

## What are we to DO? Examining the Moral Challenges of Solidarity for the First World

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In May 1993, hundreds of low-wage factory workers were trapped inside a burning toy factory on the outskirts of Bangkok in what has been called “the worst industrial fire in the history of capitalism.”<sup>1</sup> Survivors told of main doors that were locked and windows that had been blocked to prevent pilfering. The stuffing and animal fibers used to make the toys littered the factory. While Thai law requires that the fire-escape stairways of such a large factory be sixteen to thirty-three feet wide, this factory’s were a mere four and a half feet wide and cheap construction allowed steel girders and stairways to crumple easily in the heat. Official reports listed the dead at 188 and the injured at 469.

Previously, the Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire of 1911 in New York City had ranked as the worst industrial fire in history, but the Triangle fire became legendary, ushering in a new era of regulatory protection for American workers. Not only was the Bangkok fire barely noticed by those outside of Thailand, similar tragedies are commonplace in the Two-Thirds World. Rather than the moral indignation that followed the Triangle fire, the Bangkok fire primarily elicited moral indifference from the world’s global elite. The era of globalization has made tragedy ubiquitous. Every day the media brings us more news of death, destruction, and devastation. It becomes simply too much to process. The repetitiveness of disaster has inured us to the tragedy of each individual incident and the question of our own culpability is rarely, if ever, raised. If we are going to truly examine the meaning of solidarity in a globalized world, it is imperative for First World Christians to grapple with the realities of privilege, wealth, and power.

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<sup>1</sup> Information regarding the Kader fire is from William Greider’s report of the incident found in William Greider, *One World, Ready or Not: The Manic Logic of Global Capitalism* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1997), pp. 339-346.

While the term “globalization” represents a variety of theoretical perspectives, ideas, and moral frameworks, this essay will focus on the increasing chasm between wealth and poverty in our world that has resulted from processes of economic globalization.<sup>2</sup> It is important to recognize that striving for solidarity under conditions of injustice and material inequality requires different responses from different constituencies. This essay will examine the moral challenges that globalization pose to First World Christians who desire to live in solidarity with our sisters and brothers around the world.

### **New eyes to see – privilege, wealth, and power**

Very few people think of themselves as privileged, wealthy, or powerful. And, with the notable exceptions of British royalty, or children from dynastic families (Kennedys, Rockefellers, etc), even fewer young adults consider themselves privileged, wealthy, or powerful. The majority of people in the United States classify themselves as “middle-class,” even many of those who fall in the upper 20% income bracket (>US\$94,150).<sup>3</sup> For the 1.2 billion people in the world who live on less than one U.S. dollar a day, that fact is quite remarkable. What becomes obvious is that wealth has both absolute and relative qualities to it. People in the U.S. often think about wealth in absolute terms. Popular perceptions of what it means to be wealthy in the United States relate to those people who can afford to buy or do whatever they want, whenever they want; money is simply not a factor in their decision-making processes. The “middle-class” perceive themselves as people who do have to think about money. They have to plan for their retirement, save to buy a new car, or a new house, or to go on vacation – they have to make budgets and stick to them in order to cover their expenses. However, from the vantage point of the majority of people in the Two-Thirds World or even from the perspective of people in poverty within the First World, wealth is relative. New cars, new houses, and vacations are not even on their

radar screens. The wants and needs of people who live on the margins of society are much more basic – healthy food to eat; a clean, safe place to live; and opportunities for jobs that pay a living wage. Perspective makes all the difference in the world when we begin to examine the material reality of the world in which we live.

One of the tricky things about privilege is that it is often invisible to the people who possess it. A privilege is a right or an advantage that some people have that is not available to everyone. The benefits of privilege are often so deeply woven into our experience of reality, that we do not recognize the unequal distribution of these factors in our society. Most Anglo people in the United States expect that if they are well dressed and behave politely that they will be generally respected in public, they will be waited on in restaurants and stores, and that law enforcement exists to protect them. It is not that there is anything wrong with these expectations, in fact, all people ought to be able to expect this kind of treatment as recognition of their basic humanity. But, in societies that are plagued by prejudices of race, class, and gender, these “rights” have become “privileges” afforded to people with the “right” skin color, or education, or gender, or checkbook balance. Prejudice against people who do not conform to a society’s norms is often imperceptible to the people in the majority culture, but it shapes the lives of minority people, their families, and their communities in unique ways. Muslim women who wear head scarves often experience a lack of public respect for their choice. Many African-Americans have related their experiences of being ignored in restaurants and stores, or worse, even followed to make sure they are not stealing. And the recent scandals of racial profiling by police departments in the United States demonstrate that the expectation that law enforcement is there to protect law-abiding citizens is not universal.

