

Christadelphian Welfare Policy: A Critique

Capitalism And Christadelphian Welfare Policy

We all have a tendency to overlook where we are situated within life, and the nature of the social, economic or family system which we are part of. It seems to me that Western Christadelphians need to give some more thought to the simple fact that they live within a capitalist system, and to appreciate some of the features of that system within which they live. There would appear to be a tacit assumption amongst Western brethren that capitalism is somehow right, or at least, better and more justifiable than socialism; that the right wing of politics is better than the left.

In the context of seeking to conduct our mission work from the purest of motives, we need to reflect upon the historical progress of capitalism. As capitalism developed in the West, there arose a need to expand markets and find sources of raw materials. Expansion is necessary to fuel capitalism; it can't work without growth, without the creation of wealth, without the creation of new markets and cheap labour. This is why Marxist critics have always predicted that capitalism must ultimately come to an end once the whole world has been 'colonized' by capitalism. And so it was in the search for cheap raw materials and new markets that imperial colonialism began. The Western European nations began sailing the seven seas, running up their flags around the world.

Capitalism, however, affected the areas it invaded. They are sucked into what Milton Santos called a "core-periphery model" ⁽¹⁾. This core-periphery syndrome works itself out on different levels. In a Western country, the 'core' may be the owners of a factory. The 'periphery' are the workers who work for low pay in order to make large profits for the owners. Capital and resources tend to agglomerate, i.e. the 'core' people tend to come to live in the same areas, notably big cities. They may open a plant in a poorer or geographically isolated part of their country. The local managers of that plant in turn become the 'core', living in comfort, whilst the workers are again not given a fair share of the wealth created. Capitalism is characterized by its cyclical nature; production of goods and profits rise and fall over the years in cycles. In the downturn years, it's the periphery which suffers. The periphery plants are closed down for a few months, often with no compensation for the workers left with no income. When the economy picks up, the periphery is again brought into action.

Once the Western nations started to geographically spread their influence, the countries they arrived in became the 'periphery' to them. And yet the local people with whom they forged the deepest ties became the 'core' in their local context. The Western nations assumed that the areas they arrived in had no history; even today, the history of the American Indians, or the Australian Aborigines, or the Zulu tribes, are very poorly researched. It was assumed that Western culture would be exported there; that the 'White man's burden' was the spreading of his culture into the newly invaded areas. Eric Wolf wrote a classic study whose very title sums up his whole thesis: *Europe And The People Without History* ⁽²⁾. He discusses in detail the case of the American Indians, as does Immanuel Wallerstein in his study of *Historical Capitalism* ⁽³⁾. The Western traders arrived, and showed an interest in the skins which the Indians wore to keep warm. They exchanged trinkets and alcohol for skins. Suddenly, skins became really important. The Indians were running everywhere hunting and skinning animals. The Indians who learnt English and did the deals with the visitors became the 'core'. Then the Westerners offered them guns for skins. The Indian who possessed a gun became in a far stronger position to kill far more animals more quickly, and to therefore get more skins, and get more guns, with which to kill yet

more animals. These men therefore started to employ people to skin the animals; they started a primitive production line. And they suddenly had more power and goods than anyone else ever had. No longer was the tribal chief the most powerful and important person. The men with guns and skins were. These wealthy 'core' people were then able to indulge themselves. They started employing people to be their personal slaves; they amassed luxury goods. Things which were just occasional treats in their culture became things which the 'core' people regularly enjoyed. Money was introduced. Everything became commodified; things which had had no special meaning in the past, like skins, suddenly took on new meaning as a commodity. The meaningless trinkets bought from the Western visitors took on special value.

The same process repeated itself throughout the world, especially in Africa and Asia. Railways and transport networks were developed- not for the benefit of the local country, but in order to develop the links between core and periphery. Christianity was brought to these areas along with the economic exploitation. Nobody doubts the sincerity of the missionaries themselves; but there is no doubt that consciously or unconsciously, capitalism found the spread of Christianity convenient. It got the local people on their side; they could use the need to protect missionaries as a pretext for military presence; and it tied the local people into Western culture. David Livingstone was a medical missionary originally sent to Africa by the London Missionary Society, "but he later returned under government auspices as an explorer "to open a path for commerce and Christianity"". The French likewise used missionaries in Algeria and Tunisia as an excuse to "set up a religious protectorate that preceded the political protectorate. Gambetta said of [the missionary] Lavignerie, "His presence in Tunisia is worth an army for France""⁽⁴⁾.

