

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

What is the significance of Jesus for the world in the twenty-first century? Before this question can be answered, one needs to look at the present state of the world. As in the last century, much of the world in the twenty-first century continues to be afflicted with wars, poverty, corruption, famines, and injustice, which are the sources of an untold amount of suffering for the poor and the innocent in the world. The people of the richer countries enjoy much greater stability and prosperity (though there are still poor people in these countries), but with the secularization of these countries people explore different lifestyles which are very different from those of their forefathers. Their grandparents most probably adhered to some religious beliefs but for many of the present generation, these beliefs are no longer thought to be true or applicable. In the West, Christianity, which used to provide the framework and backbone for life in the family and the society, no longer occupies the pre-eminent and regulatory role as before. With the dwindling belief in and practice of Christianity in Western societies, there is no longer a clear and recognized pattern for living in these societies—everyone is free to choose or create their own lifestyle as they see fit. Yet people in these countries are not without concerns for the world. There is a growing awareness of the plight and suffering of the poor, the exploited and oppressed. There is a gathering of momentum in popular opinion and aspiration to make poverty a fact only in past history, i.e., to remove poverty for a better future. There is a genuine concern for the preservation of the global environment for future generations. People are waking up to these problems and concerns in the world and realize that unbridled self-interest on the one

hand inflicts exploitation and injustice on fellow human beings, and on the other hand inflicts damage to the global environment, some of which could be irreversible.

Despite these growing concerns, people in richer nations often find themselves powerless to act, as they are caught up in the powerful currents of economic forces. When thinking about economic forces operating in the world, one must be very careful in assessing their positive contributions as well as their possible drawbacks which emerge when they are exercised without proper restraint and an ethical framework. One should not assume that all economic forces are inherently good or inherently evil. Their positive or negative nature depends on the intention and the manner of their deployment. The values and ethics underlying the work of economic forces and their manner of operation give them their positive or negative character. If the forces are exercised purely from an intention based on self-interest, the risk is that others may be disadvantaged or harmed while that self-interest is served. However, if they proceed from a genuine twofold desire to serve our neighbors (far or near) and to provide for the needs of one's household, both of which come from love, these are honorable intentions, and the economic activities conducted in such a spirit of loving service, justice and creativity will help the world to flourish, to the benefits and rewards of all the parties involved. This is a rather idealistic picture. In the world that we live in, we have to acknowledge that things are not as desirable, particularly with the economic crisis at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, where various economic mal-practices have been exposed. Our human nature is not as altruistic as it should be. Sometimes (but not always), economic forces with unbridled self-interest and with influence on global or national scales crush the lives of the poor and vulnerable, damage the environment, and harm even those involved in driving those forces.¹ Often, people in richer nations, despite their desire to care for the poor and care for the environment, find themselves enmeshed in the currents of economic forces because they have their own stakes and interests in the same forces—as consumers, employees, employers, shareholders, fund managers, bankers, civil servants, and politicians.

1. One should not assume that all market and economic forces are self-interested in an unbridled manner. There are people of good conscience involved in the activities of the market and the economy.

Many consumers would like to be able to increase their buying capacity for the benefits of themselves and their household (including their children if they are parents), e.g., to provide a better standard of living and provide better education for their children. For this reason (and maybe for other reasons too), most employees would like higher salaries; most employers or boards of directors would like to increase their profits; most shareholders would like to see the value of their shares rise; fund managers would like to see their investment funds prosper; bankers would like to see their businesses and accrued interests expand, and politicians would like to see their countries' economies flourish. These are fine and proper as long as their greater financial gains are reaped as a result of their own labor, fair and responsible trade; and that many people will be served by these healthy economic activities. These groups of people—consumers, employees, employers, shareholders, fund managers and bankers, which include most of the people in the West—have their inter-related interests in the economic processes and forces.² The employers or board of directors have responsibilities towards their employees, their shareholders and their bankers who give them loans, and they rightly look after the interests of these people as well as their own when running their businesses. Likewise, the fund managers have the responsibility of looking after the interests of those investors who entrust them with their money and savings. Thus we see the individuals' interests and corporate interests enmeshed together. But in some or even many cases, these corporate and individual interests of the richer countries, when handled without sufficient attention to justice, compassion and care, can override the interests of the people in the poorer countries and take a damaging toll on the environment. Whether or not the people in the richer countries fully understand the causes of the injustice and damage, they are aware of these issues from public media or otherwise, and many genuinely wish to see these problems overcome. However, the structural nature of the causes, in which they themselves are implicated as briefly alluded to above, has meant that these problems of injustice and environmental concerns are quite beyond individuals or even lobby groups to overcome. Perhaps the

2. This can be seen in the economic crisis in 2008/9, albeit in a negative way, when many people's lives and livelihood were affected at the same time.

politicians can provide some solutions, but even they find the task extremely challenging because the politicians themselves are also caught up in the currents of the economic forces.

