

CHRISTIANS AND GLOBALISATION

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CHRISTIAN OR NOT, THE CASE AGAINST GLOBALISATION IS GENERALLY THOUGHT TO BE MORALLY UNASSAILABLE.

An economic order that condemns half the world to live on two dollars a day or less, and over 800 million to poverty, strictly defined, while 5 per cent of the world's population consume 25 per cent of the world's energy and enjoy incomes 114 times those of the poorest 5 per cent, must surely be unjust. For Christians who hope to make a difference to the world by transmitting to it the good news they have been given, the moral question is vitally important. Really, it is three separate questions. To what extent is the present economic order the cause of a growing pauperisation and marginalisation of a section of the human race? To what extent must the present order be called unjust? And what should the Christian, particularly the European Christian, be doing about the injustice?

As to the first question, there is fortunately a dispassionate and quantitative guide to the facts of the matter – the United Nations Reports on Human Development. These now also include reports on progress towards the Millennium Development Goals for the year 2015, adopted by the UN in 2000 – such as halving extreme poverty, achieving universal primary education, and reducing child mortality. Their evidence is that in most areas (though not alas in child mortality) steady progress is being made. The trend is not towards pauperisation. The human race *is* developing. According to the report for 2003, between 1990 and 1999 the proportion of the world's people living in extreme poverty fell from 29 per cent to 23 per cent, while primary school enrolments rose from 80 per cent to 84 per cent, and over 800 million people gained access to improved water supplies. Only a quarter of the world's population live in countries that are not on track to meet at least half of the Millennium Development Targets. And, while it is very difficult to measure degrees of participation or marginalisation, the proportion of human beings with access to multi-party elections and forms of democracy has risen over the 20 years since 1980 from 46 per cent to 68 per cent. Moreover, the areas where underdevelopment is most recalcitrant are concentrated in the small inland countries of sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, while progress has been most striking in the world's most populous countries, India and China, as they have begun to play a significant role in the world economy: per capita Gross Domestic Product has quadrupled in East Asia and the Pacific since 1975.

The evidence then is not only that development is taking place and that important targets in the fight against world poverty can be met within the timetable laid down by the UN, it is also that poverty is being eliminated – insofar as individual national economies are joining the global system; insofar as the jobs of toy makers are being transferred to China and the jobs of software writers to India; insofar as capital is being allowed and encouraged to move around the world and seek the investments that will give the best (but also the most secure) returns. Poverty is most pronounced in those areas which, as a consequence of natural barriers, or of the political borders which reinforce them, or of institutional instability, corruption that is unaccountable and beyond reform, or endemic warfare, are cut-off from the global market – those areas in which investment is most difficult, least rewarding, and least secure.

The question whether the world order can be called unjust is therefore not straightforward. Strictly speaking, no purely economic order can be said to be unjust – it is the sum of a myriad voluntary (though usually reluctant) decisions to trade goods and labour at an agreed price, so achieving the mutual satisfaction of some desires through acceptance of the frustration of others. Injustice is of its nature political, and injustice enters economic relations when the political sanctions of law and power, and so ultimately of violence, are deployed to influence price and so distort the market. The Human Development Report for 2003 estimates that a worker from a developing country selling into global markets faces barriers twice as high as those confronting the typical worker in industrial countries and that the agricultural subsidies to the farmers of industrial countries, which run at \$1 billion a day, are six times higher than the sums those same countries disburse as development aid. Now that really is injustice – and like all injustice it is short-sighted.

One example of this injustice is the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which, by the deliberate decision of the elected representatives of the peoples of Europe, uses the force of law – a non-economic factor which, in the last analysis, is a threat of physical constraint – to raise taxes for the purpose of subsidising farmers who would price themselves out of the world market if sales of their produce were their only source of income. Because this is a political decision, it is a decision about priorities, and it is an unjust decision because it puts the short- and

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► medium-term interests of Europe before the long-term interests of the global community (including Europe).