Over time, the colonies were given independence. But there was a politics to that independence. It wasn't true care for the value of freedom or independence which led Britain and France to encourage their colonies to become independent. They wanted to retain them as their economic colonies, without the need to support their poverty- the poverty which they had created. And it's the same with the expansion of the E.U. into the poorer areas of Central and Eastern Europe. Cheap labour and easy markets are clearly the motive for dragging these new areas into the periphery of Western capitalism; for the core will remain in the Western countries.

Against this background, we must consider the simple fact that Christadelphians have been amongst those who went out from the West to 'convert' Africa; and in more recent times, have set out from England to 'convert' Eastern Europe, at the very time when that area is being tied in to the capitalist core-periphery model. The question we must ask in the context of mission work is simply 'To what degree are Western Christadelphians caught up in the attitudes and assumption of the Capitalist system to which they belong?'. When they enter e.g. Lithuania, or when they entered Kenya 30 years ago, are they bringing with them even unconsciously the Capitalist Western attitudes, assumptions and motivations which other Western missionaries have brought with them?

It would appear that the interaction between Western Christadelphians and those in what they call 'the mission field' does have elements of the core-periphery model about it. For example, English is seen as the 'core' language; the local 'core' members in the periphery are characterized by good English skills, email access etc. Often they are bought computers and mobile phones or have internet access paid for, by the Western brethren. Is this in essence any different to the colonial powers building railway and transport networks in the 'peripheries' which they invaded? One doesn't doubt the genuine motivations behind it all, and yet there is an uncanny similarity. The result often is that a core-periphery scenario is re-enacted in some newly preached in country, and the local 'core' in the new country end up with AV Bibles marked

up in the very same way as one might encounter in Adelaide, Australia; even learn how to pray using 'Thee' and 'Thou'; and end up bonding with other similar local 'core' members. They learn to sing the English language hymns, in a way which is comforting and reassuring to the Western visitors (the singing of local hymns in another language by the 'periphery' is found often to be rather disturbing by the Westerners). The Christadelphian orthodoxy of the 'core' members is then presented in the West as an example of the success and high standards of 'the Mission', with many appeals to patiently wait for the local 'periphery' members to 'get there'. But unity is not the same as uniformity; such examples are rather an admission of spiritual colonialism, rather than giving individuals the freedom which is in Christ, and which the cross opened up for every man and woman to whom we share the Gospel.

Power And Control

Power and control are what capitalism is all about. And one cannot easily dismiss the possibility that the same factors have crept into Christadelphian mission politics. If the Lord Jesus is our head, all concept of core-periphery vanishes. His greatness, the magnitude and extent of the Lordship which He exercises over us, should mean that we look to nobody else as our head or 'core'. All resources are *His*- not ours to manipulate. The teaching of the Lord Jesus places a huge value upon the value and meaning of the individual, with absolutely no distinctions made in terms of race or social / economic position. The very talk about 'the mission field' can smack of core-periphery. The 'core' is the Anglo-Saxon Christadelphian heartlands of North America, the UK and Australasia. The 'periphery' is the ecclesial worlds of Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe etc. Although there are now more non-Anglo Saxon Christadelphians than Anglo-Saxon ones, the core-periphery model seems to be in place in some ways. Ecclesias in the periphery are not accorded the respect nor autonomy of those in the core. It has not been unheard of for a 'core' ecclesia to disfellowship a member of a 'periphery' ecclesia; and the CBM position is that they decide the validity of baptisms performed in many 'periphery' areas, not recognizing the baptisms performed by local members there unless they have their approval. Welfare funding is made conditional upon being a 'CBM ecclesia'; whereas those who are simply, e.g., Jamaican ecclesias but not CBM ecclesias, are not granted that welfare support.