Privileges shape our worldviews in invisible ways and they often function as expectations that we have for how the world works. For example, when I wake up in the morning I am able to make choices about what I want to eat for breakfast. Do I want coffee, tea, or milk? Do I want a bagel, or a scone, or a bowl of cereal? Do I want to eat at home or go out to a restaurant or café for breakfast? But, this is not the way the world “works” for everyone. In fact, the choice that I exercise in relation to such a simple thing as choosing what to eat in the morning is one of the privileges of wealth, of

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed treatment of the topic of defining and understanding globalization and its moral frameworks, see Rebecca Todd Peters, *In Search of the Good Life: The Ethics of Globalization* (New York: Continuum, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> United for a Fair Economy, “The Growing Divide: Inequality and the Roots of Economic Insecurity,” (Boston: United for a Fair Economy, 2004). Data taken from the U.S. Census Bureau. March 2001 Census, Current Population Survey, Tables F-1 and F-3. Income range in 2001 dollars.

having a reasonable income. The problem is not that I have this privilege; in a just world everyone would be able to have a decent, healthy breakfast. The problem is that so many people in this world not only do not have choices about what they want to have for breakfast – many will have *no* breakfast. In a world of radical economic disparity where the wealthy of the world can choose between a variety of luxury items while millions go without food – my privilege is wrought with moral ambiguity.

If we ever hope to approximate anything close to living in solidarity with our neighbors, we must confront the issues of privilege and inequality head on. This is enormously difficult in the North American context because our rhetoric about difference is often structured to create situations of us vs. them – Canada vs. United States; black vs. white; women vs. men; *gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender* vs. straight; poor vs. rich; blue collar vs. white collar. Pitting the marginalized against the marginalizer often has the effect of shutting down debate, of laying blame, and of evoking guilt, hostility, and anger. This sort of strategy does not move us toward the repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation, or transformation that will build solidarity. The purpose of naming inequality and injustice is not to elicit guilt on the part of those either perpetrating or benefiting from it; the point is for the injustice to cease, for repentance and forgiveness to take place where appropriate, and for reconciliation and transformation to ensue. In order for this to happen, it is necessary for us to demystify the differences that alienate us from one another. We must be able to see our social reality with new eyes, with the eyes of other people who do not inhabit our social location and who see our reality from a very different vantage point. Our privilege will only become visible to us when we recognize it as an advantage that other people do not have. Only after we have opened our eyes to seeing the social relations in our world from new and different perspectives can we begin to inquire into our own moral accountability in a system of economic globalization that benefits the few at the expense of the many.

With this task in mind, it is necessary to recast the debate in ways that invite engagement and participation in the dialogue. This does not mean that the conversation will be easy or that guilt, hostility, and anger will disappear completely, nor should they, as these emotions are often not only appropriate responses to a given situation, but responses that we can use to

mobilize us toward transformation.<sup>4</sup> What it does mean is that North Americans (and other First World Christians) are invited to participate in critical ethical reflection on the state of inequality and injustice in our world with an eye toward identifying strategies that will allow us to be in solidarity with our neighbors. This critical reflection requires two important steps – awareness of the problems of injustice inherent in economic globalization and theological reflection on the concept of solidarity.

### **Recognizing neoliberal globalization as unjust**

Neoliberal economic theories began to be promoted in the 1980's under the Reagan and Thatcher administrations in the United States and Britain, respectively. This approach was also known as “supply-side” economics, “trickle-down” economics, and the Washington Consensus. The policy hallmarks are privatization, deregulation, and free trade.<sup>5</sup> This model gained even more prominence in the 1990's with the opening up of the former Soviet trading bloc and the increasing embrace of markets, trade, and capitalism by China.