In the short and medium term it has the consequence of preserving throughout Europe a class of peasant farmers who in various ways maintain and beautify the fabric of European society and culture: they produce the irrationally varied abundance of Europe's local wines and cheeses; they care for features of the natural landscape that more industrialised agriculture would neglect – by maintaining hedgerows, for example, or hand-mowing inaccessible Alpine hayfields; they also maintain the variety of the human landscape, for their often remote and secluded communities furnish havens for customs, folklore, political parties, and even languages (such as Irish or Occitan) that could not survive exposure to the global culture of the cities; and they underpin the great illusion of modern Western city-dwellers – that the reality which those urban lives seem to lack is to be found in the countryside. But is the preservation of Europe in a dream of pre-industrial paradise, from which sooner or later it must wake up with a headache, worth the consequences that flow from the CAP for the rest of the world – the unnecessary tensions with the USA, the strangling of African and Latin-American production of sugar and wheat, and even of millet and rice, the degeneration of abandoned land, and the bloating of ill-organised cities by a displaced rural population in search of government handouts?

The CAP allows Europe to retain its rurality – and so to a large degree its natural and cultural variety – by exporting the disruption and homogenisation and poverty, the social and environmental degradation, that result from global competition, to parts of the world less able to defend themselves. The CAP, in other words, is the result of a political decision to act unjustly by rigging the market, and it can be reversed by a political decision to take a longer view of Europe's interests. It is not in the interest of the rich man to starve the mob outside his front door into desperation, and a world in which there are fewer varieties of Burgundy and more middle-class Sudanese will be both a better and a safer place.

Similarly, the decision of the present American administration to enrich those who levered it into power, by running a colossal budget deficit, is a political decision to make use of government's power to tax (or refrain from taxing) its citizens in order to plunder the

dollar-denominated savings of other nations through an indirect devaluation of the American currency. It can be reversed by a decision of the American people to change their administration – which will become more likely if the rest of the world stops seeing the dollar-zone as a safe place to invest.

The role of the Christian, then, as of anyone who perceives the injustice to which distortion of the market leads, must be to anticipate those judgements of expediency – to say what it is right to do before it becomes obvious what it is also and anyway prudent to do. That means speaking and acting, not against some nebulous boggyard such as globalisation or capitalism, but against those who make specific political decisions to use force – whether of arms, or of the power to impose taxes and tariffs – in order to constrain the freedom of others who merely wish peacefully to buy and sell their produce and their labour.

But there is also action that only a Christian can take – only one who has heard the message of the Bible that the Bible's culmination and centre is the person of Jesus Christ, who came that we might have life, and have it more abundantly. The Christian knows that, whatever the cost may be of forgiving and making good the human suffering caused by human injustice, that cost has already been borne by God himself. So the Christian has a particular duty to seek out the presence of God and of the resurrection not in the flawed successes of the process of human development, but in every one of its victims – whether as love and aid for the afflicted, or as the conversion of their persecutors, or as the God-likeness of their desolation. And the human interaction, innocent and sinful, that we call the economic and political order has many more victims than we imagine: the poor and the marginalised, the stressed and the unemployed, their spouses and their children, are to be found in the First World as in the Third, and nowhere is insulated, except by injustice and in the short term, from the pressures of global competition and the disruptive adjustments of the global market. Indeed, the worst degradation of all is to be found on our own doorstep, in Britain and in Europe. Thanks to the destruction of sovereign nations, over the last 100 years, by the globalisation of economic activity, Europeans have largely lost the ability (which seemed so important to Hegel) to equate their collective destiny with a manifestation of absolute truth, that is, with God – as seemed natural in nineteenth-century Europe, and as still seems natural in the USA and in the Islamic world today. The loss of faith in a political

identity goes hand in hand with the loss of faith in God, and Europe now is the most godless region of the entire world. To that extent, Europe is the most deprived and most marginalised area in the global economy, though the UN Human Development Reports do not notice it, as they do not factor faith into their indices. Lacking the belief in God, Europe lacks the precondition for seeing the face of God in the victims of its own injustice. The most urgent and immediate political task for Christians is therefore to preach the gospel, for only a Europe that has heard the gospel can know that morally – that is, absolutely – the most important thing about the process of globalisation is not the success it enables but the suffering inflicted by attempts to hold it up. And a Europe which has recovered the Christian belief that the God who created and cares for everything became incarnate in a single human being, and which therefore is open to the principle “think globally, act locally”, may perhaps even see its way to abolishing the Common Agricultural Policy. ■