The dynamic in all our relationships must be the love of Christ. That alone must constrain us. We are under the constraint of all the principles which arise from seeing and knowing His person. Nikita Khrushchev pointed out many years ago that capitalism was by its nature unprincipled. It just went on growing. He saw a difference between what he called the principled world and the unprincipled world; and he feared the inevitable encroachment of the unprincipled upon the principled. He perceived that there was no care for individual people in unprincipled capitalism. It was survival of the fittest, a social form of Darwinism. Those with wealth and initiative and opportunities developed. Government intervention was only necessary in cases of acts of God like earthquakes, or in order to enable the working classes to do their jobs. We need to reflect upon Khrushchev's warnings and observations. For care for *the individual* must be paramount. It matters not what ecclesia or fellowship our brother belongs to; he is our brother, or she is our sister. Their needs are our needs. All our giving out in welfare or time or worry or support must be fashioned after the love and grace of our Lord to us. It is given out not to be controlling, without conditions- because it is grace. This was the Lord's point when He spoke of how in the world, those who are benefactors are those who exercise authority- but it is not to be so amongst us, He warned. In other words, our giving is not to be in order to get any power over anyone.

Culture

There is a cultural arrogance about the West, an assumption that their way, their literature, their language, their economic principle, simply has to be better than that of the 'periphery'. This is unconsciously assumed, even in Christadelphian mission programmes. Economic or technological superiority is confused with cultural superiority. If a Western brother shows his love for his Lord by wearing a tie to the memorial meeting or by pronouncing the Name 'Yahweh', he has no right to assume that his cultural perspective is automatically superior to that of a brother in, e.g., Central Africa who has a different culture. There are worrying signs that the Western desire to recreate the rest of the world in their own image has spread in some ways into our approach to mission work. Hymns are to be sung from the English Christadelphian hymnbook, or at best to be translated from English into a local language; the 'converts' are encouraged to learn English, an ecclesia in the middle of the South American jungle or the ice fields of northern Russia is expected to have the Birmingham, England 'Statement of faith' as the basis of their constitution, etc. It would be unheard of for the periphery to influence the core. The Western brotherhood [even though they are numerically smaller than the non-Western brotherhood] would likely feel insulted if they were asked to adopt, e.g., the Karachi Statement of Faith, or the Moscow Amended Statement of Faith. And yet in Christ, we learn from each other. The exhorter comes back exhorted. We are built up by that which every other member of the body supplies. No part of the body can think that they somehow are the source of power and vitality; for the Head is the Lord Jesus. True leadership is in servanthood, and respect or superiority is never demanded nor assumed- it is always loving given by the undemanded respect of others.

The West has always been fascinated with non-Western cultures, but they only see what they want to see- e.g. African or Arabic art, literature or cooking is depicted in mission publicity meetings as exotic, quaint, etc. Yet it's just as valid as anyone else's culture. Christadelphians in the 'periphery' often complain of being treated as animals in a zoo, stared at and photographed by fascinated Western Christadelphian visitors. Europe perceived that the rest of the world was without history, without culture, and needed to be graced by their presence. And this attitude can rub off on Western Christadelphian preachers.

"When President William McKinley told a delegation of church leaders that God had counseled him to annex the Philippines and "to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them," few Americans knew that the Philippines had an educational system older than that of the United States and that the majority of Filipinos were Catholic" ⁽⁵⁾. There is an assumption that 'they' must be helped by 'us', because 'they' have absolutely nothing of intrinsic value or ability- rather than dealing with each other as equals in Christ. The whole concept of equality in Christ turns the capitalist model on its head.

The local 'core' brethren in the 'periphery' of the 'mission field' often end up adopting the Christadelphian culture of the West, rather than allowing e.g. Chinese Christadelphians to be Chinese Christadelphians. One hears local brethren even speaking of themselves as being in 'the mission field', or even as 'overseas brethren'. But the very concept of a mission field, or being 'overseas', is all relative; 'overseas' from where? Over which seas? Indeed, one CBM welfare presentation features an African brother warning his white brethren that 'We blacks are always liable to be dishonest with money'. He had been abused by generations of economic and spiritual imperialism, of which Christadelphia had sadly been a part, to perceive his own people as the White West perceived them.

