself that makes this happen.<sup>4</sup> This simple definition has the benefit of lucidity, as well as an inclusiveness which avoids the narrow focus of those who have argued, with Rugman (2001, 5) that there is only one “correct [and exclusively] economic definition of globalization” – a definition endorsed by Bhagwati (2004, 3) but one which all too conveniently sidesteps social and cultural implications of globalisation.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It is generally recognised that the term ‘globalisation’ has been in popular, though imprecise, usage since the 1960s (Steger 2003, 7) or the 1970s (Held 2002a, 2) but it has acquired greater frequency and meaning since the early 1990s.

<sup>2</sup> As leading development economist Amartya Sen has warned (2001, 84), “sharp diversities in assessing the consequences of ‘globalisation’ in the world seem to produce a similar unity of radical opposites.”

<sup>3</sup> Stiglitz (2002, 9) has lamented that “the differences in views are so great that one wonders, are the protestors and the policy makers talking about the same phenomena?” to which we might answer: probably not.

<sup>4</sup> I do not have space here to develop my argument that, although globalisation has historical roots, these are better understood as internationalisation until the late Victorian era, and then proto-globalisation until the 1970s and 1980s, after which globalisation proper has occurred – as Held (2002a, 48) describes, of an “historically unprecedented scale and magnitude.” This argument disputes Feffer’s claim (2002, 2) that “Globalization is nothing new,” and contradicts Steger’s assertion (2003, 19) that “globalization is as old as humanity itself” but inevitably depends on how globalisation is understood.

<sup>5</sup> Amongst the many definitions of globalisation, Feffer’s stands out for its evocativeness: “Globalization is a Nike trainer on every foot, a Golden Arch in every town, a Madonna on every magazine cover, a sweatshop in every alley, a Coke on every table, a big dam on every river, a cloud of pollution on every landscape, and ‘structural adjustment’ in the speech of every government leader. Globalization is an assembly line circling the world...” (2002, 1).

## Section II: Defining the Poor

Before we can evaluate the impact that globalisation has on the poor, we must first briefly consider whom we mean by 'the poor.' In most of the recent literature on globalisation, there is actually very little discussion on who are most affected: there are numerous individual examples, and much talk of developing countries in general, but little sense of something in between, or more precisely defined. Here we argue that globalisation is not an even or uniform process, and as a result, it impacts people differently; it also manifests itself differently in different cultures.

Whilst the poor are often equated with the populations of the world's least developed countries, this is something of a blunt definition, since there are undoubtedly some wealthy elites even within the world's poorest countries; and, contrariwise, there are very impoverished people in some areas of, say, the United States.<sup>6</sup> It is better to understand 'the poor' as those in absolute or relative material poverty, regardless of their location or culture. This leads to a more complicated picture of globalisation, but a more complete one.<sup>7</sup>

## Section III: The Impact of Globalisation on the Poor

In response to increasingly vociferous criticisms of globalisation in the 1990s, Bhagwati has strongly defended both the concept and the performance of globalisation in his book *In Defense of Globalization* (2004). In this polemical work he criticised, not without justification, the methodology of many of those opposed to globalisation, especially their 'gotcha' approach of using unrepresentative "specific examples" to "validate" their claims (Bhagwati 2004, 22). The underlying tension here is, in many ways, that of practice versus theory: anti-globalisers rail against emotive real-world examples, while Bhagwati criticises their selectiveness, piecemeal approach and lack of systematic understanding of the issues at hand.<sup>8</sup> While keeping in mind the human dimension of globalisation, we should heed his methodological warning and seek a balanced, systematic evaluation of globalisation's impact (without necessarily restricting ourselves to his own particular framework of analysis).

Given that globalisation can be understood as a greater global degree of connectedness (or, moreover, greater dependency),<sup>9</sup> the impact of globalisation will be observed wherever different societies, cultures, polities and economies are becoming more closely connected. The difficulty of understanding this, however, is that a myriad relationships are involved, none of which is necessarily straightforward. The only way that we can continue with a balanced, systematic evaluation, therefore, is to briefly outline the *general processes* involved (as opposed to citing isolated and often unrepresentative examples either for or against globalisation, or using selective statistics).

