

# Taking More Than

How our consumption helps the poor stay poor

by Robert Goudzwaard

**T**he place: Dehra Dun, India. The time: autumn 1969. For the first time in my life, I visit one of the poor countries of the Southern Hemisphere, as a young Dutch parliamentarian. A Christian missionary is kind enough to drive me through the city center. Then, near to my open window, comes the open hand of a beggar.

He is obviously a leper. He looks at me with his mutilated face and asks for some money: "Please give, please give." I feel insecure about what to do, so I ask my companion, "Will giving money really help him?"

There should be other and better methods, I think. Meanwhile the car begins to move, and I lose sight of the beggar completely. My dilemma is solved by the mobility of modern life. But since then, the beggar's face has often come back in my memory. Was I really acting as a good Christian at that moment?

I tell this uncomfortable story because it illustrates so clearly how insecure all of us are in relating to poor people. We are uncertain about the range and character of our personal responsibilities. I also tell this story because it makes me personally vulnerable. For the hunger in this world is not a topic from which we may escape—for instance, by using only an abstract style of reasoning. My lifestyle as a Western citizen should be at stake here from the outset.

What is our responsibility for the poor as rich Western Christians? How do we figure into their hunger and poverty? Does the worldwide disparity of wealth, in which we seem to gain more and more of the world's riches while the poor end up with less and less, make matters worse? If so, what can we do?

The answers to these questions are not simple; there is no one cause for poverty and hunger. At the same time, Christians



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may never say that these troubles are none of our business. We have a responsibility in these matters, murky as that responsibility may sometimes seem.

It helps to think of these problems as an onion with many layers.

## LAYER 1: THE FACTS

Before you can come to the onion's vulnerable heart, you have to peel off its layers. The first layer is the layer of factual evidence. Is it really true that the disparity between rich and poor is still growing in the world?

On this question the answer is convincing. If we compare the income per head in the top fifth of the world's richest countries with that in the fifth of countries that are poorest, we see that the ratio grew from 30 to 1 (already high) in 1960 to a 60-to-1 ratio today. And while in 1960 the share of the poorest fifth of countries in the world's gross income was 2.3 percent, it went down to a mere 1.4 percent in 1991. According to United Nations statistics, this share is still declining.

So the gap between our wealth and the poverty of others is deepening. Even in the United States, one out of four children today is now reported to have a real experience of hunger. This was not the case even 10 or 20 years ago.

# Our Share

My own style  
of economy  
should not  
be built on  
always  
having  
more  
for myself.

## LAYER 2: THE CAUSES

But that leads us to the second layer on our onion, which is the level of causality. Has our recent growth in wealth caused more hunger in the world? The answer to that is less easy. We should not ignore that hunger has causes that have no direct link with global income disparity. I think here of factors such as population pressure, land erosion, changing weather conditions, and social and political stability.

Even more important, a higher income or wealth in one part of our globe is by itself not a sufficient proof for the rise of poverty elsewhere. Important trickle-down effects may occur, in which poor countries reap part of the benefits of a generally

rising world income and enjoy an (albeit somewhat smaller) increase of their average incomes. The U.N. World Economic and Social Survey reported recently, for instance, that in 1993 gross domestic product per capita was on the rise in 50 of 93 poor countries. In 1996 this was true for 75 of these countries.

These data are valuable, but out of fairness we should not stop here. We should not forget that seemingly separate causes for hunger may have indirect connections with our rising incomes. There is, for instance, an undeniable link between erosion and loss of land by people in poor countries and their leaders' desire to export manufactured goods to earn dollars. Such transactions mainly serve the richer parts of the world population.

It is not by accident that in the 1980s most countries in Africa lost their original food sufficiency. And there are forms of impoverishment in the Southern Hemisphere that can be traced immediately to the enrichment of the North. The same U.N. World Survey observes, for instance, that in most of the aforementioned 93 countries, the average income per head is still below the level of 1980. So during the 1980s, most countries of the South experienced not a rise, and not even a stabilization, but a substantial fall in average incomes. This decline

## Response to Goudzwaard

### PURSuing JUSTICE FOR ALL OF US

It is hard to disagree with the argument presented by Bob Goudzwaard. If our goal, however, is greater justice through social change, other approaches may be more effective.