Growth and trade are the watchwords of this dominant model of globalization. Growth is the primary indicator of economic well-being and growth can best be achieved through developing commodities for external trade. This model is one of the leading factors in the international debt crisis as countries have been forced to adopt neoliberal economic policies (also described as structural adjustment) as requirements for continued financial support from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank. This endorsement of the IMF and World Bank is often necessary to leverage direct foreign investment from the private sector. Economic productivity as measured through trade has been touted as the panacea to poverty and a host of other social problems that exist in many developing countries. Unfortunately, the consequences of neoliberal economic policies have wrought havoc on the people and social systems of the Two-Thirds World. Let us look briefly at the problems of poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation as some of the most severe examples of injustice that mark this unsustainable form of economics.

<sup>4</sup> For an essay that explores the important ethical role of anger see Beverly Harrison, “The Power of Anger in the Work of Love,” *Making the Connections* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983).

<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed description of neoliberalism and these three policies, see Rebecca Todd Peters, *In Search of the Good Life: The Ethics of Globalization* (New York: Continuum, 2004), especially, ch. 3.

Since Robert McNamara's tenure as the President of the World Bank starting in 1968, the eradication of poverty has been the primary goal of the work of the World Bank. McNamara's first five-year plan projected lending 11.6 billion, more money than had been lent in the first twenty years of the Bank's existence.<sup>6</sup> McNamara believed that more money, dispersed more broadly would ease the burden of poverty more quickly. Unfortunately, McNamara's strategies failed to actually reach the people in poverty to whom he had felt so obligated to help. In fact, as it turned out, the lending strategies of the WB during the McNamara years did two things that did damage to the poor. First, by lending mainly to the landowners and business people of Two-Third's World countries, the lending strategies increased the gap between the rich and the poor; and second, by pumping so many billion dollars into already debt-burdened countries, the McNamara years set the stage for the structural adjustment programs of the 1980's that were to have devastating effects on the poor and marginalized. These structural adjustment programs required countries to adopt neoliberal economic policies that promoted growth and trade, often at the expense of necessary social programs that were addressing basic human needs. Neoliberal economic policies, represented by structural adjustment programs, contributed to the increasing poverty of heavily indebted countries that has only worsened in recent years. A 1999 report from the United Nations Human Development Programme documented that "more than 80 countries still have per capita incomes lower than they were a decade or more ago."<sup>7</sup>

In addition to the fact that poverty remains a serious problem in virtually every country in the world today, the neoliberal economic model of globalization generated a "free trade" movement in the 1990's that has benefited corporations and many of the world's wealthy elite. While capitalism has always promoted the values of wealth creation and profit, these desires have taken an interesting turn in the last fifteen years. As businesspeople and corporations have continued to search for ways to raise their bottom line, new forms of cost-saving measures have come in the form of "down-sizing" in the

1980's and "out-sourcing" in the 1990's. What this means is that many corporations eliminated middle-management positions in the 1980's in an attempt to streamline their operations and cut costs. The neoliberal deregulation efforts of the business community in the 1990's, combined with technological advancements that made travel and communication easier, led to an increasing move toward moving low-skill jobs to countries where labor costs were cheaper and environmental regulations more lax. The mode of increasing "efficiency," or raising profits, known as "out-sourcing," has taken a new turn in the 2000's as higher skilled telecommunications and data-processing work is being out-sourced to English-speaking countries (most notably India).

These shifts in production and corporate strategy have greatly benefited corporations and their shareholders with a phenomenal decade on Wall Street in the 1990's. To a certain extent consumers have also benefited from lower prices and wider consumer choice and availability. But, what is often not recognized in the First World is the extent to which economic inequality has increased at an astounding rate over the last two decades.<sup>8</sup> The 1999 United Nations *Human Development Report* documents that "inequality has been rising in many countries since the early 1980s."<sup>9</sup> While the logic that undergirds neoliberal economics is that a rising tide lifts all boats and that eventually as corporations increase wealth there will be more jobs and everyone will benefit, the data simply does not demonstrate that that has been the case. In an obscene example of the extremes of inequality in our world, "the assets of the top three billionaires are more than the combined GNP of all least developed countries and *their 600 million people* [emphasis added]."<sup>10</sup> As bad as this is, as First World citizens, we cannot abdicate our culpability in the engines of globalization that continue to perpetuate poverty and inequality in our world. The UNDP has also shown that the wealth creation of the last fifteen years has disproportionately benefited those of us living in the First World.