### (a) The processes of globalisation

*Economic* globalisation has been its most frequently criticised form, and indeed some pejoratively call this *corporate* globalisation instead. There is a broad consensus that economic factors are the driving force behind globalisation (although, some would say, in conjunction with political factors).<sup>10</sup> Given the ability of money to affect and transform living standards, this is hardly surprising. But there has been substantial argument that the entities (governments, corporations, international institutions) which control international flows of money, dictate international financial regulations and influence political and economic policy

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<sup>6</sup> BBC journalist Peter Jay deserves an honourable mention here, with his acknowledgement that globalisation has led to "the global deterioration in the bargaining power of low-skilled labour" which means that "in America a significant underclass is obliged to live on more or less subsistence earnings and in Europe the equivalent people... depend on forms of corporate and State welfare..." (2000, 305).

<sup>7</sup> For a fuller Christian understanding of 'the poor,' there must also be an appreciation of those who *are poor in spirit* (cf. Matthew 5:3); regrettably, this is beyond the scope of this short essay.

<sup>8</sup> In a characteristically forthright attack, Bhagwati says Oxfam's criticisms of unfair trade "are often little more than rubbish" (2004, 5) and that those emotively campaigning for fair trade are "know-nothings" (2004, 6).

<sup>9</sup> The term 'connectedness' or 'interconnection' is very popular in globalisation literature but is somewhat misleading since it reflects nothing of the *power dynamics* involved in such connections.

<sup>10</sup> Steger, for example, insists that "the economic and political aspects of globalization are profoundly interconnected," (2003, 62).

in developing countries have done so to their own advantage, and consequently at a cost to the world's poor: many are materially worse off, have seen their jobs destroyed or their lives become more insecure. This need not be seen so much as a conspiracy (although some would happily use that term) as enacted self-interest – but something which reflects the underlying national, corporate or political power of those directing entities. Put simply, those who devise, develop and direct the processes of globalisation are more likely to benefit from them than the poor and powerless.

The *political* sphere is also affected, such as when political conditions are tied to the giving of loans or aid packages, a controversial feature of the Structural Adjustment Programmes favoured by both the IMF and the World Bank. Nation states may also find themselves acquiescing to the demands of powerful multinational corporations, with their sovereignty and democracy thereby being undermined.<sup>11</sup> A third example of the political process working against the poor is when politically motivated deregulation “removes safety nets that protect the vulnerable” in society.<sup>12</sup>

*Cultural* globalisation sees ways of life influenced by ‘outside’ influences – and while Legrain (2002, 296) may blithely claim that national cultures are only under threat because “individual choices... are to blame,” we should recognise that these choices tend to coincide with the cultural expressions being promoted by wealthy, powerful Western companies; they are not made in a value-free vacuum. If traditional cultures are eroded in this way, impoverishment of a different type occurs. Other realms of globalisation include *environmental*, where ecological and ‘green’ issues are no respecters of geographic or political boundaries, but which are considerably affected by the industrialised economic powers; and *religious*, where religions characterised by what Waters called “a globalising sense of mission” have taken increasing steps to spread their global reach (cited in Kiely 1998, 191).<sup>13</sup>

Each of these realms of globalisation overlap to a greater or lesser degree, and tends to utilise advances in technology, especially with regard to the accessibility and transmissibility of information.<sup>14</sup>

### **(b) The levels of globalisation**

Economists, journalists, politicians and social scientists have come to differing conclusions on what impact these globalising processes have on the poor. This mixed picture is actually a good thing, since it indicates that a healthy debate is underway, despite Legrain’s (2002, 22) pessimistic assessment that the “row over whether globalisation is good or bad has produced more heat than light.” The quality of debate must be improved, but the ‘row’ is certainly worth having.<sup>15</sup>

I suggest that there are three levels on which the ‘badness’ of globalisation for the poor can be considered: the specific, the general and the systemic.<sup>16</sup> In the first instance, illustrative examples can be, and have been, used to demonstrate negative impacts of globalisation. Secondly, it is possible to ask whether the *net* result of globalisation is good or bad (or, in this particular context, good or bad for the poor). Debate about globalisation has shifted from the first plane to the second, but there is surely a third level that is not well represented in current analysis of globalisation. In my opinion, it is worth asking whether there is anything inherently

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<sup>11</sup> As Barber argues, “there is... no ideology less interested in nations than capitalism, no challenge to frontiers more audacious than the market. By many measures, corporations are today more central players in global affairs than nations,” (1995, 23).

