Global issues and Christian perspective on justice, peace and human development

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The Industrial Revolution in Europe during the 18th century was a great turning point in modern history. It promised a better socio-economic and politico-cultural life for all peoples. It was hoped that substantial economic progress and peace for everyone would result. However, for the overwhelming majority of people that dream did not come true. That revolution helped some people in the society to exploit and manipulate majority for their own selfish interests. Class interests developed and class struggle grew intense. Eventually problems like these in the modern European society coupled with arrogant nationalism led the world to the two World Wars during the first half of the twentieth century. That period of damage and destruction was followed by what is known as the Cold War between the Super Powers dividing the world in two separate economic and military blocks: Communism and Capitalism. Together with this scenario modern scientific and technological advancement produced a civilisation and culture, which virtually made human beings slaves to science and technology because of their economic and political greed and power. It is an irony that the advance of science and technology led many to believe that development for many would ensue, but the benefits of that were rather unequally distributed and tended to highlight the gaps and entrench poverty. Total economic and human growth for ordinary exploited people of the world at large continued to be an illusion. “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct to the other way”. This is how Charles Dickens in his The Tale of Two Cities expressed his feelings about the so-called development that came with the Industrial Revolution.

In the name of secularism and human advancement moral and ethical values came to be increasingly neglected. Advanced technology and secular morality pushed man to many morally and ethically questionable practices like genetic engineering, transplantation of animal organs into human body, abortion, half-abortion, euthanasia, test-tube babies, artificial insemination, surrogate motherhood, cloning, etc in the recent years. There has been unthinkable progress (!) in militarisation, weaponry, in human device for killing people and destroying establishments with
the invention of biological and chemical weapons and nuclear and atomic weapons of diverse nature.
The industrially advanced countries have been exploiting the resources of the poor nations and dominating over them. Poor nations are becoming poorer and more and more dependent on them.
Due to the undue intervention in internal affairs of the poor countries the promotion to democracy in those countries has been hindered. The web of globalisation is easily seen as a new way of economic colonisation of the developing countries by the technologically advanced nations. Globalisation, materialism, consumerism and neo-imperialism have compelled the poor countries to enter into unhealthy business relations with the rich ones. The resources of the earth have been used and abused to feed those modern gods of materialism and consumerism. All the basic elements of nature earth, water, air and even sunshine have been polluted. Mankind has awfully failed to be faithful keeper of God’s beautiful creation and made a mess of it!
Religious fanaticism, bigotry and fundamentalism have also been besetting problems in the world. In spite of all the glorious achievements and advancement in science and technology, the promotion of the tapping and use of the fertile imaginations of Man all over the oikoumene still today there prevails so much wrong interpretation and use of religion. Sectarianism and narrowness put a big question mark against our achievements. These have been the cause of battles and riots in almost all parts. Human rights of minorities have been violated in so many diverse ways.
The problem of the world has always been spiritual and moral. Man, who is called “the crown of creation needs to turn to God, to His Word and Will to help himself from further destruction. Some one has nicely put it: “the heart of the problem is the problem of the heart.”
I wish to draw our attention to the following themes and highlight some major world problems and try to find what our faith has to teach us on our subject. Primarily I wish to highlight that the God of the Bible is a God of action. He is a just God. He basically what he does in and for his creation. He is not a god of the philosophers only. The Hebrew and Greek words for God’s Word, ‘dabar’ and ‘Logos’ are not merely abstract word ideas. They represent God’s mind, intention, intelligence, his plan and work. That’s why he said, and it all came to be (see Genesis 1, Psalm 19:1-4, Amos 4:6-10). So the Bible declares, “in the beginning was the Word, the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”(Jn 1:1). God works in and fashions human history and culture. The Old Testament testimony is that he did that in ancient times in a particular people’s life, the Hebrews. In his appointed time he became incarnated in human flesh so that we could see how he finally dealt with the question of true justice and peace that remains. The themes are:

1. God is both the Creator and the Righteous Judge of all men:

Genesis 1:26-31, 18:25, Is.1: 2-3, 11-17, 21-23, 3:1f., 5:11-24, etc. are some of the relevant Scriptures. God created human beings in his own image and likeness. These two words mean that God shares with Man his communicable moral
attributes with humankind. So when Man is in pains and agonies God feels that pain. He is the creator and judge of all people and all nations for their disobedience and rebellion against him exhibited in all forms of greed and pride. We might concentrate our thought on the Magnificat in order to understand this theme clearly. According to the Gospel as recorded by St Luke we see Mary, the mother of Jesus praising God for His intervention in human history. God, the King of Kings and Judge of all the world pulls down the tyrannical rule of the worldly powers and sets at liberty the oppressed and weak ones. In the Old Testament we see the two attributes of God, e.g. ‘righteousness’ and ‘justice’ are intertwined. The Hebrew word ‘tsedeq’ means both.

Biblical ethics speaks of both individual and corporate ethics without which the Kingdom of God is not possible. God works with people and with community. We are his co-workers (I Cor. 3:9) in the process of liberation. In the ancient time God appointed Moses to be his agent of liberation of the oppressed Hebrew slaves. In course of history He raised and used many great heroes for His work of justice and liberation for the oppressed ones. He even used the non-Israelite rulers like Cyrus of Persia to set at liberty the Israelite exiles. God is no respecter of persons because He loves and cares for all people. In order that all people can partake in his holy love he throws down out the unjust and oppressors, whose tyrannical activities represent Satanic powers, from authority just like Jesus cast demons oppressing people. “He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work” (I John 3:8).

2. The Kingdom of God is within us with the coming of Christ in history:

Some Scritural references Psalm 85:10, Micah 4:1-4, Matthew 12, Luke 11, etc.

We as Christians believe and preach the Kingdom of God. This Kingdom refers to God’s rule on earth and in our lives. It has been inaugurated in the coming of Christ to the world. We must accept it and respond to it by being obedient to God’s holy will that make us live a life of love, compassion, justice and peace for all. Jesus’ birth, ministry, miraculous activities, unjust death and resurrection have all been the sings of God’s Kingdom on earth. The entire world was subjected to death and destruction as the direct result of the Fall of Man as the hands of Satan. It has now been groaning for salvation from Satan’s bondage. St Paul said, “We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.” (Rom. 8:22-23).

If St Mark’s Gospel is the first among the four gospels the first miraculous work that Jesus did was that of the casting out an evil spirit at a very centrally important place i.e. the Synagogue in Capernaum, and that act was the first miracle since his announcement about the coming of the Kingdom of God.

3. Eternal destiny of man cannot be separated from temporal life:
**Christian Theology is no “pie in the sky” theology. Lk 2:14, 4:18-9, Eph.2: 14-5, 6:12.**

We must have a ‘Paradigm shift’ in Theology from the traditional theological outlook that we have inherited from the Western colonial countries through the old missionaries in order that we can relate the Christian message of transformation in our day-to-day life and work. Paradigm refers to set of beliefs, values, attitudes and techniques etc. commonly shared by a given community or society. An example of paradigm shift in science is the shift from the Ptolemaic belief of the static world to that of the Copernican belief that the earth revolves round the sun. We need to have the holistic view of reality and discover the inherent connection between the material and the spiritual, the personal and the social, the individual and the collective.

Christian belief is essentially holistic. It means everything is within the purpose of God. Holistic ministry implies care and growth of the total personality of a man: body, mind and soul. In the Bible man is seen in his total personality. It is related to Christ’s redemptive work of restoring harmony of all creation in the totality of relationship: a) Relationship of Man to his own self, b) His relationship with his neighbor, c) His relationship with nature and environment, and d) His relationship with God. We believe in holistic transformational change in the individual and community that will positively affect the attitude of people to life and the world.

John Went, Bishop of Tewkesbury (England) made this opening remark in his Foreword to ‘Body and Soul’ (a collection of Papers presented at the Second World Vision Christian Forum) observed, “In the history of the Christian Church a preoccupation with people’s eternal destiny has led to a neglect of the injustice and suffering of this world. Too often the church has been perceived as a strong defender of the status quo at the expense of the needs of the poor and vulnerable.”

