



## Can We Eradicate Poverty While Tolerating Alienation?

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I am driven by the goal of building a healthy world, where each man, woman and child has the opportunity to reach their full potential. A key part of this involves creating a world where poverty is neither acceptable nor necessary. On the surface, eradicating poverty looks hopeless because the extent of it is steadily increasing in the face of all our efforts. However, there is one essential issue that I believe, if resolved, would reverse poverty. It is our tolerance of alienation. It is our decision that it is all right for some people to feel alienated. I will argue that our willingness to tolerate alienation is fundamental to the continuance of poverty—and it is this that we must deal with.

Let us imagine for a moment that we did not share the same meal around the tables this afternoon. Suppose that some of the people at your table were served a full meal, but that you were served a bowl of thin soup with only a few grains of rice. How would you feel? You would feel cheated. You would feel abused. You would feel devalued as a human being. You would feel angry. Now, consider the reaction of others to your misfortune. Imagine that everyone else at your table acted as if you did not exist. No one looked at you. No one spoke to you. No one offered you anything to eat, not even a roll or dessert. At best, some of them patted you on the head and kept on eating. Now, how would you feel? You would feel indignant. You would feel that this mistreatment was intolerable. You were invited to the table on equal footing with everyone else but you were not treated equally well.

You know where I am carrying this analogy. Everyone was invited to this planet on an equal footing, but not everyone was received equally well. The feelings are the same as at the inequitable meal: devalued, resentful, frustrated, angry.

During the two decades I have been at the U.N., I have heard friends from developing nations telling those from developed nations that they feel alienated, cheated out of a seemingly equitable share of the pie, that they were not given an equal opportunity. I see our colleagues from the developed nations taking a defensive posture, giving the distinct impression that they do not hear the hearts of the hurting and alienated, and cannot empathize with their pain. I cannot imagine anything more damaging to a human being.

My conviction is that the root problem for poverty is our comfort with our fellow human beings feeling alienated. I am convinced that if we decided we would no longer tolerate alienation, then poverty would largely disappear with it. On the other hand, I do not believe we can eradicate poverty and tolerate alienation at the same time. If we reached the point where we no longer tolerated alienation, then many of our problems would disappear, including ethnic division, gender discrimination, and governmental abuses.

Alienation means to feel isolated or estranged, rejected, left out. It means to feel treated as less than a human being. Is alienation of some fraction of our global population the price we must pay for “progress”? What are the underlying assumptions behind this question?

1. The fraction that feels alienated is small.
2. The fraction is decreasing at an acceptable rate.
3. Alienation is unavoidable.
4. The alienation is, in some way, the primary responsibility of those alienated.
5. Those alienated accept their state with patience.

All of these assumptions are false. There is tremendous pain and hurting among our alienated brothers and sisters. If we were too blind to understand this before 11 September, we have no excuse now.

In our world and in each of our nations, there are people living under intolerable conditions. It is as if we have learned to live with our consciences by pretending that the alienated do not have the same feelings that we would have if we were experiencing their suffering. We have lost the capacity to care that they are feeling such intense pain. We have lost the capacity for true compassion. I see this as a measure of what has happened to the human race in this highly materialistic world.

Poverty is the simplest of many indicators of alienation. While I want to approach the issue of poverty through alienation, I want to look at alienation in a broader context because it is at the root of many problems.

**Alienation Between Developed and Developing Nations.** We have alienation at all levels, from the smallest unit of society to the largest. We have alienation between developed and developing nations. One-tenth of our global population feels the alienation of living in an LDC.<sup>1</sup> One-fifth of our global population feels the alienation of a per capita income of less than \$1 per day.<sup>2</sup> Fully one-half of our global population feels the alienation of a per capita income of less than \$2 per day.<sup>3</sup> More than half the world's population lives on less than I spend on coffee. Their awareness that many of us live much better than they do has to be a source of frustration. Knowing that they cannot educate their children and equip them to escape this cycle of poverty has to push them to the brink of hopelessness.