Goudzwaard's prophetic advocacy for the poor encourages charity and lifestyle restraint, but much of it is based on guilt. Over time, however, guilt stops working; feelings of powerlessness tend to overcome it and erode our enthusiasm. By contrast, strategies that pursue a common good rather than focus on rich vs. poor may be more sustainable.

Wealthy Canada, for example, faces some of the same dilemmas as much poorer countries. We, too, risk losing control over our own economy through the same expansion of global trade we count on to reduce our debt to the international money traders. An era of deficits and debts have taught us that governments have limited power by themselves.

More important, we are learning that our own well-being is intimately linked with that of people in poorer countries. Our challenge is to claim in 20th-century terms the promise of Scripture that things will go well for everyone if we do justice while we at the same time obey the biblical command to help the poor.

We Reformed Christians tend to emphasize material resources more than issues of power in our analysis of wealth. But levers of power are diffuse in our age, and we have access to more levers than we realize. We can look for more positive and creative actions than we often do. We need to dream a bit. Take mutual funds, for example. What would happen if we used all the mutual funds owned by members of the Christian Reformed Church to create opportunities for the poor—as well as for ourselves?

If we are motivated by the common good rather than guilt and we are creative in our use of power, then working for justice can have all the challenge and excitement of a hockey game—rather than the obligatory feeling of a collection plate.

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was in turn undoubtedly connected with growing indebtedness.

These debts became so huge during the 1980s that the notorious negative transfer between North and South could emerge: poor countries paid more in interest (often 17 percent)

Response to Goudzwaard

**TRUE COMPASSION CHALLENGES**

We live in a fallen world. Hunger and poverty are problems everywhere. They were problems in the past, they are problems today, and they will be problems until our Lord restores his kingdom on earth.

But how should we as a society address these issues today? What is a true helping hand? How do we really change a person's life circumstances—isn't it a combination of meeting both a person's physical and spiritual needs?

In the United States, government welfare and hunger programs spend billions of dollars each year, yet the problem of hunger persists. These programs may meet some of the immediate needs of individuals, but they don't teach recipients to become self-sufficient. In some instances—public housing, for example—it's obvious that money alone isn't the answer.

We can look to Michigan's Ottawa County for an example of what works. The Ottawa County Family Independence Agency recently reached its goal of having all able-bodied adults receiving benefits working in some sort of job. In Ottawa County, state and local officials credited churches and community-based organizations for helping them reach their goal. The nongovernment groups provided recipients with transportation, day care, and training, as well as working to meet their spiritual needs.

Government programs will never solve all of our problems. Instead we need committed men and women working on the local level to truly engage themselves in the lives of the needy. Rather than just employing bureaucrats to distribute checks or food, we ought to employ our own true compassion, which author Marvin Olasky defines as being personal, spiritual, and challenging.

—Pete Hoekstra

Pete Hoekstra is the congressman for Michigan's Second Congressional District. He is a member of Christ Memorial Church, Holland, Mich.

and amortization to the banks and nations of the North than they received back in the form of development aid and direct investments

So it seems that at least part of the growing impoverishment in the South is tied to our enrichment. For even today huge debts are still hanging like dark clouds above the severely indebted low-income countries of Africa, Asia, and South America.

**LAYER 3: PERSONAL LIFESTYLE**

But does all this necessarily relate to your and my lifestyles? Here we reach the third layer of the onion, which is most

painful to peel: the layer of personal accountability. And this level looks to be the most firmly secured layer of all. For though we are good and willing citizens, you and I could say we do not have the power to alter the situations I have described above—even if we radically altered our own lifestyles overnight. We would probably also say, If something goes really wrong in terms of worldwide poverty, is it not primarily the task of public authorities to intervene?

It would, after all, be highly incorrect to hold the business world in general and banks in particular accountable for the world economic situation as it now stands. For all are subject to a world of strong competition and high risks in which they are compelled to survive.

We all are familiar with this kind of rationalization of the state of world affairs. We may even have committed ourselves fully to it. It does certainly make us feel better. But the strange thing is that if all these arguments were true, no person or institution could really be held accountable. For even governments can certainly point to a lack of means and a lack of cooperation from other governments. So we arrive at a conclusion that the world is not accountable for its own hunger. How can that be true, from a biblical point of view?

The answer has to be that this can only be theoretically true. It can only be true in a closed world, a world consisting of mechanisms such as the market mechanism or the democratic mechanism—mechanisms in which people participate as separate particles.

