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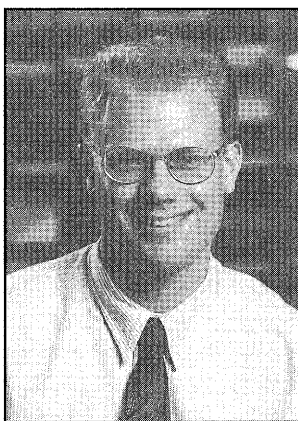
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A Reformed Christian Perspective on Global Justice and Political Economy



by Fred Van Geest

Introduction

Reformed Christians, especially in North America, have generated a unique perspective on politics and society in the concept of "public justice," which seeks to develop greater understanding of a pluralistic domestic political order in increasingly diverse societies.¹ This approach to politics and society aims to serve all people and communities by outlining the conditions that enable them to live harmoniously together and fulfill their

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"calling" in life, free from persecution and oppression. James Skillen says:

the biblical view of justice for every earthly creature will mean instead that Christians will work politically for the achievement of governmental policies that will protect, encourage, and open up life for every person and community of people, whatever their religious confession; it is a community of public legal care for all people which must not favor or persecute any particular group or society.²

This concept of "public justice" can also be used to evaluate foreign policy and its relationship to global economic justice issues,³ although this application has received less attention. As Rarend A. de Vries points out, the Jewish, Catholic, and mainstream Protestant religious traditions have been much more active and explicit in publicly addressing matters of socioeconomic injustice, including global economic injustice.⁴

This paper intends to explore ways that the Reformed, Christian perspective on politics and society can be applied to modern global economic injustice. In response to the growing consensus in favor of neoliberal foundations for a new world economic order, I shall argue that Reformed and other Christians need to give greater attention to global justice issues by paying more critical attention to public policies and seeking to advance justice for all, regardless of nation or territory.

Highlights of the Reformed Christian Perspective on Politics and Society

Reformed, Christian approaches to politics and society have been sufficiently developed elsewhere,⁵

so I will only highlight those features that speak to justice and global issues.

At the core of the Reformed, Christian view of justice is a particular understanding of history as revealed in Scripture. This familiar view of history is summarized in the phases of divine creation, the Fall due to sin, and God's redemption of his perfect creation, culminating in the establishment and consummation of his Kingdom in Christ. Significantly, this Kingdom is global, and while it does not derive its authority from here on earth (i.e. Christ was not an earthly king), it exists on earth today.

In this perspective, a fully just domestic and global socioeconomic order will not be achieved until the consummation. However, this delay does not mean that as earthly citizens we are to sit back and wait until that final day of full redemption. On the contrary, the redemptive process began with the promise of Christ's birth, death, and resurrection. As earthly citizens who also belong to the body of Christ, Christians have a duty and responsibility to participate in this history of redemption by advancing Christ's Kingdom, though with a humility that recognizes that the Kingdom is accomplished only through the power of Christ.⁶ The crucial significance of this duty is that Christians ought to be actively pursuing justice in the world today. We should not be complacent about global inequalities or tolerate them as a phase of history over which we have no influence. Christ's Kingdom does demand justice, in the here-and-now.

A key principle that flows from this calling to seek justice in today's world is to seek justice *for all*. In particular, Scripture requires us to love our neighbors and pursue justice for them *regardless of where they live* in today's world. The biblical view of justice includes special consideration for the poor, the weak, and the disadvantaged. Reformed scholars writing about justice have emphasized the attention Christ gave in his ministry to the weaker elements of society and His clear teaching that there ought to be no poverty and destitution in His Kingdom. Nicholas Wolterstorff explains:

If we consider Jesus to be God incarnate, and these teachings from the book of Luke to be God-authorized, as I certainly do, then we cannot but conclude that God has taken sides with the poor.... It is against his will that there be a society in which some are poor; in his perfected Kingdom there will be none at all.⁷

It is also clear that this kingdom has no connection to existing national boundaries. Christ said, "my kingdom is not of this world." God's justice is not limited or organized by national boundaries.⁸ He does not distinguish between Jew, Gentile, Scythian, slave or free, rich or poor, and He abhors the injustice of poverty and destitution everywhere. So Christians—citizens of a heavenly kingdom—should not feel constrained in any way by national borders. Parochialism and uncritical nationalism ought to be avoided, for justice in the kingdom of God is global by definition. Christians have an obligation to seek justice in distant countries as much as they do at home, and perhaps more so in other countries if that is where there is greater injustice.⁹ It is not correct to say we should care for the poor and weak in our own country first.

An overarching principle of the Reformed perspective is the calling that Christians have to transform every aspect of today's world.¹⁰ All of creation is to be redeemed, and Christians ought to be actively involved in the redemption of every feature of it.¹¹ This work ranges from business to child care to social relationships and to economic relationships. Perhaps it is especially important to transform economic relationships, as they are becoming ever more significant in determining the nature of other realms of life. With today's steady increase in international trade and further industrial development, international economic relationships have more profound consequences than ever before.

