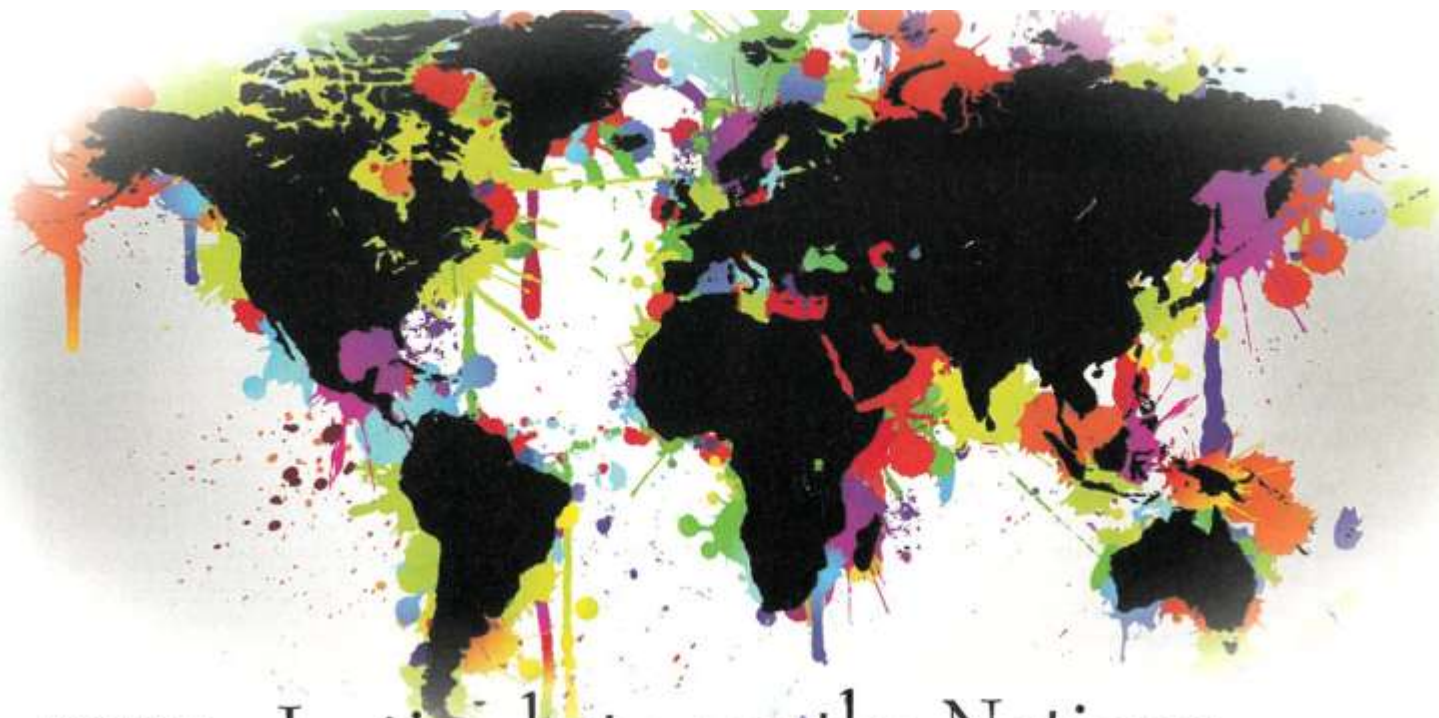


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Donal Dorr

Justice between the Nations

More than thirty years ago I was working with a group of poor women and men in a fairly small African country which at that time was suffering from a major economic crisis. The country had such a huge international debt that the IMF (International Monetary Fund) had forced the government to adopt an extremely stringent austerity programme. This left the local people impoverished, reduced to subsistence living. One striking example of this, for me, was to see people drying out their used tea-bags on a washing line, in order to reuse them over and over again, because they could not afford to buy tea.

One man told me: 'I have a book.' His remark pierced my heart and my conscience; and it has stayed with me ever since. Here was somebody who was proud to tell me that he owned *one* book. I thought of my bookshelves at home filled with more books than I could count. How could such a wide gap in wealth and income have come about between what we in the Western world took for granted and what was quite common in poor countries in the non-Western world?

HOW THE ECONOMIC GAP DEVELOPED

Over the intervening years I have gradually come to understand how this wealth gap came about. About five hundred years ago most people, in Europe as well as in the other continents, were quite poor. But at that time a great change began to take place. Wealthy bankers in a few parts of Europe lent money to the rulers of Spain, Portugal, England, and the Netherlands to finance expeditions by explorers like Vasco da Gama, Christopher Columbus, and Francis Drake who opened up sea trade routes between Europe and the Americas and Asia.