By the late 1990s the fifth of the world's people living in the highest-income countries had:

<sup>6</sup> Catherine Caufield, *Masters of Illusion: The World Bank and the Poverty of Nations* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996), p. 98.

<sup>7</sup> United Nations Development Programme, "Globalization with a Human Face," *Human Development Report 1999* (New York: Oxford University Press for the United Nations Development Programme), 1999, p. 2

<sup>8</sup> For an excellent assessment of the problems of inequality in our world, see Douglas A. Hicks, *Inequality and Christian Ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

<sup>9</sup> UN *HDR*, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

- \*86% of world GDP – the bottom fifth just 1%
- \*82% of world export markets – the bottom fifth just 1%
- \*68% of foreign direct investment – the bottom fifth just 1%<sup>11</sup>

It is incumbent upon all First World people to recognize the ways in which our lifestyles and consumer habits and choices impact the lives of our neighbors and the health of the planet.

Finally, the rapidly degrading quality of our environment stands as a witness to the fact that we not only refuse to care for our human neighbors, but that humanity has shown a blatant disregard for God's creation in recent decades that threatens to destroy life as we know it. Many of the deregulation efforts in the last twenty years have been aimed at laws meant to protect the world's waters, forests, animals, and even indigenous human communities. Representatives of business argue that these environmental concerns are "externalities" that interfere with their ability to turn a profit. In a sense they are right. Within the current economic paradigm, any business that chooses to "internalize" the costs to the environment by producing their product with less waste or by cleaning up environmental damage that they might cause risks losing market share and the competitive edge that the current neoliberal system requires.

In addition to the deregulation efforts, as many corporations have moved toward outsourcing their production facilities, they have looked for locations with the most lax environmental regulations. In some instances they have even exerted pressure on local or national governments (in the U.S. and abroad) to relax, change, or exempt them from current environmental protection requirements with their offer of new jobs and economic stimulation. While we do not have time to examine the threat to democracy that corporations pose in the new neoliberal sphere of political-economy, it at least bears noting.

All of these shifts have had profound implications for workers around the world. In the Two-Third's World many workers, disproportionately young women, are exploited by poor working conditions, low wages, and tedious work that often results in long term health damage. Workers in the United States and other First World countries are losing what used to

be good paying, secure working class jobs which are often replaced by jobs in the service industry that do not offer salaries or benefits. And in all locations, in every part of the world, the environment is suffering as deregulation continues to compromise the health of the planet and all of God's creation.

### **Theological reflection on solidarity**

When we speak of solidarity in a globalized world within the context of the World Student Christian Federation, we are talking about a model of being in the world that challenges the prevailing social order. The divisions of our world are evident in the nomenclature of "First World" and "Third World" that dominate political and economic discourse. These terms reflect a structured system of inequality and hierarchy that shapes the material reality of human experience. We have already detailed the ways in which the current model of economic globalization creates situations of injustice around the world. If we understand a movement toward solidarity as a witness to God's grace working in the world, then we are challenged to move toward a new vision of society that is rooted in mutuality, justice, and transformation of the present social order.

Solidarity is an expression of a new way of thinking about and modeling human relationships. In the neoliberal vision of humanity, we all exist as individual autonomous beings that act solely on behalf of our own self-interest. This vision of human nature is a fundamental cornerstone of neo-classical economic theory known as *homo economicus*, a theoretical economic actor around whose expected actions economic theory is built. While it may be true that a large number of people in the world do, in fact, behave in this manner, it is not self-evident that this is an ontological aspect of our human nature, or that it is even the dominant characterization of how most humans behave. In fact, if we examine who exactly it is that behaves this way, we find that it is predominantly people influenced by Western philosophical notions of the self that were advanced during the Enlightenment. Kant's influence on Western conceptions of human nature have become deeply embedded in the neo-classical economic theory that undergirds capitalism. Serious critiques of the adequacy of this notion of human behavior have revealed a distinct male bias

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

in this description of how individuals make decisions.<sup>12</sup> Women often make decisions from within a relational matrix of competing obligations that involve the material care of others (cooking, cleaning, caring for children or elderly relatives, etc.). Non-western communities also often exhibit a different understanding of decision-making than the autonomous individual represented by *homo economicus* with a stronger emphasis being placed on how decisions will impact the community.