Within the Reformed perspective, then, to minister to the poor and disadvantaged involves more than "preaching the gospel" and "saving souls." Ministering to the weak and disadvantaged also means pursuing justice in economic relationships. Consequently, our concern for the exploited and impoverished people of the world implies a requirement to do more than evangelize in the narrow sense—it requires that we seek justice in all areas of life. Moreover, our understanding of the nature of justice in economic relationships is derived from the serious study of biblical principles.¹² This is not to say that the economic system that God required for Israel applies identically today, nor that the Bible gives us direction on specific matters like monetary policy. However, it does mean that there are God-ordained principles for just socioeconomic life that apply for all time and in all places.

The Reformed perspective also relies heavily on the concept of "sphere sovereignty" promoted by Dutch statesman, Abraham Kuyper.¹³ Like other spheres, the state has a special and limited God-given role. Its specific task is to ensure that there are just relationships among and within other spheres, or societal institutions. Thus, it is acceptable for the state to intervene in a family situation if a parent is abusing a child, a school if a teacher is abusing her authority, or a business if it exploits its employees. This role for the state is fundamental to the discussion of global economic justice that follows. It implies that global economic justice is something that *can* be advanced by the state, and is not necessarily the responsibility only of transnational corporations (TNCs), individuals, or labor unions, although these other institutions have roles as well. The import of this principle is great: it means that the Reformed perspective on global socioeconomic injustice must go beyond a false dichotomy between state-centered approaches (socialism, communism, fascism) and "society-centered" approaches (liberalism, libertarianism, conservatism).

Principles of Christian justice and foreign policy

America first vs. Global justice

In the Reformed perspective, then, Christians should urge *their governments* to pursue justice in the development of foreign policy as it relates to the global economy. As James Skillen says,

The biblical vision is a vision of a kingdom that transcends American, Canadian and European interests. One of the most prominent evidences of Christian weakness in the world today is the failure to pursue this political vision together in international community for the sake of justice for all people.¹⁴

This view that *the state* (although not exclusively) ought to actively pursue global socio-economic justice contrasts with the views held by some American Christians in the neo-conservative tradition, such as Michael Novak, who support a very limited role for the state in advancing global socioeconomic justice (but, ironically, support a strong military presence in the world).¹⁵ The Reformed position also stands in stark contrast to the Christian economic nationalism of Pat Buchanan, who is not averse to using the state, as

long as it is to protect American economic interests first and foremost.¹⁶

Christian neo-conservatives and Christian economic nationalists commonly embrace a modern foreign policy defined by the dominant values of "national interest" and "national security." The words of Christian neo-conservative Richard John Neuhaus on the relationship between the United States and Nicaragua in the 1980s illustrate this well:

Washington believes that Nicaragua must serve as a warning to the rest of Central America to never again challenge U.S. hegemony, because of the enormous economic and political costs. It's too bad

Justice in the kingdom of God is global by definition.

that the [Nicaraguan] poor must suffer, but historically the poor have always suffered. Nicaragua must be a lesson to others.¹⁷

This view of foreign relations is obviously not based on the concept of justice as it is defined in the Reformed tradition. Sadly, by focusing on national interest and global influence, many within and beyond the larger Christian community have given little thought to any normative conception of a world order based on principles of justice that go beyond narrowly defined neo-conservative or classical and neo-liberal views that exalt state interest and individual freedom while tolerating large inequalities.

This widely embraced foundation for foreign policy has prevailed throughout the twentieth century without much challenge.¹⁸ Further, there is little question that so-called national interest continues to be the guiding principle in foreign policy today, especially in economic relations. U.S. trade policy in particular is admittedly guided by the goal of advancing U.S. business interests throughout the world. Trade agreements are developed not to achieve justice but to give U.S. economic interests access to foreign markets, whether it be in Asia, North America, Latin America, or through the World Trade Organization (WTO). For example, in U.S. relations with China, concerns for justice (whether it be basic human rights, sweatshops, or ecological destruction) are, at best, secondary to the

primary goal of facilitating advantageous economic relations with the world's largest potential consumer market for American products.

In the midst of the global transition to an American-style neo-liberal¹⁹ economic order characterized by freer trade, the U.S. government has spent little time considering issues such as environmental protection and human rights. Whether it's the Indonesian occupation of East Timor, the contamination of Venezuelan tropical ecosystems by transnational petroleum companies, Central American sweatshops, Mexican paramilitary hit squads, or Chinese labor camps, environmental and human rights concerns are marginalized in political debates by the quest to further develop regional and global trade agreements and greater market access. One of the more repulsive examples of bypassing human rights concerns in favor of economic gain has been U.S. Vice President Al Gore's recent warm relations with the leader of Turkmenistan, one of the world's most ruthless authoritarian dictators (according to the State Department). Not surprisingly, the warm relations are intended to pave the way for U.S. access and influence in one of the world's richest petroleum deposits.²⁰

Many argue that there is nothing wrong with a U.S. foreign policy that is based on self-interest and advancing U.S. economic interests abroad. The injustices in other countries may be considered "foreign issues" and therefore outside the realm of domestic responsibility. However, this position fails to account for the relational character of international relations. Trade with other countries implies a very concrete relationship between different peoples of the world; these relationships should not be considered impersonal, value-free market transactions. Certainly, we must ask, are these relations characterized by justice? At the very least we should wonder about them since very little consideration seems to be given to the consequences of foreign and trade policies for the weak and disadvantaged in other countries. How often is an American politician heard arguing for a trade agreement because it will bring justice to people of other countries and promote just relations? A foreign and trade policy that is deliberately devised with thought given to just economic conditions for all parties would be more convincing than one driven by self-interest and the *assumption* that other

parties will benefit in the process, to the extent that such an assumption even exists.