I am encouraged that some are looking at the problem of poverty from a human point of view. *The Brussels Declaration* issued during the Third United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries spoke of "freeing our fellow women, men and children from the...dehumanising conditions of extreme poverty" and affirmed our "collective responsibility to uphold these principles of human dignity, equality and equity."<sup>4</sup> I was encouraged by many of the statements in Monterrey reflecting shared empathy with the victims of poverty.<sup>5</sup> But I also heard as motivation for reducing poverty the deterrence to terrorism.<sup>6,7,8</sup> A reduction in terrorism will hopefully follow as a result of reducing alienation. However, if reducing terrorism becomes our motivation, it will not lead to an eradication of poverty, but merely to a reduction to a so-called "tolerable level." Humanly speaking, there is no "tolerable level." We must determine that we will not tolerate one person living in alienation. And we must do this because we care for them.

**Alienation Between Civilizations.** We also have alienation between civilizations or cultures. The tragedy of 11 September was a vivid reminder of what we have known all along: there is alienation between our several different cultures. The attacks of 11 September clearly brought to the surface the feelings of alienation on the part of our brothers and sisters from Islamic civilization with regard to the West. Western global domination has been achieved at the sacrifice of the more vulnerable in our world. We, in the West, have been seduced into "win-lose" thinking. Recently, I saw a bumper sticker that read "I win! You lose! Too bad!" Someone thought this was cute. It is dangerous thinking. I would submit to you that we must subscribe to a "win-win" mentality. Clearly, in a world where our lives are interconnected, we can only win if we all win.

We can sympathize with the pain felt by the perpetrators of 11 September. I am not justifying their actions. What they did was wrong. However, they are fellow human beings who are hopelessly lost, which should cause us great pain. The question remains: Were there triggers that caused these individuals to feel alienated and that they had nothing worth living for? We want to identify these triggers, and then to eliminate them. The frustration was expressed by Huntington who stated that members of Islamic civilization are "convinced of the superiority of their culture, and obsessed with the inferiority of their power."<sup>9</sup> We in the West must take the complaints of our Muslim brothers and sisters very seriously, not simply for the purpose of eliminating the substrate for terrorism, but because we care about

their pain.

Similarly, the other 5 or 6 civilizations feel just as alienated by Western civilization as Islamic civilization does. For example, African civilization feels alienated by Western civilization, based upon the history of colonialism, slavery and pillaging of resources. It is this phenomenon of alienating each of the other civilizations that has caused Ambassador Kishore Mahbubani to coin the popular expression “the West and the Rest.”<sup>10</sup> It is imperative for us in the West to build healthy bridges based upon mutual respect with each of the other civilizations. Regardless of the culture we are from, we must build healthy bridges with members of each of the other civilizations.

Let us reflect, in passing, that although poverty leads to alienation, alienation is based upon rejection much broader than economic. Personal poverty was apparently less of an underlying factor for the perpetrators of the 11 September attacks than other issues of rejection.

**Alienation Within a Nation.** In addition to alienation between developed and developing nations and between civilizations, we have alienation within a nation. Just as serious and perhaps even more visible is the alienation that exists within a culture and a nation. The alienation within a nation can be reflected in the distribution of wealth within the nation. One indicator is the ratio of the consumption by those in the highest consuming 10% of the nation to those in the lowest 10%. As a reference, this ratio is typically in the range of 8-17 for Western and Asian nations. By contrast, in Africa and Latin American, this ratio is typically 20-40, although there are ratios as high as 66, 78, and 85.<sup>11</sup> This means that the highest consuming 10% of the nation enjoys using 30, 40, even 80 times as much as the lowest consuming 10%. What is disturbing is that this ratio is so much higher within the poorest nations.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the distribution of wealth within a developing nation is nearly as skewed as it is between the developed and developing worlds.<sup>13</sup> It should be no surprise, then, that the level of alienation within a developing nation is so high. In eradicating poverty, it will be necessary to address this alienation.