Politics

Exporting Western Christadelphian division into the mission field is a grave sin. Acts 6:1-6 makes the point that aid to the poor widows was cut off or impaired, because the other believers were arguing amongst themselves. It would appear that the Hebrew Christians went to the temple daily (Acts 2:46), whereas the Greek widows wouldn't have done (Acts 7:48,49). So the common theological disagreement about how far the Jewish Law should influence Christian life- resulted in old and needy ladies in the ecclesia suffering.

Welfare

The giving of welfare can be used as merely another link in the core-periphery model. True grace, or 'giving' as *charis* means, gives a genuine freedom of choice to the person helped. Such grace empowers. Giving, true, grace-inspired giving, is never a means of control. God's grace of giving His Son, and the "all things" which are in Him, is pure grace. Pure grace does not expect results, response, adulation etc. Those who grasp it do of course respond; response is inevitable, all because grace by its very nature doesn't expect this response. In the giving of welfare, those who are in a position to do so are to reflect the grace / giving of God; and His grace is never given in a controlling sense. Grace by its very nature is not controlling. Grace is sensitive to needs. No impoverished brother or sister should have to come cap in hand, Oliver Twist-style, asking for help. Help and support are given as part of a whole relationship. Never should it be emphasized that 'We have the money, you have the need'- for this is the stuff of control and core-periphery. If Western brethren are perceived solely as the source of welfare, then something of the 'Cargo Cult' will develop as it did in New Guinea 100 years ago. Missionary planes landed on the island and gave the people beads, food, goods etc. as aid- and then the planes flew off again. The local people worshipped the planes as God. The missionaries were playing God, unconsciously of course. No relationships were built. But the locals became loyal members of their church. This isn't what we want to see happening.

The view that the world should be left to go its way to its destruction, whilst the believers concentrate on their own acceptability before God, effectively leads to a *laissez-faire* approach to society- which is exactly Capitalism's view. Let the economy develop, intervene with social welfare if there are 'acts of God' such as floods or disaster, but let society care for itself, believing that capital will always trickle down to help the poor. And, therefore and thereby, the poor are poor because they are basically lazy. Welfare policy of the Bible missions appears to be similar- intervene in disasters, but little else. It may be shocking to think that Christadelphians are in fact so 'political' as to be passive supporters of Capitalism in this way, when we pride ourselves on being so apolitical. But it doesn't take much to figure out that *if* Christadelphians were to vote, the majority would vote for right-wing, Conservative parties who consciously enshrine the principles of Capitalism.

I have heard very many talks, exhortations, sermons etc. from our community which use a piece of business training or ideology in order to make a spiritual point. The message is that we can, e.g., serve the Lord more effectively and efficiently if we... develop good management practice and the like. There is little wrong with this in itself (although I would prefer all exhortation to be directly Jesus-based); but what this reflects is a tacit acceptance of overt capitalism. Here we see the tensions within much Christian mission work. On the one hand, the message is that we should not trust in ourselves, in human strength, but only in that strength which comes from the Lord. And yet on the other hand, there is a *laissez-faire* attitude to capitalism, and a tacit support of it, when this philosophy is all about human strength and trusting in the power of money for security.