<sup>12</sup> Feffer (2002, 8-9) claims that this is an example of diminishing state power as economies are deregulated.

<sup>13</sup> Waters himself identified Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Islam and Hinduism “in particular” as having such a global approach.

<sup>14</sup> Especially the Internet. The exponential growth of Internet take-up is further evidence that there is a newness and dissimilarity of globalisation since the 1980s compared to that which has gone before.

<sup>15</sup> Steger (2003, 93) is correct to claim that the “public debate over whether globalization represents a ‘good’ or a ‘bad’ thing occurs in the arena of ideology,” but this is by no means the only arena. For example, Christians are influenced by their religious and moral beliefs, which cannot necessarily be equated with ideology or political stance.

<sup>16</sup> This essay does not seek to explore in depth how that ‘badness’ may be defined, other than understanding globalisation as having unfavourable (absolute) and disadvantageous (relative) consequences. An interesting exercise would be to explore how globalisation also diminishes the universe of possibilities available to the poor, which could be also considered a ‘bad’ thing.

or intrinsically bad about globalisation, i.e. will the negative effects not just outweigh the positive effects now (which would be an argument on the second plane) but will they always *continue* to be so by the *very nature* of globalisation. Without concluding that this will necessarily be the case, this should at least be a front in the globalisation debate.

The arguments above have suggested that there are certain processes through which globalisation *is* bad for the poor, certainly in the first plane of the specific, but also on the second, general plane where the *net* effects of globalisation are negative. Even if this were difficult to demonstrate in the absolute sense, the fact that globalisation benefits the rich more than it benefits the poor means that, in relative terms, the poor are thereby harmed by globalisation. Is this inherently the case, or are there alternative scenarios? Given that globalisation is driven by Western interests (represented by Western companies, institutions, governments and even NGOs), it seems entirely plausible that globalisation will continue to work against the poor<sup>17</sup> – unless steps outlined in Section IV are implemented.

### Section IV: What Can be Done?

This section addresses the issue of how Christians can positively respond to the negative impact that globalisation has on the poor.<sup>18</sup> The first point to be made is that Christianity has a *mandate to respond*, founded on two pertinent concepts – the Earth and the poor.

The divinely-inspired Psalmist noted that “the earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it; the world, and all who live in it” (Psalm 24:1) and Christianity has always understood itself to be of global relevance. Examples of this include the Great Commission, where Christ’s parting words to his followers included the instruction to “go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19) and his revealing that they would “be my witnesses... to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Ten Old Testament books use the phrase “the ends of the earth,” with Isaiah alone making twelve references; clearly, the concept of global begins with the creator and sovereign God.

The poor, considered ever-present in society according to the Bible,<sup>19</sup> are those who are impoverished and, beyond that, suffer socially because of their poverty. Their position in society is that of the marginalised; the oppressed. Despite their poverty – or, indeed, because of it – these people are loved and valued by God,<sup>20</sup> who instructs His people to likewise love them.<sup>21</sup> This demands practical action, which is the motif of the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-32) but can also be seen from the following passage:

[“On Judgement Day, Jesus] 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.’” (Matthew 25:34-40)

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<sup>17</sup> Legrain seeks to justify globalisation as of universal benefit but undermines his argument by frequently only being able to cite positive examples from the *West*, e.g. “Just look at the amazing leap in American and European living standards since the Second World War” (2002, 12) – which have been realised, whilst “Poor countries have everything to gain too” (2002, 14) – which he does not show to have been realised.

<sup>18</sup> It is should be acknowledged that Christianity has not developed independently of globalisation: it has both facilitated and been propagated by it (Beckford in Cohen and Rai 2000, 170-183).

<sup>19</sup> At Bethany, Jesus said, “You will always have the poor among you,” John 12:8 (and parallels in Matthew 26:11 and Mark 14:7).

<sup>20</sup> Indeed, liberation theologians such as Boff (*Faith on the Edge: Religion and Marginalized Existence*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989, and elsewhere) have argued that God actually has a ‘*preference* for the poor.’

<sup>21</sup> Feffer, a Quaker academic, has commented that religious leaders have attacked globalisation on several fronts – not just its impact on the poor, but its overall effect on society, since it “emphasizes material over spiritual growth, corporate ties over family ties, competition over cooperation” (2002, 16).