**Alienation Within the Family.** Then, there is alienation within the family. Let me illustrate this by asking the gentlemen this question: How many times have you said to your wife “I wish I were a woman instead of a man”? On the other hand, has your wife ever said to you “I wish I were a man, because I would have more opportunities”? The reason this statement is only made in one direction is because the members of one of the genders have a distinct advantage. Members of the other gender frequently feel alienated. There is intense pain over a lack of educational and vocational opportunities. Overcoming poverty will require the full participation of every member of society. We cannot afford for half of our population to feel like second-class citizens. We must resolve their alienation.

**Confronting Alienation.** I believe that the point is made that we have alienation at every level of our societies. The sad scenario I am painting for you today is that, generally, we are far too comfortable with people living as second-class citizens within our families, our nations and our world.

On each alienation issue, there is a pairing of two groups: those who benefit from the alienation and those who suffer—in other words, alienators and alienated. Alienation involves stepping on others to gain advantage. It involves hurting people, even some close to us, for our personal benefit. I am arguing that alienation is an active process, not simply a passive one as we would like to argue if we wanted to be excused from personal responsibility. I consider that consenting to receive the benefits of alienation makes me fully an active participant.

Correcting alienation will require my confronting my advantages over a significant fraction of my brothers and sisters. I have a privileged position and opportunities that half of the world does not have, just by my gender. What did I do to deserve or to gain this privilege? Absolutely nothing! I have a privileged position and opportunities that 85%<sup>14</sup> of the people of our world do not have just by my being born in a developed nation. What did I do to deserve or to gain this privilege? Absolutely nothing! Once we recognize that alienation is an active process, then it is clear that we who benefit from the alienation process must voluntarily release our grip on that benefit and work to reverse alienation. We must be willing to sacrifice something that does not really belong to us. With privilege comes responsibility. Those of us who are on the privileged side of alienation issues are the ones who must break down the alienation. The change must start with us.

The major problem is that we who benefit from alienation are unwilling to give up our advantages. I see an unwillingness of those benefiting to use their advantage to correct the alienation. To be blunt, we are willing to deal with every alienation issue except the ones from which we personally benefit. But this is precisely what will have to change if we are ever to overcome poverty.

If you are from a developed nation and you tell me that you are committed to eradicating poverty and yet you tolerate alienation of our brothers and sisters from LDCs or from Islamic civilization or from Africa or any of the other major civilizations, then to me you are not believable. If you are from a developing nation and you tell me that you are committed to eradicating poverty and yet you tolerate alienation within your nation, then to me you are highly suspect. If you tell me that you are committed to eradicating poverty and yet you tolerate alienation of your wife, then to me you are not credible.

The fundamental issue is: Are we willing to loosen our grip on the advantages we have received, through no merit of our own, for the sake of reducing alienation? We are faced with the seemingly insurmountable challenge of overcoming our selfish impulses to treat others as if they are just as important as we are. I am convinced that we can only do this with the power of God.

Jesus confronted the problem of tolerating alienation when He commanded “Love your neighbour as yourself.”<sup>15</sup> This sounds difficult enough, but Jesus added an element that makes this even more difficult. Jesus used a word for love that in the original language describes a love for another that is unconditional, not based upon whether the recipient deserves it. This is a pure love, not for anything that can be gained in return. Not surprisingly, this word *agape* does not occur anywhere in Greek literature outside of the teachings of Jesus in the Bible.<sup>16</sup> When Jesus said “Love your neighbour as yourself,” He was not saying to reduce hostilities with our neighbour for our mutual benefit. He was saying that we are to care about others with pure motivation—for their sakes and for their sakes alone. When Jesus defined the neighbours whom we are to love unconditionally, He referred to the ethnic enemies of the hearers<sup>17</sup>—a clearly alienated group. We are to love those whom our society teaches us are unlovable and whom we should hate—those whom our society permits or even encourages us to alienate.