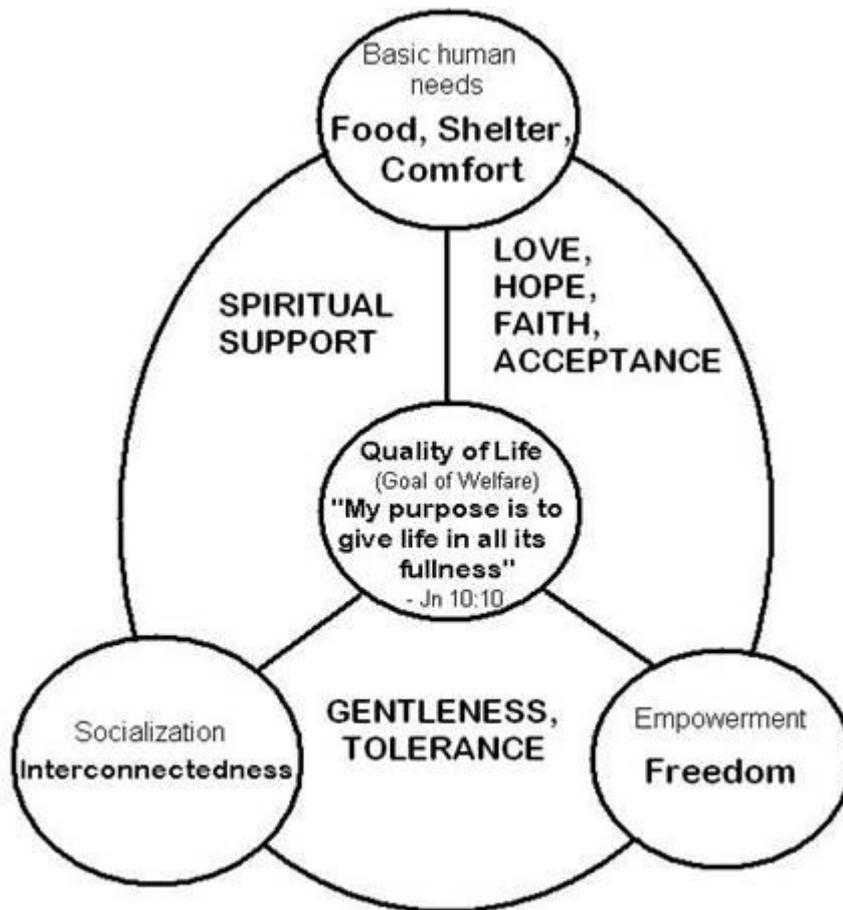
There has been the strong message in previous decades that God is somehow especially with America and the Anglo-Saxon world, and somehow He is especially against the Russian and Arabic speaking world. Can it be coincidental that these very areas were the two sections of the globe that the West failed to fully colonialize, never succeeding in drawing them into the periphery where the West was the core. The African, Asian and South American sectors of the global economy are generally treated with some kind of paternalistic pity by mission organizations; and these are the very areas that were well and truly sucked into the core-periphery model of capitalist expansion. Yet the Russian and Arabic speaking worlds have undoubtedly been treated by our community especially with more suspicion and negativity. Controversies over whether or not the converts there were valid broke out, whereas this didn't happen very much in the other areas. Far more cynicism has been expressed by us over meeting welfare needs there; and there has even been the comment that the Arabs shouldn't be helped but Jews should be. The existence of paradoxes of this magnitude can only be debilitating to any mission organization; they can only sow the seeds of confusion and disharmony within the lives and thinking of those whom it converts.

In capitalism, there has been what Wallerstein called 'the commodification of everything'. In spiritual terms, we could better talk about the objectification of everything and everyone. The value and wonder of the individual human person, so stressed by the Lord Jesus, is lost. Relationships are utilitarian, and can be severed even after 30 years. Relationships are a means towards an end, rather than being enjoyed for what they are in themselves- the natural bonding of men and women in Christ. Standard Christadelphian mission work has a very sad history of argument, dispute, betrayal and broken relationships- along with a poor track record of caring for the needy *individual*. Could this not be because of the 'objectification of everything'? Of course, none of this has been consciously done. It has all been an unconscious, tacit result of not firmly establishing spiritual principles *first*, and insisting on working according to *them* rather than according to political expedient.

Towards A Holistic Welfare Policy

This study has mainly sounded only caveats. More positively, building on these points, we would like to present the conclusion of a study by Sister Ruth Stibbs (Brisbane, Australia):

"From a social welfare point of view, welfare means people feeling connected to others, of being part of a group, of not being alone in the world. But from the spiritual welfare aspect which we are promoting, I would rather call this 'True Fellowship', despite the somewhat legalistic context in which it is understood these days in Christadelphia. True Biblical fellowship provides the most loving, supported interconnectedness with others and is really what we are getting at:



Notes

(1) Milton Santos, *The Divided Space* (Rio: Alves, 1978).

(2) Eric Wolf, *Europe And The People Without History* (University of California Press, 1982).

(3) Immanuel Wallerstein, *Historical Capitalism* (Verso, 1996).

(4) Quotes from David Thomson, *Europe Since Napoleon* (Knopf, 1966).

(5) Helen Toribio, Abe Ignacio and Jorge Emmanuel, *Malevolent Assimilation* [quote provided by John Stibbs].