Having established the necessity that Christians respond to globalisation's negative impact, the question now faced is: what can be done? I suggest that there are three types of things that can – and must – be done:

### **(a) Practical**

The first response must be action. Given the relatively high awareness levels of globalisation amongst Western Christians, there is little excuse for there not being a sustained, practical response intended to counter the negative effects of globalisation. This response may take several forms: demonstrating against entities (governments, corporations, institutions) most responsible for globalisation's negative effects on the poor; boycotting companies responsible; lobbying politicians; and campaigning for reforms to the international trading systems, especially concerning capital flows and multilateral institutions.<sup>22</sup> The World Bank and IMF must be reformed, especially since the latter (in the words of the Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz) makes decisions "on the basis of what seemed a curious blend of ideology and bad economics" (Stiglitz 2002, xiii) and without even forecasting "what the policies would do to poverty" (ibid., xiv).<sup>23</sup> Such reform may seem ambitious, but it should be remembered that the Church was instrumental in abolishing slavery, and is effectively the world's largest (and richest) NGO.

Christian action should occur at the individual, church and (inter-)denominational levels, living out the fact that "at the very centre of our lives God calls us to a very different dream than the Western [consumerist and materialist] dream," (Sine 1999, 344).<sup>24</sup> At the most challenging level, practical action may involve living in a state of poverty that expresses solidarity with the poor, as Jesus instructed the 'rich young man' in Mark 10:21: "Go, sell everything you have and give it to the poor" in order to "come, follow me."

### **(b) Vocal**

Stiglitz (2002, 9) reminds us that "for decades, the cries of the poor in Africa and in developing countries... have been largely unheard in the West," and so the second Christian response must be vocal, speaking on behalf of the unheard poor. Christians must raise the profile of globalisation's victims by stimulating informed and fair debate, be it in the pulpit, the press, the pub or the chatroom. It is only proper to acknowledge globalisation's benefits and achievements – such as improved living standards for many, increased life expectancy for some, more opportunities in parts of the developing world and often cheaper products there – if criticizing its excesses and failures. Into the polarised debate, Christians can speak justly in the interests of the poor from a position not of ideology, but of fundamental respect for all humanity, of which each individual has been made in God's image (Genesis 1:26-27).

### **(c) Bringing Hope**

Feffer (2002, 19) makes the interesting observation that 'prosperity' has its roots in the Latin word for 'to hope,' and there is an opportunity to restore the association between these two concepts. In every part of the world, Christians can respond to globalisation by sharing a message of hope; this is a message that ultimately transcends globalisation and all earthly concerns, since it is a message of the eternal. By working and speaking in the interests of those hurt by globalisation, Christians can bring hope of a better standard of living – but they must also speak of a better *life*, and of the certain fact that, even if current problems are in fact systemic and enduring, there is hope of a better world to come.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Bello (2002, 6) argues convincingly that there is a "deep crisis of legitimacy of the multilateral order," even arguing that, if unchecked, it "is a mortal threat to development, social justice and equity, and the environment" (2002, 109).

<sup>23</sup> The suggested reforms of Stiglitz (2002, 236ff), himself a former Chief Economist at the World Bank, are coherent, cogent and compelling, and deserve formal consideration.

<sup>24</sup> In his provocative and timely work, Sine argues that the chief inhibitor of Christian response is "a crisis of vision... the imagery of the better future that we want for ourselves and those we care about" (1999, 207).

<sup>25</sup> Summarised by Peter as: "God... has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you... though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials," 1 Peter 1:3-4,6.

**Conclusion**

Globalisation is a complex and disputed concept. We have seen that it operates through many different processes and on different levels, and is neither a uniform nor an even phenomenon. Given that globalisation is, in many ways, driven by Western business, governments and ideology, it is not surprising that there is considerable evidence of globalisation being bad for the poor (both in the developing world and in the industrialised West). Such negative results may even be inherent in globalisation. Faced with this situation, and being motivated by love and a desire for justice, Christians must respond by taking practical and vocal steps to counter globalisation's ugliest characteristics, including campaigning for more equitable global trade, and more transparent and accountable multilateral institutions. For many, this will involve rethinking their aversion to political action in the name of Christianity. Beyond this, Christians should also share a message of eternal hope – which, ironically, is more possible to communicate due to globalisation itself.

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