How can we love those with whom we have differences? Let us consider the context of Jesus’ remarks. Jesus’ full statement was:

*“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbour as yourself.”<sup>18</sup>*

This does not say “Love your neighbour as much as you love yourself.” It says “Love yourself with God’s kind of love, then love your neighbour the same way.” The reason we do not and cannot love others is because we do not and cannot love ourselves. We cannot accept ourselves as a creation of God—sinners, yes, but sinners who can be forgiven through Jesus’ death on our behalf. Our inability to accept ourselves and love ourselves makes it impossible to love others. As human beings, we are too insecure to love ourselves. The key to all of this was described by Jesus when He told us to love God first. It is only as we love God and begin to understand and trust Him, that we have confidence in what He has done in creating us and designing a plan for us. Only God can forgive us and, with it, change our nature, giving us the capacity to love ourselves. Once we love Him, we can love ourselves. Then, and only then, can we begin to love others, and begin to reverse alienation.

Everyone must view it as his or her personal responsibility to reduce feelings of alienation in our world. Jesus told us:

*Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.<sup>19</sup>*

I know that I am a part of a group that has hurt my fellow human beings. This means that I cannot even go to the altar and worship God if I do not seek forgiveness from and reconciliation with my fellow human being whom I have

offended. We must humble ourselves before God, seek forgiveness from those we have alienated, and then commit ourselves to change, with God's help.

The inner struggle we face in changing was expressed by the Apostle Paul when he said:

*I really want to do what is right, but I can't. I do what I don't want to—what I hate. I know perfectly well that what I am doing is wrong...But I can't help myself, because I'm no longer doing it. It is sin inside me that is stronger than I am that makes me do these evil things.*<sup>20</sup>

We each have a side of us that alienates. It is obvious that we need an agent capable of changing us on the inside. We each have an alienating nature that, I am convinced, can only be brought under control by the power of God. I am convinced that the person of Jesus is a key part of this.

Can God change a person from one with the capacity to alienate into one with the capacity to heal alienation? I am convinced that God is powerful enough to do much more than this. Let me share one example of His power in the life of my wife Elaine. Sixteen years ago, Elaine was diagnosed as having a malignant ovarian tumour at an advanced stage. This kind of tumour at such an advanced stage is very difficult to treat effectively. Furthermore, the malignancy had spread to other locations in her reproductive system. Did this mean that God was going to allow my beloved wife to die? We did not believe it was God's intent. Two days later, she returned for further testing. As she was waiting in the examination room for the tests, in great pain, Jesus appeared to her in person. This was a miracle in itself. He told her: "You are going to be all right. You are going to be all right." She thought this meant she would not die from the cancer, but that she would have to undergo extensive treatment. Then, Jesus disappeared. A few minutes later, the medical technician began the tests and scanned her body for an hour looking for the tumour, but could find none! Subsequently, the doctors have taken tissue samples but have found no evidence of cancer cells. The symptoms, which had been present for more than a year, immediately left and never returned. She did not need any medical treatment. God clearly performed a miracle! The God who gave Elaine a new body can work in our hearts to make us, who are by nature alienators, into agents for healing alienation.

I need this kind of power in my life in order to be a healer from alienation rather than one who inflicts alienation. For me, this is summarized in the words of the Apostle Paul when he said "I have been crucified with Christ; and I myself no longer live, but Christ lives in me. And the real life I now have within this body is a result of my trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me."<sup>21</sup> It is by voluntarily giving up my personal goals to God and allowing Jesus to live my life for me that I have the ability to move from alienator to healer. God has told us through His servant: "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"<sup>22</sup>

Dealing specifically with the form of alienation that underlies poverty, let us consider how obedience to God can change the situation. Listen to this historical example from the first century. Referring to followers of Jesus:

*All the believers were of one heart and mind, and no one felt that what he owned was his own; everyone was sharing. And the apostles preached powerful sermons about the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and there was warm fellowship among all the believers, and no poverty—for all who owned land or houses sold them and brought the money to the apostles to give to others in need.*<sup>23</sup>

This is a group of people who clearly were able to deal with their alienation issues. Each member of this group started out as an alienator. However, each member of this group had been changed by the power of God.