The IMF and the neo-liberal global economic order

Perhaps the most important manifestation of this issue is the way in which the United States and other developed countries have promoted an American-style capitalism throughout the world by means of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The transition to a global American-style capitalism has often had terrible consequences for many of the world's poor, calling into question the justice of the neo-liberal economic model, or at the very least, the transition to it. Highly indebted countries, victimized by global currency speculation and unable to pay off foreign creditors, have received loans from the IMF, but only if certain conditions are met. These conditions often lead to "structural adjustment programs"(SAPs). Typically, an SAP will include the following requirements reflecting neo-liberal ideology: elimination of foreign ownership restrictions, privatization of state-owned enterprises, government spending cutbacks on social services, an export orientation, and elimination of tariff barriers. It is perhaps the elimination of foreign ownership restrictions and tariff barriers that best allow U.S. economic interests to infiltrate foreign markets and obtain greater global influence.

The outcomes of SAPs are often highly desirable for U.S. and other foreign economic interests. This much is clear to the business community. In response to the debate in the U.S. House of Representatives over renewing IMF contributions, the President of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce said: "If we fail to act, we'll be sending a message that we're not interested in those markets. That would come under the heading of stupid."²¹ This comment and others like it, made without regard to the widespread human suffering in Asia, seem to reflect an interest in foreign "markets" more than foreign "people," except in terms of their capacity to purchase imports. Unfortunately, impoverished countries often have little choice but to accept the IMF SAPs and their role as "markets" for transnational economic interests; the alternative is even greater economic ruin.

The Asian currency crises of 1997 and 1998 are a good case in point. It is a compelling case of

IMF/U.S. policy driven by national self-interest, where global justice is simply assumed or ignored, and the poor have suffered. In 1997 and 1998 Asian countries were required by the IMF to ease foreign ownership restrictions and lower tariff barriers, among other stipulations, in return for IMF loans. South Korean companies such as Daewoo and Samsung have had little choice but to allow foreign influences and ownership in their operations in the areas of semiconductors, forklift trucks, and the automobile industry, by such TNCs as Ford, Intel, General Motors, and Volvo.²²

In the midst of the structural adjustment required of countries like South Korea and Indonesia, very little if any attention has been given to the unemployment, poverty, and general social disruption that has resulted from such foreign imposed fiscal austerity plans. While large TNCs take advantage of the new opportunities made available by the IMF structural adjustment programs, millions of Asians suffer from unemployment, food shortages, and other hardships.²³ Asians and others have perceived this as a case of U.S. colonialism.²⁴

Similar hardships (likely worse) have occurred in Latin America (especially Mexico and Brazil) as a result of the same pressures.²⁵ One key effect of structural adjustment policies has been the withdrawal of the state in Latin America from welfare provision and social assistance, in favor of private, non-profit, and international voluntary and relief assistance. There is evidence that this additional element of the neo-liberal model is having negative consequences for the weak and marginalized in Latin America.²⁶ Even more disconcerting are some of the other economic and social effects of the neo-liberal transition in Mexico. The decline of the peso and fall in foreign currency reserves led to an inability to pay off foreign-held debt in the last two decades. In return for a \$50 billion IMF "bailout" of Mexico in 1995, says Gerardo Otero in a recent study on the foreign imposition of a neo-liberal economic order on Mexico, the "U.S. gained veto power over most of Mexico's economic decisions for the ensuing decade."²⁷ Prior to that, in 1989, as a result of U.S. pressure (derived from being a major creditor), Mexico was forced to pass a law permitting 100% foreign ownership of most enterprises. It is no coincidence that U.S. economic interests bought up many of the privatized state-

owned enterprises in Mexico shortly thereafter. Further, the structural adjustment required by the United States and the IMF in the mid 1990s led to massive social upheaval, particularly in the southern state of Chiapas. (The Chiapas rebellion intentionally coincided with the same day NAFTA was implemented.)

Most alarming are the frequent Mexican government crackdowns on the poor and weak and their supporters, in the last number of years. Throughout the 1990s there have been frequent reports of the governing PRI party cracking down on the marginalized. In December of 1997, 45 innocent

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pursue justice in the
global economy.*

women and children were massacred as a result of this conflict, most likely a direct government crackdown.²⁸ This is much more than a bloody internal conflict, and a strong case can be made that it is in large part a consequence of the massive shift to a North American neo-liberal economic order and the very strong pressure applied by the IMF and the United States to Mexico. The policy changes required of Mexico have contributed to poverty and social inequality in the Chiapas region as the coffee and maize sectors have been restructured and the constitutional provisions for land tenure have been modified. According to Neil Harvey, "The rebellion in Chiapas can be seen as an indication of the level of desperation being reached among the small farmers and as a warning that neoliberal restructuring in rural Mexico threatens not only campesino livelihoods but also political stability."²⁹ While poverty and inequality rise in Mexico, the benefits to the United States are clear: the Mexican economy becomes more integrated with the American economy as it is adjusted to fit the neo-liberal framework, greater access is assured for American exports, American ownership of Mexican enterprises grows,³⁰ and the chance of loans being repaid (with interest) is increased. Where is the justice for the millions of Mexican peasants in all this?