This cannot be true, however, for our God-created world. God's world is an organic universe, consisting of numerous responsible human beings. In such a world the suffering of one part is felt and should be felt by the whole body. In a God-given global community, no one can just live or die for self. The loss of lives of young children in Africa concerns us immediately; in a biblical world-and-life view, it is comparable with the amputation of a part of our own body.

So we are all—consumers, governments, banks, firms, citizens—here as well as in the South, in one way or another responsible and accountable for the results we see today. This is nearer to the truth than it is to suggest that no one's behavior (our private behavior included) should be questioned.

**WE ARE CO-RESPONSIBLE**

And here our real weakness and vulnerability finally becomes visible. As we peel off the layers of our onion, we cannot deny the actual rise in global income disparity nor the existence of at least some links between Western enrichment and Southern impoverishment. It would be near to hypocrisy to exclude ourselves as members of the present world elite from any co-responsibility for that whole process.

For as far as we are citizens, we vote; as far as we act as consumers, we demand or deny goods from different countries. If

we work in firms, banks, or governments, we participate in one way or another in the economic decision-making processes of our world; and if we had a growing income in recent years, it is no doubt a part of the worldwide process of growing income disparities.

So now that the onion is peeled, this question remains: Where are we? It is a similar question to that asked by God in Eden: Where are you, Adam? Where are you, Eve? Perhaps not willing to stand up because it is easier to hide behind the leaves of the tree of a self-imposed innocence?

Let me be as clear as possible. As long as we in our rich countries personally and publicly support an economy that is fed by the desire for limitless acquisition and mutual rivalry in consumption, we will always need the highest possible growth of income levels and a corresponding maximum growth of productivity and competitiveness. If these factors remain true, we will see no other choice than to strengthen and stiffen the kinds of business thinking and acting that presuppose hard moneymaking.

Similarly, we will simply have to support those policies that intensively cut all public expenditures, including those for social assistance and development aid to the poorest countries. And we will see no real possibilities for fully respecting limits in the carrying capacity of nature and of our fellow human beings, even if they suffer severely under the pressures of our rat race for more progress.

Remembering the poor leper in India, I know now that he was asking me not for money primarily, but for economic fairness and for respect for his human dignity. Knowing that, I realize that my own style of economy has to change. It should not be built on always having more for myself, but on the willingness to do justice to others while practicing good stewardship of the earth.

## Response to Goudzwaard

### GLOBAL GOOD SAMARITANS

I am thankful to Bob Goudzwaard for his excellent article. Many of the people of the world live in such absolute poverty that their lives are constantly at risk. Many die because the necessities of life are not available to them.

For example, in the West African country of Mali, which *Banner* readers know from Henrietta Hunse's column, only 40 percent of the people have access to basic health services, and only 45 percent to safe water. Thirty-one percent of the children under age 5 are underweight. One out of every six or seven children dies before reaching age 1. Life expectancy at birth is only 47 years.

Jesus calls us to love these our neighbors as we love ourselves (Matt. 27:39). We are to follow the example of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) and help those in need, regardless of whether we have caused their need.

We should also acknowledge, though, that actions of wealthy nations have contributed to this poverty. We must recognize that we act much more like the priest and Levite than the Samaritan. Net government development assistance is only 10 cents out of every 100 dollars of gross national product for the United States, 38 cents for Canada. Aid by nongovernmental organizations adds 4 cents per 100 dollars for the U.S., 5 cents for Canada.

We erect barriers to exports from low-income nations, exports that could provide more jobs for their people. In times of good harvests, we dump farm surpluses abroad, depressing the prices poor farmers receive. We have supported oppressive governments in return for their political support.

We must abandon our search for happiness through ever-higher levels of production and consumption and devote our lives and resources to showing love to others in Christ's name. The Christian Reformed Church already does much through the Christian Reformed World Relief Committee and other agencies. But the needs are so great that we must do much more if we are to fulfill our calling as Christ's disciples.

—George Monsma

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This implies for me here and now that we should accept that we have enough. We are saturated with things. And if that is true for me, it is also true for the world's richest economies. We simply do live on too-big feet. For doesn't the Bible say clearly that we should be willing to be content with what we have (1 Tim. 6)? And that only in the peace of others can our peace be found? ■



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