In addition to the empirical challenges to the adequacy of this model of understanding human behavior, there are several aspects of the Christian tradition that challenge the moral adequacy of a theological anthropology that privileges autonomy over relationality. One of the fundamental aspects of a Christian understanding of what it means to be human is that God created us as social beings, as beings in relationship. In the book of Genesis, we have two separate creation stories which each contribute to our theological understanding of human nature as fundamentally relational. In the first creation story, found in the first chapter of Genesis, we see that God made all the creation, the heavens and the earth, waters and the land, night and day, birds, fish, and animals, and finally, on the sixth day, God made humankind. Of all the aspects of the creation, it is only humans that God declared would be made in God's image. In the first chapter of Genesis, as God creates humankind, *in God's own image*, they are created in relationship – male and female. From this creation narrative, Christians can see that one of our most sacred stories of origin understands that part of what it means to reflect the image of God is to exist in relationship with one another and with God.

The second creation story is found but a few verses later in the second chapter of Genesis. As biblical scholar Phyllis Trible has argued, in this second story God makes a single earth creature, who is sexually undifferentiated, and places the creature in the garden of Eden.<sup>13</sup> Then,

God said, "It is not good that the earth creature should be alone," and God made many living creatures to fill the garden, but none were suitable partners for the earth creature. And so, God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the earth creature and from one being, God created two. It was at this point that the two beings were designated as male and female. In this story we can see that after making the first earth creature, God recognizes that it should not be alone and God works very hard to find a suitable partner.

The important theological insight of this story is that *human beings were not intended to be alone*. Once again, relationality is a foundational assumption of Christian theological anthropology – there is something ontologically important to our personhood about living in community and caring for one another. These themes are represented throughout the biblical witness that testifies to our call to seek justice, to exhibit compassion for our neighbor, and to live in solidarity with one another. If our task as Christians is to seek the will of God and do it, a foundational aspect of the will of God is to care for one another, to seek to establish solidarity with our neighbors, particularly in instances when we are radically estranged from them.

### Unmasking neoliberal economic globalization

With the ever-increasing gap between the rich and the poor and the spiraling debt crisis in most Two-Third's World countries, it is increasingly apparent that the current economic model is not working. Before we can move forward in developing new economic models, we must first unmask two faulty assumptions that support the current neoliberal economic model.

First is the assumption that economics is a hard science. As economics has developed, it has relied more and more heavily on the development of sophisticated mathematical models intended to predict market expectations and behavior. As the discipline has relied more heavily on mathematics, it has been treated as a more "scientific" endeavor. Elevating economics to the level of a hard science has generated an enormous amount of authority for the projections of economists and has allowed economic theories to heavily influence the development of public policy, international development, and economic globalization. The problem with treating economics in this way is that economics is fundamentally a theoretical discipline. While many

<sup>12</sup> For an excellent analysis of the gender bias of economic "rationality" and the inadequacy of neoclassical economics, see Carol Robb, "Rational Man and Feminist Economists on Welfare Reform," *Welfare Policy: Feminist Critiques* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press), 1999.

<sup>13</sup> Phyllis Trible's essay, "A Love Story Gone Awry," argues that the original Hebrew poetry has been misunderstood and mistranslated within patriarchal religious traditions. Trible argues that *adam*, is a Hebrew word that means "earth creature" and that it is not until the second creature is created woman, *ishshab*, that the first creature becomes man, *ish*. See Trible, "A Love Story Gone Awry," in *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978).

economists are well aware of the theoretical limitations of their discipline, politicians, businesspeople, and the corporate world often treat economic theory as fact.