Justice for the weak and the poor of the world continues to take a back seat to an ever expanding global framework designed to enhance trade and mobility for TNCs. The latest feature of the new global economic order is the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI). Under the auspices of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), this agreement was developed in secret for three years.³¹ While this agreement has not been completed, it has been roundly criticized for doing nothing to improve the lot of the poorer and weaker people living in this global village. The agreement has been almost unanimously condemned by hundreds of non-governmental organizations involved in poverty, human rights, environmental protection, and economic development, as a bill of rights for large TNCs.³²

How Just is the Neo-liberalization of the Global Economy?

There is good reason why the world's largest economic power would be interested in advancing free trade and obtaining access to more foreign markets, but it is doubtful that the reasons have much to do with justice or involve *fair* trade. In the case of a relatively undeveloped economy, far fewer large corporations have the resources needed to "compete" in the global marketplace, thereby giving advantage to existing TNCs. In an unrestricted international free market it is highly unlikely that the domestic resources exist in Burundi, El Salvador, or Jordan to start up and operate a company on the scale necessary to compete in today's global market. Does anyone realistically expect another General Motors to develop in Uganda? Or another General Electric in Nicaragua? Or another Boeing in Bolivia? Another Proctor and Gamble in the Dominican Republic? Another Hoechst or Merck in Afghanistan? Another Phillips in Burkina Faso?

One of the main reasons Samsung, Daewoo, and Hyundai exist today in Korea is that the protection afforded to them through tariffs restricted the import of foreign cars. (Indeed, both the United States and Canada built up and protected domestic industries in this way.) If an international economic order is developing in which it will become impossible for countries like Cameroon and Papua New Guinea to protect their domestic markets and develop their own Daewoos, then it may not be a

just international economic order. How will it be possible for low income countries to develop their own industry to compete with the cheaper, high quality products sold to them from large TNCs based in the wealthy industrialized north? Simply because trade may be free, does not mean it is fair or just.

Defenders of the neo-liberalization of the global economic order respond to criticism in a number of ways. First, while they sometimes acknowledge that foreign exploitation is a part of the new global economic order, they also point out that this factor is not the only source of socioeconomic malaise. For example, there seems to be some agreement that the debt and currency crises in Mexico and Asia are the result of both foreign opportunism *and* domestic mistakes.³³ Indeed, it may be true that poor decisions were made in Mexico and elsewhere and that a less than successful development strategy was pursued. It may be true that South Korean banks were less than forthcoming about their financial status. However, these facts do not take away from the fact that the United States and the IMF have taken advantage of this misfortune to advance economic interests and to disseminate and entrench a neo-liberal economic order from which the wealthy obviously stand to gain the most. That tin pot dictators and democratic leaders abuse their own people and make bad policy decisions does not excuse other countries from acting justly toward them.

Second, backers of IMF and U.S. trade policies have argued that while the circumstances surrounding this disorder are not ideal, the transition to the new neo-liberal economic order will *eventually* benefit less developed countries (LDCs) because it is based on a superior model of productivity and growth. Whether or not the developing neo-liberal economic order will be a just one for people living in LDCs remains to be seen. However, as any recent *World Development Report* from the World Bank shows, many indicators such as those for literacy, access to health care, and other quality of life measures in low income countries have actually been worsening in recent years. Many people in low income countries realize this and are strongly opposed to the American economic model being forced on them. When domestic producers go bankrupt, unemployment rises, social services decline, and cheap American imports come in,

people in low income countries become skeptical that the neo-liberal model is benefitting them.

Third, it is often argued that companies like General Motors, Proctor and Gamble, and Nike manufacture their products in LDCs, thereby providing capital, jobs, and technology to those countries. Even if this claim were true, it does not address the fundamental issue of just economic relations. The profits and income obtained from the sale of products manufactured in these low income countries go to wealthy shareholders in the industrial north. Yes, Mattel provides tens of thousands of jobs in Indonesia and China and there are probably some economic side benefits from manufacturing Barbie there. But, it remains true that the CEO of Mattel can make \$30 million dollars in one year while the Chinese laborer dressing Barbie (90% of whom are young peasant women³⁴) makes 25 cents an hour and has to work about 29 days every month with few of the health, safety, and labor protections³⁵ that workers in the industrialized north enjoy. Is such a relationship just?

What is especially troubling is that Mattel and Nike are probably among the better world corporate citizens. In contrast, TNCs such as Royal Dutch Shell, Chevron, Exxon, Placer Dome, DeBeers, The Standard Fruit Company, and other resource-intensive corporations have a much greater impact because they extract natural resources in less developed countries for export to the industrialized north. The few benefits that may accrue to the country in which the resources are found may accrue to military and other political elites who make sure to get their cut. What is just about Chevron owning and exploiting natural gas fields in Nigeria?³⁶ Without a doubt, the vast majority of people in Africa's most populous country receive no benefit from 'their' abundant natural resource. What is just about a U.S.-based TNC owning the banana plantations in Honduras and exporting bananas to North America? How does Honduras benefit from this? Yes, Honduran workers get jobs (jobs they would probably have anyway if they owned the plantations themselves) and also cancer and other assorted ailments from the use of pesticides used in the growing of the bananas, pesticides that are banned in the north because of their toxicity.³⁷ Resource extraction from the less developed countries is often little more than

outright pillaging.