Before long, there developed a combination of Western colonialism and an unregulated exploitative capitalism on a grand scale. This involved massive genocide, exploitation and slavery in the colonies, and enormous enrichment of the ruling political powers in these four European countries and of the bankers and merchant classes in some parts of Europe. A couple of centuries later, Australia and New Zealand were 'discovered' by the West; and they in turn were subjected to genocide and rapacious exploitation.

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Germany, Russia and Denmark also became colonial powers, and some would say that Sweden was also a colonial power to a minor degree. Latecomers in the race to gain colonies were Belgium and Italy. Meanwhile, there were two Asian colonial powers: Han China and Japan.

In most of North America and practically all of Australia the genocide was so 'successful' that the USA and Australia have become an integral part of 'The West' and the USA is now the dominant Western power. In Latin America the genocide was less complete; but the descendants of the European colonisers became the dominant powers and have continued to exploit the indigenous peoples.

NEOCOLONIALISM

Over the past seventy years the colonial powers reluctantly handed over political power to a compliant indigenous group in almost every colony; but they retained and even expanded their economic control. So the colonial system has changed into a neocolonial system.

This has caused the emergence of huge structural injustice in the former colonies. In them, there is a massive widening of the gap between the rich and the poor. The exploitation of the countries' resources has expanded, with no effective improvement in welfare for the vast bulk of the population.

In the former colonial countries, an enormous gap has emerged between a tiny minority who are extremely wealthy and the rest of the population. This gap has also come about in some non-colonial European countries like Ireland which joined the European Union. But in all of these Western countries even the people who are classified as 'poor' are generally far better off than the poor in the non-Western world.

A later stage in neocolonialism is the emergence of a relatively small number of major transnational corporations, each of which is more wealthy and economically powerful than most countries in the world. They have used their economic power to 'buy' political power, even in countries like the USA which have huge military power. Meanwhile, the Chinese version of neocolonialism involves building airports, bridges, etc, mainly for African countries, in exchange for favourable access to the mineral resources of these countries.

POLITICAL RELATIONSHIPS

Over many centuries international relationships at the political level were different from those in the economic sphere. This was because of the emergence of an elaborate system of political diplomacy.

Diplomats negotiate on behalf of governments, defending and promoting their interests. By doing so they can lessen the danger of countries rushing hastily into war or other unjust and oppressive actions; in this way they can promote justice in the world. This work of skilled negotiation and mediation was greatly helped by the establishment of the United Nations. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the International Courts of Justice were further major advances through which international justice was fostered.

However, within the past few years a major change has taken place. A small number of ultra-rich individuals have come to exercise quite extraordinary political power, both within countries and in international relationships. These men (all of them are men) gained their wealth and developed their skills in the sphere of economic competition, which they see as a battlefield in which, in order to be successful, they have learned to be ruthless and unscrupulous.



Now they have openly or covertly moved decisively into the sphere of international political relationships, mainly by pressuring governments economically and making elected politicians financially dependent on them. And they are proud to see themselves as 'buccaneers', who no longer need to play by the traditional diplomatic 'rules'. They, and the politicians who are dependent on them and are influenced by them, treat the governments of other nations, the United Nations, and international conventions with the same insensitivity and ruthlessness as they have 'dealt with' their economic competitors. They ignore the whole range of diplomatic restraints and courtesies which were built up over the centuries.

The result is that the world has now become a far more unjust and dangerous place. There are increasing instances of rampant injustice at a global level. Major proxy wars have become common. And there is a far greater risk of nuclear war.

OUR RESPONSE

Committed Christians today must accept that we are living in a situation that is not unlike that of the Christians of the Young Churches at the time of the Roman Empire. We, like them, are called to challenge, by word and action, the new 'imperial' world in which we live.

When I was working as a missionary in Africa, I was actively involved in organising and running workshops which aimed to empower poor people. We worked together to challenge the unjust system which reduced them to poverty.

Now I am ninety-one years old, living in semi-retirement. I wonder whether my present stance is like that of the wealthy slave-owner in the film *Twelve Years a Slave*. He would have liked to rescue a man who had been kidnapped into slavery. But he did not do so because for him it was unthinkable to challenge the whole system of slavery.

I ask myself am I now failing to follow Jesus in his radical challenge to injustice. Am I posing an effective challenge to the grossly unjust structures which give me a comfortable Western lifestyle while causing millions to be ground down in abject poverty and powerlessness? Perhaps some of our readers may wish to share how they themselves have faced up to this challenge. ■

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