We must remember that economic theories are just that, they are theories about how people interact in a market system. Neo-classical economic theory is based on fundamental assumptions about human nature and human behavior that have been widely critiqued as unrealistic and inadequate. Nevertheless, the model of *homo economicus* or “economic man” as the atomistic individual who functions in the marketplace as a self-interested wealth maximizer remains the theoretical starting point for neo-classical (and neoliberal) economic theory. This understanding of human nature and human behavior is subject to a strong critique based on a theological anthropology rooted in Christian principles of justice and care for the neighbor. From the Christian ethical perspective developed in this essay, we understand that humankind was created as relational beings who are called to live in community and to care for one another. If we believe that these are fundamental aspects of what it means to be human, shouldn't we create theoretical economic models that allow for supporting communities, caring for workers, and protecting the environment? Contemporary economic theorists have also moved a considerable distance away from their roots when economic theory was understood as a way to try to help explain and understand the world, rather than as a positivistic model for shaping economic relations.

Adam Smith, often hailed as the father of economics, was a moral philosopher. His articulation of economic theory was conceived as part of a larger social world. Smith knew that economics was merely an element of human society. His economic theory was consciously located within a moral framework. One of the fatal flaws of the development of economic theory has been the separation of economics from morality. At this point in our history it seems "rational" to conclude that a scientific approach to the fundamentally social phenomenon of the economy has not only been misplaced, but it has had devastating consequences on the majority of the world's population.

As we work toward demystifying the power and authority of neo-classical and neoliberal economic models in developing contemporary economic and social policy in our world, we must demand that new economic models are

rooted in a moral framework that takes the social well-being of people and caring for the planet into consideration as fundamental assumptions for ordering our economic life. Because economics and markets are fundamentally human endeavors that function to help people organize our economic life and transactions, it is folly to argue that markets, businesses, and economics are solely responsible for turning a profit and are solely accountable to shareholders. The maximization of profit should never be pursued to the detriment of the communities, workers, or God's creation. Unfortunately, given the current structure of economic globalization this folly has been reified into an acceptance of economic theory as “common knowledge” and even more common business practice.

The second assumption that needs to be unmasked is the idea that one model of development is sufficient for a wide variety of cultures, climates, peoples, and nations. Wall Street, the World Bank and IMF, and multinational corporations have decided that there is a “formula” for successful development. This formula does not care whether children are fed and immunized, whether pregnant women get prenatal care, whether open sewage runs through the streets of major cities. No, the formula for successful development according to the economic heavyweights requires that countries focus their development on creating goods for export. Even when there are food shortages in their own country, farmers are encouraged to grow crops for export because they can get higher prices abroad.

It is easy for people in the First World to distance ourselves from the economic institutions of globalization like the IMF, World Bank, and the World Trade Organization (WTO). Most people in the United States do not know what these institutions do or how they function, but ignorance does not reduce our moral culpability for the actions of our government working through these institutions. The very presence of the World Bank and IMF in Washington, D.C. speaks volumes about the influence and control that the United States has in shaping their policy directives.<sup>14</sup> Economic globalization is driven by economic theories and activities that are promoted by U.S.

<sup>14</sup> For more detailed information about the history and actions of the World Bank and IMF see Catherine Caufield, *Masters of Illusion: The World Bank and Poverty of Nations* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996) and Bruce Rich, *Mortgaging the Earth: The World Bank, Environmental Impoverishment, and the Crisis of Development* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994).

economists, business people, and public officials. This system requires our complicity in the process in order to maintain course. What is Wall Street but the investments and retirement funds of American people? And we cannot simply demonize multinational corporations like Disney, Kraft, General Motors, and Microsoft since they could not exist without the consumer behavior of millions of Americans (and other consumers).