Finally, IMF supporters have argued that it is only fair that political, economic, and social reform in crisis-stricken countries take place so that those countries can eventually earn the foreign currency needed to pay back IMF loans. While it certainly makes a good deal of sense to lend money only if there is a high probability of repayment, it is undeniable that the IMF's conditionality policies requiring massive structural adjustment that benefit U.S. and other northern, transnational economic interests are rarely welcome by the receiving country. The U.S. purchase of public and private

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global trade policies.*

companies in Mexico and Asia make this abundantly clear. This is financial and economic blackmail that insists on the correctness of a single economic model. Moreover, this practice stands in sharp contrast to the values inherent in the biblical principle of jubilee.

That powerful economic interests are becoming more powerful and governments are setting up legal, political, and economic frameworks on their behalf should not be surprising to Christians. An understanding of sin and redemptive history would lead us to realize that a just global economic order is unlikely to develop in today's world. It is common knowledge that money talks and political power follows money. Nonetheless, we are called to be obedient and to seek justice, recognizing that it is only with the future kingdom that this just global economic order will be fully realized. In a world distorted by sin, power and self-interest will likely remain the defining feature of foreign trade and economic policy. It is unlikely that, as Francis Fukayama asserts, we have reached the end of history where the universally valid and beneficial neo-liberal political and economic order have been established.³⁸ A universally valid, beneficial, and just international economic order will only exist when the kingdom of God is fully realized.

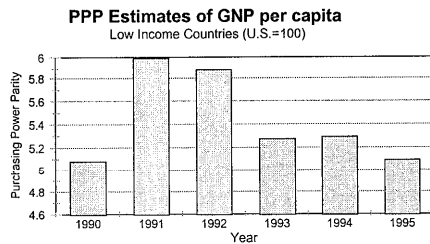
Development, democracy, and a just global economic order: a Christian response

Growing inequality and decline in global poverty

While there may be debate over the developing world economic order, there is no debate over the fact that there continues to be profound injustice in the world today. *Figures 1 to 6* show the gravity of the situation in low income countries. Income as measured by Gross National Product (GNP) per

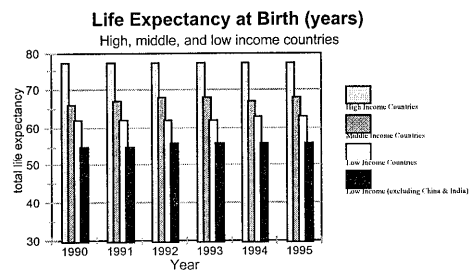
capita shows a decline between 1990 and 1995 (excluding China and India), and purchasing power parity has also declined. Various quality of life indicators are not encouraging either. While infant mortality in low income countries is lower than in 1970, it has not changed appreciably in the 1990s and is still far higher than that in high income countries. Similarly, life expectancy in low income countries has not changed in the 1990s and remains considerably lower than in high income countries.

Figure 1



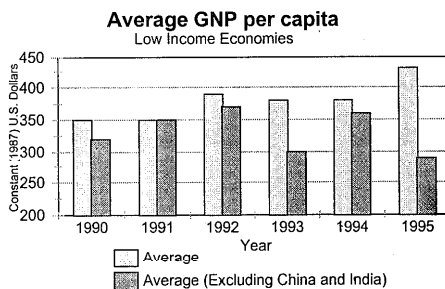
Source: World Bank, *World Development Report*

Figure 4



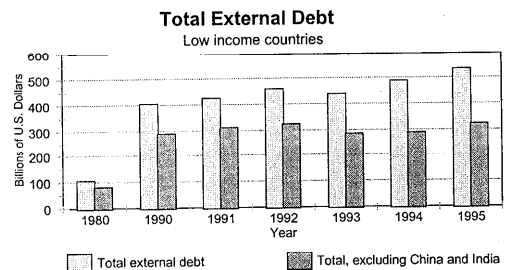
Source: World Bank, *World Development Report*

Figure 2



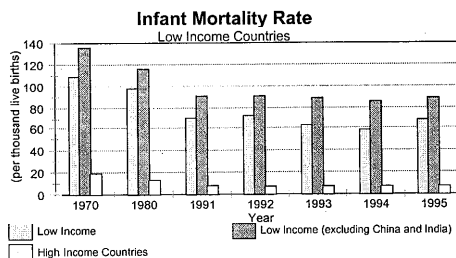
Source: World Bank, *World Development Report*

Figure 5



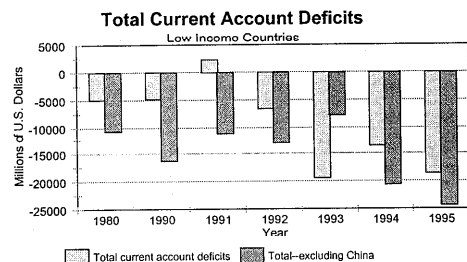
Source: World Bank, *World Development Report*

Figure 3



Source: World Bank, *World Development Report*

Figure 6



Source: World Bank, *World Development Report*

The average life expectancy in low income countries is around 55 years, while it is about 77 years in high income countries.

As Figures 5 and 6 show, the total external debt held by low income countries has continued to grow in the 1990s while current account deficits also continue to grow larger.