The group illustrated here presents us with a very high standard. My dream is to see this kind of cooperation. For now, let us, with our first step, accept a lower standard. Once we have learned the principles of successfully conducting business, will we keep them from our brother or sister? No, we would share them. If he asked me if I would purchase his goods, would I buy them on equal footing? Gladly. If he asked me if I would give him a helping hand? I would. If he asked me if I would help him have access to the global economy? Definitely!

Such an approach has never been attempted on the scale I am proposing. The closest example we have is England in the eighteenth century. England, by the middle of that century, experienced a measure of economic prosperity.

However, there was tremendous economic disparity fueled by rampant greed and abuse of power, leading to poverty and famine. In the midst of abundance all around, fathers could not obtain enough work or income to feed their families. The economic abuse included children working in factories and coalmines 14 to 16 hours per day, often under dangerous conditions.<sup>24</sup> In the midst of this, a spiritual renewal spread throughout England. People at all levels of society experienced a change of heart toward God. Many changed their goals and the way they lived. Many leaders lived their changed lives in the public arena and encouraged others at all levels of society to participate in that renewal. As a result, reform took place in several areas: social, political, and economic. Economic reform included tackling the laissez faire system of economics, public works programs to elevate the salaries of working class labourers, and increased personal philanthropy toward the poor.<sup>25</sup> There was a dramatic improvement of the lives of those on the lower rungs of society.

Knowing what I know now, I am convinced that the best thing that we can each do to remove alienation and, with it, to alleviate poverty is to submit our lives to Almighty God and then to encourage everyone within our sphere of influence to do the same, whether from North or South, elite or peasant. We must ask God for the power to love those who are still alienators and encourage them to submit their lives to God as their Master.

**How do we submit to God?** The crucial question becomes: How do we become so intimately linked with God as to become His instrument for reversing alienation in our world? God created us out of love and for the purpose of bestowing love upon us as part of this intimate relationship. The God who reigns over nations is holy—without moral imperfection. However, clearly, we are not morally perfect. We have the capacity for evil. We hurt others, even the ones we love, by the selfishness we have been talking about. Our moral imperfection—our unholiness—blocks this relationship with God. It blocks us from the full benefits available to us as human beings, whether as private citizens or government officials. It excludes us from the presence of Holy God. Our unholiness is incompatible with God's perfect holiness. The problem is insurmountable from a human point of view. By ourselves, there is no way we can come into the presence of Holy God. By ourselves, we are eternally separated from the One who created us and loves us. The eternal consequences are great when one recognizes that being separated from our Creator at the end of this lifetime means a literal hell.

How can this blocked relationship with God be overcome? We need a way to be forgiven so that God can draw us close to Himself. By ourselves, there is no way we can accomplish this. Only Almighty God can do it. That is precisely why God Himself came to earth as Jesus to die on our behalf to pay the penalty for our sins. God has told us:

*Jesus is the image of the invisible God...By Jesus all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together...He is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything He might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Jesus and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things...by making peace through His blood, shed on the cross.*<sup>26</sup>

Mahatma Gandhi described that sacrifice when he said that Jesus, “a man who was completely innocent, offered himself as a sacrifice for the good of others, including his enemies, and became the ransom of the world. It was a perfect act.”<sup>27</sup>

Thus, Jesus has told us “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.”<sup>28</sup> God has told us “There is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.”<sup>29</sup> Through Jesus' death and resurrection, God is able to forgive us and to see us as holy. Jesus' death and resurrection is the only provision given to mankind whereby we can have our sins forgiven and have this intimate relationship with God. God has told us:

*Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour. But now He has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in His sight, without blem-*

*ish and free from accusation.*<sup>30</sup>

*God took the sinless Christ and poured into Him our sins. Then, in exchange, He poured God's goodness into us!*<sup>31</sup>

Let me be very clear: What I am advocating is not religion. It is the person of Jesus. As God Himself, Jesus is for all of us, not just certain races, cultures, or regions of the world. I believe this is what Mahatma Gandhi meant when he said:

Because the life of Jesus has the significance and the transcendency to which I have alluded, I believe that he belongs not solely to Christianity, but to the entire world; to all races and people, it matters little under what flag, name or doctrine they may work, profess a faith or worship a God inherited from their ancestors.<sup>32</sup>

The repentance and forgiveness that allows us to have an intimate relationship with God and, as a result to operate in partnership with God as His servant in our world, is centred in the person of Jesus. Let us not think we can have this any other way but through embracing Jesus and Him alone.

How do we place our faith in Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins, so we can experience this intimate relationship with God that lasts forever and follow Him in healing the alienation of such a high percentage of mankind? The illustration that communicates best to me relates to the region where I grew up—near Niagara Falls. The water flows over Niagara Falls so violently that if anyone falls into the water, it is certain death. Many people do risky things over Niagara Falls to gain attention. One of these was a tightrope walker. He had a wire strung over the Falls,

from one side to the other. This man first walked along this wire from one side of the Falls to the other, and back. Then, as the crowd grew, he repeated his walk but this time he pushed a wheelbarrow in front of him as he walked over to the other side and back. Then, he boldly filled the wheelbarrow with bricks and guided it along the wire to the other side of the Falls and back. By this time, the crowd had grown very large and was cheering loudly for him. He then asked the crowd “How many of you believe I can take this wheelbarrow to the other side of the Falls and back carrying a person inside instead of these bricks?” The crowd cheered wildly. Then, he asked the crowd “Who is willing to get into the wheelbarrow?” The crowd became silent. Their belief lacked 100% confidence. To place our faith in Jesus Christ means to get into the wheelbarrow with Him, making ourselves completely dependent upon Him. Our sole basis for having our sins forgiven and for entering a close relationship with God is Jesus’ death on our behalf.

It is this making ourselves dependent upon Jesus that gives us the capacity to be a healer of alienation. No one—neither you nor I—can become the agent God would use for healing alienation without the life of Jesus in us. Therefore, if you are serious about developing the kind of relationship with God necessary for healing alienation and eradicating poverty, I challenge you to come to Him. Jesus invites us:

*If any man is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, “From his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water.”*<sup>33</sup>

As we come to Jesus and drink, He will satisfy us and this will spill over to others in our societies, causing them to come to Jesus and drink. As others around us drink, there will be a growing corps of individuals who are able to receive healing from our alienation with God and to, then, be a part of healing the alienation that exists in our world.

For this reason, I invite you to come to Jesus and drink. Let me encourage you to embrace the Master Shepherd of our world and your life. I encourage you to invite Jesus into your life by praying to God:

*Holy God, please forgive me for sinning against You. Thank You for loving me enough that You came to this earth as Jesus and died on my behalf so that I could have an intimate relationship with You. I ask You to come into my life to dwell. Today, I receive You as my Saviour from my sins. I ask You to guide me moment-by-moment as I as I serve You. Thank You. Amen.*

Not only will this start you on the most exciting journey known to mankind, but it is the most significant thing each of us can do to become God's agents for healing the alienation that exists on so many levels.

## References

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## For Further Information

Our goal is to serve you as you serve your people. We would love to dialogue with you on any questions you might have as a result of the ideas presented here. We would welcome the opportunity to learn how we may serve you and your people better. Please address your communication as follows:

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