Solidarity with our neighbors calls us to do justice and one of the tasks of justice is to right wrongs. As Christians, when our eyes are opened to see sin for what it is, we are called upon by God, our faith tradition, and our community to insist that the injustice cease, that the sin stop, and that that which is wrong be made right. As educated, intelligent and resourceful women and men of the First World, it is our moral responsibility to address those systemic distortions that allow fires in toy factories to kill hundreds of people. Let us be clear. We are not just talking about the corporations or individuals who are “bad” or “immoral” or the worst-offenders. What I am suggesting is that an economic ideology or way of thinking that exclusively values profits is an ideology that is morally bankrupt. As First World people who benefit from this economic model, it is imperative that we open our eyes to the ways in which our consumer dollars, our mutual funds, and our tax dollars contribute to a system of economic globalization that unjustly exploits people and economies in the Two-Thirds World. The current model of globalization, a neoliberal model of capitalism that promotes export-oriented economic development, free trade and deregulation, is a model of globalization that creates wealth at the expense of the entire earth community. This means that all that God holds sacred - human life, plant life, animal life, the earth, the atmosphere - all of God's good creation - is being destroyed by the current model of economic globalization.

### **What are the moral challenges of solidarity?**

Trying to figure out what solidarity with the Two-Third's World looks like is a difficult topic for people who live in the First World. We undoubtedly benefit from the current model of economic globalization that dominates our world. Most middle-class Christians own some kind of stocks, mutual funds, bonds, or IRA's. While our stock portfolios may have taken a hit in the recent recession, most of us (or our parents) profited

from the booming bull market of the 1990's. Many of us often check the stock reports or our quarterly statements with excited anticipation as we watch our retirement (or college) accounts grow. But, as morally responsible Christians, we must each ask ourselves whose backs are bearing the burden of our growing mutual funds? Whose eyes or fingers are being destroyed in the manufacture of the clothing in our closets and electronic equipment in our homes? And what will the world be like for our children and our children's children?

Like the Hebrew people, we do not always pay attention to God, particularly when God challenges the comfortableness of our lives. We sit in the air-conditioning of our homes, well-fed, mostly satisfied or at least entertained by our possessions and it is easy to believe that God rejoices with us in our success. After all, doesn't God want what is best for us? It seems to me that the answer is both yes and no. Of course God rejoices in our success and wants us to be healthy and well-fed and happy, but this cannot come at the expense of the livelihood of the rest of the earth community. It cannot come at the expense of the burning of Thai workers or the blinding of Mexican maquiladora workers or the labor of Indian children. The moral challenges of solidarity in a globalized world require two levels of response from First World people: systemic and personal - neither of which is sufficient alone.

The first moral challenge to First World Christians is that our lives must change. In a world where the gap between the rich and the poor continues to grow dramatically, the challenge of redistribution is very personal. When one fifth of the people living in the highest income countries own 86% of the goods and the bottom fifth just 1% - the moral challenge of solidarity is radical.<sup>15</sup> Most of the people living in the First World are part of that top fifth percent. If solidarity is really to occur, our lives will have to change. It is time to cycle back from the rampant consumerism that has overtaken us to a model of life that is simpler, slower, and more earth centered. We must own our moral responsibility as consumers in a global world. We must be aware of where our food is coming from, under what conditions our clothes

<sup>15</sup> United Nations Development Programme, "Globalization with a Human Face," *Human Development Report 1999* (New York: Oxford University Press for the United Nations Development Programme), 1999, p. 3.



are made, and how the corporations in which we have investments treat their employees. Cooking, gardening, cloth diapers, composting, supporting local farmers, walking to work, using bicycles for transportation, buying less of everything! Solidarity challenges us on a personal level to change our lives. If life is to be sustainable for the entire earth community, we all have to reorient our lives.

The second moral challenge of solidarity is that our systems must change. It is clear that the current neoliberal form of economic globalization is impoverishing the majority of the world's population. One of the most active reform campaigns in recent years has been the Jubilee 2000 movement, which organized to force the IMF and World Bank to forgive the structural adjustment loans that have been crippling the economies and social programs in dozens of countries over the past 20 years. While it is morally imperative that we forgive the debt, what good is forgiving the debt if the IMF and the World Bank continue the dependency cycle by pumping money into developing countries? Debt forgiveness is important, it must happen - but it is not a solution to the problems that globalization has wrought. Debt forgiveness is a step in a very long process of changing how the dominant economic system functions. Growth and profits cannot continue to be the driving values behind globalization. Solidarity calls us to a more just and compassionate system of organization and accountability. And other systems must change as well – public transportation, education, health care, manufacturing, criminal justice, and the prison system are just a few places to begin. For our personal lifestyle changes will be like drops in a bucket if the social structure of our society does not change as well.