Growing evidence shows that these problems are likely to continue getting worse.³⁹ Ironically, for some, wealth and affluence are increasing at the same time. The situation is inherently unjust when so many people go without the essentials of life, such as good nutrition, housing, healthcare, employment, etc. Individuals need these basics in order to fulfill their calling in life and make the most of the unique talents and abilities with which they have been blessed. Only those who hold a classical liberal view of justice could tolerate such gross inequality.

Principles and policy for a more just global order

The growing inequalities and the decline in quality of life for large portions of the world's population raise questions about the 'success' of the neo-liberal development now being pursued with zeal. But if neo-liberalism is exploitative, communism is dead, democratic socialism is collapsing, and the alternative Asian model is in decline, then what type of social and economic development ought Christians to call for? Of course, the answer to this question is complex and cannot be fully explored here. But Christians need to begin contributing to a public discussion by expressing principles that ought to govern the economic relationships among countries and specifying the nature of a just international economic order. Elaborating biblical principles and applying them to contemporary life has always been a strength for Reformed Christians. For example, in explaining the principle of global socioeconomic justice, Skillen emphasizes that it involves much more than adherence to international human rights, popular sovereignty, and sanctity of treaties and agreements:

Justice within states and among them exists when all people enjoy adequate health care and education; when the proper balance is achieved among industries and agriculture, among educational programs and professional services, between social mobility and social stability, between rural and urban living

centers, when a government can aid the growth of public harmony, domestically in a way that does not require it to act unjustly against other nations and governments.⁴⁰

It is clear that such justice does not exist today. Skillen helps us begin to rethink what justice means in terms of global economic development:

International justice will become possible to the extent that "development" as defined by Western consumption and industrial expansion is rejected. If development can be enlarged, unfolded, and reconceived to capture the true breadth and diversity of human life on earth involving all of the creative energies, social interrelationships, and cultural

Indicators for quality of life in low income countries are worsening.

complexities of our humanness, then it will be possible for governments cooperatively to reduce the overconsumption of food and resources by the few in order that the many may be able not only to eat but also to think, speak, write, paint, sing, weave, build, and travel.⁴¹

Ulrich Duchrow offers a related principled focus for a different type of development:

These three keywords "just", "participatory", "sustainable", together with the principle of "the church in solidarity with the poor", furnish the overarching perspective introduced into the ecumenical movement by the Commission....These new criteria seek an alternative to both capitalism and communism which alike make growth and modernization the main criteria of development.⁴²

Duchrow identifies a concept of justice laid out by a working committee of the World Council of Churches. This concept takes into account economic systems of production and distribution, and the need to have a sustainable economic system:

Justice has to do with an equitable system of production and distribution not only by and among people now but also between present and future generations. A just society presupposes the recognition that the people are the main subject of history. The pursuit of justice goes beyond distribution and involves *participation* of people in decisions about what, how, for whom, and by whom to produce. The structural changes required as preconditions for the creation of a more just, participa-

tory and sustainable society will only be possible if political power is shared by the people. *Sustainability* is about humanity's dependence upon the earth and the way in which society organizes itself and its technology. It is also about humanity's demand for economic and political systems in which justice, participation and peace are ensured for all in present and future generations.⁴³

These descriptions of a just global order stand in stark contrast to the "America first" view of U.S. foreign and trade policy and the neo-liberal global order. While Reformed Christians have been good at interpreting and elaborating biblical principles for all of life, and seeing such conflicts in the abstract, it has been other Christians that have more aggressively applied themselves to specific global issues. A good example of how other Christians have applied biblical principles to specific aspects of the neo-liberalization of the global economy is the report of the Religious Working Group on the World Bank & the IMF in "Moral Imperatives for addressing Structural Adjustment and Economic Reform Measures" (May 1997). This report addresses such issues as structural adjustment programs, the distribution of wealth, and political power and debt. Reformed Christians should become more involved because if we are to be transformers of the world, the central task at hand must be to move beyond the discussion of basic biblical principles to applying them to contemporary public policy. We need to become more specific and, for example, make clear that the neo-liberal basis of foreign and economic policy has meant that U.S. involvement throughout Central and South America has not been primarily concerned with justice (as defined above)⁴⁴ and so it should not be surprising that there has been little to no concern for justice for those in Asia, either.

The Christian obligation to address global socioeconomic injustice

If Christians are guilty of 'social sin' by participating in and perpetuating a neo-liberal order which leads to global economic injustice, it is something that requires not only prophetic judgement but also acknowledgment and repentance. As Skillen says, North American Christians *ought* to be very concerned about global injustice and their role in it, because when the U.S. government seeks such advantages for dominant economic interests, it is *their* governments, *their* representatives who are

responsible in part for powerful disruption and injustice in other countries.⁴⁵ Duchrow goes even further and argues that Christians have a special obligation to be aware of this injustice because we are linked to other Christians as part of the body of Christ *and* as participants in the global economic system. But, sadly, he says, "How we are individually and collectively connected with others by the economic structures remains outside our perception or is deliberately ignored."⁴⁶

