

**Christianity and Poverty**  
**The Revd Dr James Walters**  
**Chaplain, London School of Economics**  
**15 May 2011**

The story is told of the American Preacher and social activist Jim Wallis that when he was at Seminary in Illinois, he took a Bible and a small pair of scissors and cut out all the verses that made reference to poverty or social justice. By the end he had removed some two thousand verses and he would use it later in his ministry when preaching on how the Church has written poverty out of the Christian message. He would hold the ragged book in the air and proclaim, “Brothers and sisters, this is our American Bible; it is full of holes.”

The passages we heard from Isaiah and the Epistle of James would have been first to hit the cutting room floor. We hear Isaiah criticising the pious practices of those who show no concern for the poor, and we hear James denouncing favouritism toward the rich and powerful because, through Jesus Christ, God has chosen the poor as heirs of the kingdom. Both writers, separated by several centuries, reflect the enduring idea that right relationship with the God of Israel needs to be lived out in the right ordering of relationships, including socio-economic ones. If you love God, the poor are your problem. And if you are a follower of Jesus who himself embraced poverty, then all the more so.

But Wallis is right to say that this is not at the forefront of people’s understanding of the Gospel today. If you go along to one of the popular courses designed to introduce you to the Christian faith, possibly at a church in one of London’s more fashionable postcodes, then you will learn, not about the ordering of relationships, but about what Christians might be required to believe. You will learn the story of how Jesus redeems us, usually explained in personal and spiritual terms. There’s something quite gnostic, or excessively otherworldly, in a lot of today’s accounts of Christian life: “know these metaphysical truths, believe this set of ideas, and you are a Christian, you will be redeemed.” Concern for the poor, for justice, is somehow seen as secondary to that. In the more extreme cases, it is even seen as a distraction from this otherworldly narrative. Hence, the Fox News commentator Glenn Beck’s urging his viewers last year to leave their church if they find the words “social justice” on its website.

But in fairness to Beck, there is a problem about some Christian approaches to poverty and it’s not just a problem confined to the States. The reduction of Christianity to an “otherworldly myth” from a much bigger social vision of redemption has been taking place for a long time. It’s been part of the increased privatising of faith and its relegation from the public sphere. But as this has happened, the majority of Christian people have not rejected poverty as unimportant; they’ve just not seen it as part of the core gospel story and so they’ve been less inclined to think about it in theological terms. Simultaneously the nation state has evolved through the 20<sup>th</sup> century into an more explicitly moral entity which itself takes responsibility for the poor. Even in these constrained economic times

the Coalition Government have ring-fenced foreign aid. There is now a more overt secular discourse about helping the poor.

So the processes of poverty reduction (international development as we call it) have been secularised, although enthusiastically taken up by Christian people. Christians join alongside others in campaigns such as Make Poverty History. Christian development agencies work happily with the Department for International Development, assuming that aims and intentions are shared. And this is commendable because meeting basic need in a world where 22,000 children die from hunger every day is a cause which should unite all of humanity.

But we need to remember that there are different ways of seeking to end poverty, and once basic material need is met, there are different models of how a good society might develop, some of which we may describe as more faithful to the Christian understanding of life than others. In short, I worry that Christians have put too much faith in a model of international development aimed at increasing GDP through participation in the global market.

Some Christian theologians have done that explicitly, like Michael Novak in his book, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*. But most Christians have just implicitly accepted the idea that competing in the global economic system that the West has devised must be the best means of making poor people richer. And where I find myself unexpectedly sharing Glen Beck's concern, is in the way that many churches who have recognised the inadequacy of the otherworldly gospel story have uncritically embraced this secular development cause and ditched any understanding of human flourishing rooted more deeply in the Gospel. Their Christianity is simply too worldly, reduced to feeding the hungry and healing the sick. As a member of the Council of the Mission Agency USPG I can tell you that it is very much easier to get money from Church of England parishes to build a hospital in Africa than it is to build a theological college.

So we need to ask: is this an entirely adequate way of looking at the development question from a Christian perspective? Is this the shaping of a recognisably Christian society? There's already a lot of confusion here. In parishes you hear a lot of sympathetic talk for the plight of the poor. Yet there is also an unsentimental recognition that many poorer countries retain values of faith, family and community which we, to a large degree, have lost. We might look at images of an African famine on TV and see that things urgently need to change. But can we really say that what we have become is the ideal? Yes, humans have material needs, but we have become so obsessed with consumption that we measure ourselves by how much we can acquire. Yes, humans have health needs, but our scientists and drugs companies have pushed back the boundaries of life as if death were the ultimate failure, not the consummation of our lives in God. Yes, humans have a right aspiration to better themselves, but we have become a society where we favour competition over cooperation and even family commitments have come to be taken lightly.

And what is most pernicious in our Christian collusion with this model of development is that it has blinded us to the fact that maybe it is our very consumption that traps others in poverty rather than liberates them from it. You may have heard the journalist Johann Hari illustrate that point on Radio Four this week in showing how the need for coltan to make our mobile phones and laptops has fed the Congolese civil war for the best part of a decade. We are certainly finding that it is our model of economic growth that is causing ecological crisis on this planet, a crisis that is already affecting the poorest the hardest.

So we need some radical thinking, first about economic development. Martha Nussbaum's recent book *Creating Capabilities* offers just such thinking about how, following Amartya Sen, we might measure development, not just in terms of GDP, but through measuring the power a nation's poorest people have to create meaningful lives for themselves. Crucially she looks not just at how wealth grows but how wealth is distributed, an issue of central concern to the Prophet Isaiah and the author of the Epistle of James.

But second we need some radical thinking in the Church about what poverty is and how it ought to be addressed. I suggest three ways we might begin that.

First we need to reconceive what we consider Christian life to be all about. It was Karl Marx who saw how this reduction of the gospel to an otherworldly escapism made it the enemy of social change and justice for the oppressed. Too often the contemporary church continues that understanding, confining faith to matters of heart and head and not seeing Christian life as a practice, a life lived in the world for the sake of others. Jesus didn't ask his disciples to believe a set of propositions but to follow him. And as Jim Wallis' 2000 missing verses show, that means for all Christians a practically-expressed solidarity with the poor.

Second, and in tandem with that, we need to reconceive the story of redemption. The Cross of Christ is God's initiative to put us in restored relationship with God. But that state of grace is one that enables God's Spirit to work in and through us to bring a continual redemptive life to the world. So our narratives of how God redeems us and of how societies might develop need to be drawn together to bring us to a holistic understanding of the good life in Christian terms. A life that is comfortable but sacrificial, a life that is empowered but is devoted to service, a life lived in generous community with others.

And finally, to underpin that, we need to reconceive our understanding of poverty itself. Material poverty is the scourge of this planet, a scourge we must commit to ending. But the secular narrative that says "we are the developed world and they are the developing world" blinds us to the kinds of poverty that are the greatest handicap to knowing God: spiritual poverty, poverty of character and values, poverty of meaning and purpose. Here many so-called "developing countries" have much to teach us. God has chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom. So as we work to address material poverty, perhaps we who are rich must also embrace the poverty within ourselves, that we may all be redeemed.