For the politicians to win votes, they have to bow to the real interests of the voters—who are consumers, employees, employers, shareholders, fund managers and bankers. The politicians' manifestos, policies, and decisions have to be shaped (though not absolutely) by these interests. For example, if a politician wishes to push for a reduction in arms production and the international arms trade, he will be significantly handicapped if his constituency (which voted him into office) or his country is heavily involved in arms manufacture. This is because reduction in arms manufacture will threaten jobs and livelihood, and therefore the self-interests, of many people to whom he is responsible as a politician. Another example pertains to the manufacture of cigarettes which are exported to other countries, including the developing ones. A third example is the levying of a relatively heavy green tax on fossil fuel consumption, which could be severely contested by a local community whose livelihood depends on truck manufacture and the haulage business. These are only three simple examples where the voters' opinions will need to be heeded by politicians, and other examples can be cited. Nevertheless, some governments can attempt to regulate businesses, industries and even international trade for the good of the global community, for the sake of finding justice for the poor, and for the care of the environment, even *to the extent* that these can run against the wish and interest of many of their people. That is a distinct possibility for some brave politicians who may not look beyond the present term of office. But in reality, in many ways the politicians themselves are not totally free to break the cycle or currents of economic forces at work in their societies, even if they wish to do so. In that sense, they cannot be wholly blamed for the continuation of problems in the global community, though they must bear some responsibility. If one is truly honest, the ordinary people as voters and the elected politicians are both responsible for the forces underlying these problems. However, both alike are themselves victims falling into the closed circle of forces of their own making, and without the ability to set themselves free. There are further problems close at home.

The liberalization of society in the West has its benefits but also its perils. The benefits are greater equality between women and men,

less racial prejudice (in a general sense), greater freedom of choice to pursue one's own interests, etc. However, there are costly casualties and damages in an over-liberal society. For example, the sanctity of marriage, which used to be highly regarded as the bedrock of the family which in turn is the fundamental unit of the community, is no longer treasured in present day Western societies. Divorce, family breakup, and lack of parental care lead to a great deal of bitterness, anger, depression, and neglect of the children who need a stable family for a healthy upbringing. The pain of children experiencing parental separation or divorce cannot be easily described in words; the damage done to the children in the long term is not calculable. Quite often divorce and family breakdown are repeated from one generation to another. But how can these cycles of family breakup, with the attendant bitterness, depression, neglect and pain, be halted? How can people be freed and delivered from the depressing forces of family turmoil, division, and separation? Many families in the affluent liberal Western societies face such great challenges, but the scale of the problems that poor families in the developing world face is considerably greater because their very basic human existence and sustenance are endangered and called into question. It may be hard for them to understand why the families in the West face their troubles when they are comparatively much better fed and materially affluent.

One does not need to be an expert on world economy or medical health to appreciate the plight of the people and their families in poor developing countries (sometimes called the two-thirds world because they make up about two-thirds of the world population). The following statistics give a brief view of the kind of poverty that millions of people suffer in the world.

- *Income poverty.* There are still around 1 billion people living at the margins of survival on less than US\$1 a day, with 2.6 billion—40 percent of the world's population—living on less than US\$2 a day . . .

- *Nutrition.* Around 28 percent of all children in developing countries are estimated to be underweight or stunted. The two regions that account for the bulk of the deficit are South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa . . .

- *Child mortality.* Progress on child mortality lags behind progress in other areas. Around 10 million children die each year before the age of five, the vast majority from poverty and malnutrition.³

News reports of urban slums, regional famines, victims of diseases (e.g., HIV-AIDS), and war refugees come regularly to our attention through the media. The images of children, women and men picking what can be salvaged from rubbish dumps for their sustenance are ones that cause distress, revulsion, compassion, and anger. Television reports of famines, e.g., in Africa, bring us images of human disasters on a horrific scale. Among these poor and suffering people, there is a deep sense of powerlessness; there is an indescribable sense of sorrow when they lose beloved members of their families through malnutrition or preventable diseases. For many of them there seems to be very little hope for the future because the history of their families and their countries is one that has been punctuated with human suffering, political crises and other disasters. Even though their plight consistently comes to the attention of the West through television reports and other media, what the affluent West has done for them seems to have minimal impact on improving their lives. Corruption, poor governance, and ethnic strife in those countries often hamper Western aid from reaching needy people effectively. In these cases, only very few people benefit from the assistance. Furthermore, some countries in the West can aggravate the situation by extracting much more from the poor countries than they return to them.⁴ It is a case of the more having more from the less, and

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3. *Human Development Report 2007/2008* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), by United Nations Development Programme, p. 25.
 4. On 30th October, 2003, United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan challenged the General Assembly to face the stark fact that, “even taking all subtlety and nuance into account,” developing countries made the sixth consecutive and largest ever net transfer of funds to “other countries” in 2002, a sum totalling “almost \$200 billion.” “Funds should be moving from developed countries to developing countries, but these numbers tell us the opposite is happening. . . . Funds that should be promoting investment and growth in developing countries, or building schools and hospitals, or supporting other steps towards the Millennium Development Goals, are, instead, being transferred abroad,” he told the Assembly, as well

the less having less. It is like the case of the shepherd who has a thousand sheep and yet has the heart to demand and take the one and only sheep belonging to a poor peasant. The poor peasant has neither the knowledge nor the power to resist the strong arm of the wealthy shepherd. He and his stricken family can only bow to the reality of the economic and political powers operating in the cruel and unjust world, and resign themselves to a state of lowliness, to a deep sense of helplessness, and to a life of poverty and sorrow. He and millions of other poor peasants find themselves in the cycle of injustice, corruption, bad governance, poverty, distress, disease, hunger and death; they also seem unable to deliver themselves from human sorrows and sufferings.