Sider explains the low salience of global economic injustice by arguing that evangelicals have put increasing emphasis on personal piety. He says, "evangelicals have become unbalanced in their stand against sin, expressing concern and moral outrage about individual sinful acts while ignoring, perhaps even participating in, evil social structures. But the Bible condemns both."⁴⁷ Wolterstorff shares Sider's view, arguing that piety and charity are not sufficient, because economic injustice is a social question, and one to which churches have not paid much attention.⁴⁸ This lack of attention is disturbing because, he says, poverty is not the result of some natural condition in the third world, but "we in the core have played a crucial role in [underdevelopment]. . . . Underdevelopment has a history, a history inseparable from ours."⁴⁹

Even if one rejects the notion that global economic injustice constitutes social sin, the obligation for Christians to become more aggressive in this matter remains a powerful one. Skillen explains why:

Unless we can develop an integral vision of concrete, institutional, public justice on a global scale that can demonstrate its power in handling the details of economic interdependence, military and arms growth, nuclear limitations, health, hunger, and education, then surely we are failing to develop one of our greatest opportunities and obligations for Christian service. If there is any movement on earth that should be carrying forward an international, cooperative effort to achieve global justice, it should be the movement of the Body of Christ which claims to know, love, and serve the King of the whole earth. If there is any community that should be constantly at work trying to demonstrate concrete political implications of its global responsibilities, it should be the Christian community.⁵⁰

Given the extent of the problems involved, with billions in extreme poverty (and more each year) experiencing disease, economic destitution, and death,

global economic justice is surely an issue that must rank alongside the traditional Christian concerns with abortion, prayer in public schools, homosexuality, or school choice—issues that of late have seemed to have more prominence in the Reformed community, as they do in fundamentalist circles.

Promising efforts

A number of ideas exist for a just, alternative economic model, many of which are advanced by Christians. Many of these ideas consciously attempt to transcend the traditional liberal/socialist divides of the past and would appear to be consistent with the Reformed perspective. For example, the “Oxford Declaration”, signed in 1990 by an ideologically diverse group of over 100 evangelical leaders from various backgrounds, is a statement of Christian faith and economics⁵¹ that is intended to serve as the basis for further thought on a more just international economic order. Similarly, Donald Hay and the work of other Christian economists is helpful in this regard.⁵² One justice-minded organization in Canada called Citizens for Public Justice has also developed a critique of the 1997 OECD-proposed Multilateral Agreement On Investment (MAI).⁵³ In addition, the Pope has given some recent attention to global economic justice, in particular in his address on January 1, 1998 for the World Day of Peace, entitled, “From the Justice of Each Comes the Peace for All.”⁵⁴ It is worth remembering, too, that the outlines of a New International Economic Order have been put forth in U.N. resolutions since 1974.⁵⁵ Finally, the journal *Transformation* has given attention to the neo-liberal global economic order and the role of churches and the state in addressing the injustice that arises from it.⁵⁶ Christians need to rely more on these varied resources as they seek to define the basis for a just global economic order.

Toward a Christian Political Economy

However, a Christian response to global socioeconomic injustice will remain incomplete as long as analysis remains at the level of principle elaboration, or is conducted mainly in economic terms, and does not account for the political context in which economic policies are designed and implemented. It is for this reason that a *Christian political economy* can help us address global socioeconomic injustice

more fully. A Christian political economy must consider not only, for example, the effects of TNCs and of consumer spending habits, but it must consider the way in which economic power is exercised at the political level and vice versa. It must also, for example, consider how issues like ‘free trade’ and economic transformation have become labeled as ‘economic’ issues and less subject to the purview of state authority and Christian attention. Why, for example, are global economic issues conspicuously absent from the political agenda of North America’s strongest Christian political movement—the Christian Coalition?

Christians must begin applying Biblical principles to specific contemporary public policy.

This connection between the economic and the political, in contrast to coexisting and separate analyses of economics and politics, has been missing from Christian scholarly debate on injustice and the international economic order. An extensive literature in the political economy tradition addresses exactly these issues,⁵⁷ but few Christians have contributed to this literature, particularly in the American context where the focus in the Christian political science community has been on traditional concerns such as pluralism, religion, and the American state.⁵⁸ As long as the exercise of economic power at the political level remains unaddressed, and economic policy is viewed largely as a technical matter independent of the dynamics of political power and debates over equity and justice, global economic injustice is likely to grow. Corporations may be pressured by individuals and groups to adopt just labor and environmental practices, but the failure to address global economic injustice as a fundamental responsibility within the sphere of the state, and therefore a political concern, is to deny the state’s God-given role and to tolerate continued injustice.

Much of the Christian literature reviewed for this paper acknowledged in a vague way that there is likely some role for the state, but two big problems

accompany these suggestions. First, they pre-suppose a state that is in fact able to pursue public justice (and is not subject to undue pressure from powerful economic interests). Second, they are virtually silent on precisely what it is that the state ought to do to advance global economic justice and how that is consistent with an informed, theoretical understanding of the state's role in a pluralist society.⁵⁹

Reformed Christians ought to be leading the way in outlining the state's role, since it is a fundamental precept in the Reformed tradition that the state has the task of pursuing public justice, including economic justice.⁶⁰ In a world where the fifty largest TNCs have economic outputs that exceed that of most countries, it is a mistake to consider economic phenomena apolitical or outside the sphere of state authority.