### **So where does this leave us?**

There is no easy answer to this problem. A viable alternative economic model does not yet exist. The challenge of solidarity to economic globalization is to create a new economic model that incorporates values into its rationality. A new economic model that is rooted in a moral framework of compassion and the elimination of poverty. An economic model that does not focus on growth and trade as its primary indicators of success, but a model that focuses on reduction of infant mortality, starvation relief,

health care delivery, countries that can feed their people, and the control of HIV/AIDS for all people, rich and poor. Our moral task is to ensure that globalization proceeds in ways that honor creation and life. This is no easy task.

As people of faith we must learn to negotiate the delicate territory between pragmatism and prophetic vision. Often when my students discover the reality of environmental degradation that is occurring in our world, or when they are confronted with institutional racism, or the growing divide between wealth and poverty in our world, they are reduced to despair. They comment that, “the problem is too big!” and they wonder, “what difference can *I* make?” In response to arguments calling for a paradigm shift or institutional transformation, many respond, “but that will never happen – its too hard!” On one level they are right. From a pragmatic perspective it is true that a shift from neoliberal capitalism to a more just economic model of society appears to be a utopian vision, an impossibility given the political-economic structures of our present day world. But, we must always strive to be open to the prophetic vision of a just society, even though a just society is practically unlikely in *this* world, we can still strive toward that vision. In fact, that is what God calls us to do. In John 17, Jesus talked about how his disciples should be *in* the world, but not *of* the world. He asks us to walk that same delicate balance between reality and possibility.

In Mark 5, Jairus comes to Jesus and begs him to follow him and heal his daughter who is very ill and near death. As Jesus makes his way to Jairus' home, some people come to tell Jairus that his daughter has died. Jesus overhears them and says to Jairus, “Do not fear, only believe.” When Jesus reaches the young girl's home he takes her hand and says to her, “Talitha cum” or “Little girl, get up!” And she does. In these words lie great wisdom for our time. All around us, people misperceive reality just as the people in Jairus' home believed that the young girl was dead. Today people tell us that capitalism is the only way to structure our markets, that if the poor would only work harder they wouldn't be poor, that the movement of productive work from the First World to the Two-Thirds World is inevitable – but I say to you, that there are too many people in our world who misperceive reality. They allow *what is* to blind them to the possibility of what *might be*, indeed from a Christian ethical

perspective, what *ought to be*.

The task before us to transform the unsustainable consumer habits that enslave First World communities is difficult. The task before us to restructure corporate accountability seems insurmountable. The task before us to develop new, sustainable, justice-oriented economic theories seems impossible. The opposition that change agents encounter is often overwhelming, potentially threatening, and fearful – for it is human nature to fear change. As we contemplate what that change might look like, we begin to wonder - What would my life be *like* without a television? Without meat? Without a two-story brick home in the suburbs? Without an \$80,000 a year job? Without the latest CD or DVD? Without the latest fashions in my closet? Without McDonalds or Coca Cola or Wal-Mart? Indeed, perhaps the better questions to ask are what would my life be like if I worked toward decreasing my environmental impact on the world? What would my life be like if I lived sustainably? What would my life be like if I honored the Sabbath day? What would my life be like if I lived it in solidarity with the Two-Thirds World? What would my life be like if I took a job that contributed toward solving the problems of economic and environmental globalization rather than a job that contributed to them? What would my life be like if I insisted that I did not have to make a choice between my career and my family? What would the United States look like if this generation demanded all of these things? What would the world look like? God continues to call to us today through the power of Jesus' words, "Do not fear, only believe." In walking that thin line between pragmatism and prophecy, we must *believe* that a new future is possible, that we can work toward a world rooted in solidarity with our neighbor. A deep and abiding sense of solidarity that requires transformation on our part and we need not fear the naysayers who tell us it is impossible. If we believe in the possibility of a new future, then can work together to figure out how to get there, with the grace of God in our midst, anything is possible – *talitha cum!*

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