The very brief survey above captures the common feature of human inability to break free from the forces that circle or imprison them. They are often trapped by the circle of self-interested economic forces, the turmoil of family feuds and separation, or they are trapped by the crushing weight of corruption, bad governance, injustice, diseases, famines, and wars. Despite the constant progress in science, engineering, and communication technology, humanity has not been able to free itself from these oppressive forces which permeate societies and inhibit humanity from its full potential. Whether it is recognized or not, humanity in the twenty-first century is in great need of deliverance, the deliverance which brings true freedom, so that humanity is free to be what it could be and should be. But where can this deliverance come from if human progress in science, engineering, and communication technology has not been able to deliver? Some look to new age religions for deliverance, others look to Eastern mysticism or other forms of human philosophy, but this book suggests the historical figure of Jesus Christ as the one who can deliver. Jesus Christ has long been forgotten in many of the Western societies even though elements of his wisdom and teachings surface in different areas of their cultures. The mention of his name at particular festivals, for

as heads of the affiliated international financial institutions, on the second day of its high-level dialogue on financing for development. This report was accessed from UN News Centre at <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=8722&Cr=financing&Cr1=development>, on 11th May, 2010. See Kofi Annan's full remark at <http://www.un.org/apps/sg/sgstats.asp?nid=600>.

example, at Christmas and Easter, and the occasional rumors in the media about him, hardly does justice to him. Given the various accounts of Jesus Christ by fiction writers, such as the author of the *Da Vinci Code*, which often are quite perplexing, it is time to remove the shroud around this historical person and re-discover his amazing and dynamic personality; his revolutionary teaching and his radical lifestyle; his penetrating insights and his incomparable wisdom; his compassion for the poor and needy; his humility and gentleness especially to the weak and marginalized . . . and his sacrificial love which has power to free people, inspire them and change their lives. The world in its present groaning and pains needs a decisive deliverance, and the person of Jesus Christ is the one who can offer the world a new and radical way of living, and give people the hope of deliverance from the forces that bind and oppress them. Jesus Christ can deliver.

If the person of Jesus Christ who can deliver has been largely forgotten in many Western societies (or may not be known in other societies), then the mystery of the Trinity is something most people have never known. People may have heard of the word “Trinity”, but it makes little sense to them. But this mystery of the Trinity, namely Jesus’ loving *relationship* with his Father through the Holy Spirit, is the very foundation which will help to restore human relationships with one another—relationships between the rich and poor, men and women, husband and wife, brothers and sisters, young and old, white and black, red and yellow. And it is this mystery—Jesus’ loving and obedient relationship with his Father through the Holy Spirit—that ultimately restores humanity’s relationship with God himself. How can this be? How can this relationship between Jesus and his Father (through the Spirit) promise to restore human relationships with one another and restore human relationship with God? The brief answer is that the relationship between Jesus and his Father is one of self-giving love, one of perfect love reaching out to the other and receiving from the other, and it is this love which will bond our relationships with one another and with God. God is love and God is the ultimate source of love in human relationships. The Christian faith does not confess that God is a solitary figure who can only love himself; rather, it confesses that God as Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—is an eternal relationship of mutual dynamic love. Far from being an antiquarian doctrine of the Christian church which has little relevance to human

life in the twenty-first century, this Christian confession holds promise for our ultimate meaning in life because the very essence of this confession is inter-personal love. We need to discover or re-discover the significance of this Christian confession and thereby find our ultimate and wonderful goal in life—being embraced by the love of God and embracing one another in that love, overcoming the hostilities and barriers which separate people from people and people from God.

How do we set about knowing Jesus Christ, who holds the promise of delivering people from their plight? And how do we go about knowing the mystery of the Trinity which holds the essence of inter-personal love? The author's suggestion is to go to the gospel story which presents Jesus Christ and his unique relationship with his Father. As one reads the events in this extraordinary story, which in the author's opinion is the most beautiful and amazing story ever told, one comes into a personal contact with Jesus Christ and his Father. The author has chosen not to present Jesus Christ and his Father (and the Spirit) in *abstract and propositional language*, which has often been the case in the history of the church and theological discussions. Such discussions can run the risk of draining the life and drama out of the story. Rather than using such abstract theological language, the author has chosen to work through the *narrative or story of Jesus* which is more readily assimilated by ordinary people. It is the author's hope that through the retelling of the unfolding drama and events in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the readers may catch a glimpse of the unique person of Jesus Christ—who has unparalleled impact on the history of the world—and so come to a trusting knowledge of his Father, who provides the ultimate security and foundation for living a life of freedom, peace, and inter-personal love. The world in the twenty-first century, with all its dilemmas, pains, sufferings, injustice and its powerful currents, desperately needs to have this freedom, peace and love.