As such, I would recommend that Reformed Christians work to develop a Christian political economy along the following lines. First, it should establish a sound biblical and theoretical basis for the state's role in advancing global economic justice, as distinct from those responsibilities corporations and unions have to do justice. As Abraham Kuyper recognized, both liberal and Marxist perspectives (from which most secular political economists take their orientation) are the wrong place to begin.⁶¹ A Christian political economy must not be driven by either of these perspectives. Second, it should develop a principled justification for the role of the domestic state in relation to other regional and international political institutions in advancing global justice. Third, it should explore the relationship between the responsibilities of the state and those of other institutions for advancing global justice. Other such institutions include families, churches, voluntary organizations, and individuals. Fourth, a Christian political economy should conduct a critical analysis of matters such as campaign finance laws, the electoral system, and other structures of government and representation, which currently favor those with money. It should also include an analysis of the role of the media in the political process. An unjust political process gives undue access and influence to powerful economic interests that use it to advance narrow self-interest often without regard for global justice. Fifth, a Christian political economy should examine

the effects of the neoliberal, global economic order on the poor and the weak throughout the world and *reveal the inherently political character of this order and the political power that sustains it*. Sixth, it should develop and promote public policy positions that are based on justice rather than narrow nationalistic self-interest. Seventh, this Christian political economy should explore the concept of a just international wage system and the state's role in seeing that there is justice in relations between employer and employee, and between consumer and producer. Finally, a Christian political economy should develop and promote a comprehensive alternative political and economic order based not on neo-liberal principles, but on Biblical principles.

Conclusion

The need for a new Christian political economy is paramount. With the ascendancy of the neo-liberal political and economic order and the apparent decline of all alternative models, the need is more pressing than ever. If justice were increasingly served and quality of life improved as part of this neo-liberal ascendancy, perhaps there would be no need for concern. However, injustice is rampant. Throughout the world poverty continues to rise, quality of life indicators continue to fall, and ecological destruction continues unabated.⁶² These are fundamentally *political* issues. It would be a sad day, indeed, if Christians came to accept uncritically the ascendancy of this neo-liberal world order, or remained locked into the ideological debates of the past. The time has come for a new Christian political economy.

END NOTES

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- D.C.: Association for Public Justice Education Fund, 1982); Ronald H. Stone, ed., *Reformed Faith and Politics* (Washington D.C.: The University Press of America, 1983); Bennie van der Walt and Rita Swanepoel, eds., *Confessing Christ in Doing Politics: Essays on Christian political thought and action* (Potchefstroom, South Africa: The Institute for Reformational Studies, 1995); Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983).
2. James Skillen, "Public Justice and True Tolerance," in *Confessing Christ and Doing Politics*, p.57.
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 8. Jim Skillen, "Who is My Neighbor? Politics and Justice in the Global Economy," *Pro Rege*, vol X, no.4 (June 1982), p.17-25.
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 14. Skillen, *International Politics*, p.26.
 15. See chapter 4 in James W. Skillen, *The Scattered Voice: Christians at Odds in the Public Square* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990).
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 17. Cited in *Sojourners* (May 14, 1989), p.23.
 18. Francis Moore Lappe, Rachel Schurman and Kevin Danaher, *Betraying the National Interest: How U.S. Foreign Aid Threatens Global Security by Undermining the Political and Economic Stability of the Third World* (New York: Food First, 1987); Stephen E. Ambrose, *Rise to Globalism: American Foreign Policy Since 1938*, Seventh Revised Edition (New York: Penguin Books, 1993); Richard J. Barnett, *Roots of War: The Men and Institutions Behind U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Penguin Books, 1972); Skillen, *International Politics*, p.115.
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 28. Phil Gunson, "General on murder charge for massacre in Chiapas," *The Guardian* (London) (April 4, 1998).
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 31. OECD, *Multilateral agreement on Investment, Text and Commentary* (1 October 1997). Online. Internet. Available: <http://www.mai.flora.org/mai-info/9710-p00.htm>
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 33. The debt crises in the less developed countries which have been ongoing for over two decades now are a good case in point. This debt situation seems to have developed as follows: Developing countries pursued an economic strategy of import substitution (ISI) with mixed results. They decided to borrow large sums of capital (made available by large international surpluses due to the sale of oil from middle eastern countries) to fund this development, to some degree. These borrowed funds were not used all that wisely, and northern commercial banks lent without discrimination with what has been described as a herd instinct. Two related factors then compounded the problem. High interest rates in the early 1980's and the decline in value of developing country currencies made it almost impossible to pay back those loans. Thus developed the crisis. This misfortune is what allowed the United States and the IMF to literally force countries like Mexico to scale back government spending (often the source of much social upheaval as spending on health, education and welfare is cut), deregulate, privatize, reduce foreign ownership restrictions, and focus on exports in order to earn the foreign currency needed to repay loans. See Bob Goudzwaard, *Beyond Poverty and Affluence: Toward an Economy of Care* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994); Hay; Otero, Sider.
 34. Clare Garner. "Poverty pay of Barbie doll workers," *The Independent* (London)(December 23, 1995), p.2.
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 42. Ulrich Duchrow, *Global Economy: A Confessional Issue for the Churches?* (Geneva, Switzerland: World Council of Churches, 1987), p.73.
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- Policy: The Unequal Structure of Representation,” in L. Panitch, ed., *The Canadian State* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984).
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