The global issues and problems for most of which the Western so-called Christian colonial powers and super powers are responsible must make us change our traditional theological perspective and understand the Christian message of liberation from every structure of injustice and oppression. This paradigm shift results from the experiences of people living under systems of violence, domination, discrimination and any form of exploitation and abuse. A new interpretation of the Word of God is called for out of the experience of man in such situation coming from the relationship between God and Man as created in the image and likeness of God Himself.

4. **We are not owners of any resources, but we are stewards of God’s resources:**

Gen. 1:26-31, Ps. 24:1, I Cor. 4:2, I Cor.6: 20, I Pt 4:10, Rom.14: 12, Lk. 15(lesson from the 3 parables of Jesus), Mt 25: 14-5 are some of the references on this issue.

The Bible begins with the theme of Stewardship and ends also with the same theme (Gen.1: 26-31, Rev. 22:18-19). Man has miserably failed to be faithful stewards of God’s creation. Three billion people in the world today live in poverty. They live on an average income of less than 2 US dollars each daily. Jesus spoke about justice
and peace 2000 years ago in the Roman colony of Palestine. But still today the same human problems of injustice, neglect and greed continue unabated.
The present world’s annual spending on arms is $800 billion, on illegal drugs is $450 billion and on advertising is $450 billion. These are the spending on items, which are less important than any other mentioned above. The world’s resources are wasted to feed the greed and lust of those who have more than enough.
To cater for these, natural resources are also becoming limited. According to the Foundation Document for World Convocation of Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation (1992):
- “every day a species becomes extinct;
- every year an area of tropical forests three quarters the size of South Korea destroyed and lost;
- every decade the sea level will rise by about 1.5 meters as a result of present global warming trends, portending disastrous consequences for our planet and especially to coastal areas.”
Modern technological development has brought in its train colossal ecological problems and risks for the whole world. More than 2.3 billion people suffer from diseases caused from water pollution today. According to the World Commission on water for the 21st century more than half of world’s major rivers are so and polluted that they pose a big threat not only to human health but also to the entire ecosystem. Only half of South Asia’s 550 million people have access to safe drinking water. The death toll from air pollution is around 3.0 million per year. Today 35,000 children die due to malnutrition and preventable diseases, 1 million children become prostitute every year, and there are 100 million street children. According to WHO estimate about 7,00,000 deaths could be prevented every year in the developing world if major atmospheric pollutants like carbon monoxide, suspended particulate matter and lead could be reduced. Organic food pollutants cause direct threats to our health since long.
More than 5,50,000 people worldwide are infected with HIV today, and HIV left more than 13 million orphans by 2003. About 36 million people worldwide are currently living with AIDS 95% of which live in the developing countries. AIDS has already killed 23 million people.
More than 150 million children do not attend primary school and 150 million children drop out of education before grade IV. Contaminated water claims the lives of 5 million children annually. Due to wars and domestic strifes in various countries about 40 million are refugees in other countries than their own and are displaced in their own home countries. About 250 million children are child laborers and more than 3,00,000 are forced to take arms. The age-old minority issue is one of the crucial issues in almost all over the world. Minorities suffer because of political, religious, ideological, economical and ethnic reasons.
Considering the various urgent issues that the organizations with commitment to sustainable development all over the world (e.g. World Vision, CARITAS, etc.) believe that this dismal picture could be changed if the following areas are addressed with honest political will and commitment as the Millennium goals on the part of GOs and NGOs of whatever kind:

5. **There can be no lasting and true peace without justice:**

The God of the Bible is God of justice and peace. In the OT the word for ‘Peace’ is ‘Shalom’ meaning wholeness, healing, abundance, prosperity for everyone in the community. Usual Old Testament Scriptures include Isaiah 1:17, 3:14, Jere. 7:5-7, 22:13-6, Micah 2:1-12, 5:7, Amos 4:1, 8:5, Micah 3:5-11, 6:10-11, Psalm 34:14, Hosea 12:17, etc. The teachings of Jesus focus on the genuine human rights of the poor. Justice is giving one her/his genuine due. The world suffers from lack of peace because human rights are violated in every sphere of life, in every country and society. When the false prophets in the OT declared peace, peace (like the prophet Hananiah in the book of Jeremiah) they were hiding the truth under some sort of cosmetic peace in the society. Most of the so-called Third world governments are representatives of Hananiah of Jeremiah’s time. In order to establish peace we need to ensure justice. To do so we also need to address the root causes, the bad structures that help perpetrate socio-economic injustice and deprivation of human rights to people. This is no easy and quick job. It needs genuine love and commitment on the part of all.

6. **Faith without work of obedience and love is dead:**

The Christian community should be a sign of the Kingdom of God in all its activities whether it is evangelical or socio-economic development of the poor people. But mere faith in God will not avail. We need to trust in the power of the Spirit of God and commit ourselves in transforming our own lives and also the lives of others. The book of James has as many as 54 exhortations that concerns peace, justice, love in action, the interrelationship between faith and work. Love excels any other virtues. So it is bound to transform people. Without genuine love and concern we cannot do anything for any people of sustainable value. Effective change is costly. Jesus paid a price by laying his sinless life. To follow his footsteps we also will need to come to people with outreaching love and sacrifice. That’s how we can be incarnation of God’s love in us for all of his creation. We need to remember what Jesus taught the Scribe, who asked him about how to get eternal life (Mt. 22:37-40, Luke 10:27). We often think and behave like this religious leader of Jesus’ time. Instead of considering our mission and vocation of loving our neighbours and God in this present world we focus on the eternal life! Some thing must be basically wrong somewhere in our paradigm or thinking!

7. **We are God’s co-workers for the purpose of reconciliation:**
God works through people. E.M Bounds: “Men are God’s methods.” The Bible is so full with instances of this truth. Our mission is to reconcile people to people, people to God. St Paul calls Christians as God’s co-workers (I Cor. 3:9). Jesus commissioned His followers to continue his work of reconciliation. Paul explicitly told about this ‘reconciliation’ as lying at the heart of the Gospel when he said, “All this is from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us”(2 Cor. 5:19-21). The greatest single ultimate goal of any development work is to make peace and reconciliation for all people in the community. The entire life of Jesus is full with events telling about His reconciling and reconciling ministry.

8. Ours is a prophetic and advocacy role:

“Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy”, urged the ancient sage in Proverbs (31:8-9).

If we profess God both as Creator and the Judge of all men we need to share his concern for justice and reconciliation in human society for all people. All people are God’s image-bearers and have the intrinsic dignity of the ‘imago dei’. The message of Christ’s salvation is a message of judgement against any form of bondage, injustice and alienation. Christ’s call to follow him means that we are in the business of transforming lives and relationships in all individual and societal contexts.

Consider the work, the preaching of all the prophets and great leaders in the Bible: e.g. Joseph, Moses, Amos, Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Nehemiah, etc. They were advocates for the will and purpose of God in the life of the people of Israel as well as that of all other nations. They advocated the cause of the poor, the oppressed and afflicted people. We have a prophetic and advocacy role to play for the poor and weak ones. All the prophets preached for a change and transformation of lives of people. In that tradition Jesus Christ came with the supreme prophetic voice. He saw himself as the Servant of the LORD and not only preached peace but also paid the price for it. We love and preach peace; we are ever ready to war for protecting our selfish interests.

“Change is the essence of life. The moment we cease to change, to be able to adapt, to respond effectively to new situations, then we have begun to die”, so said Lee Kuan Yew. Today this world needs more prophets---prophets to call people to repentance and to act justly to people in all human relationships, in the family, in organisations, in the Church, in the society at large. Do we have that courageous prophetic voice in our Church? Let us consider what Jesus would do if he were still with us in our present day world where fair seems to be foul and foul fair.

Let me quote from a Statement made at a Council of Bishops in the Philippines on peace and justice:

“Genuine peace comes when justice is served.
For as long as peasants remain landless,
For as long as labourers do not receive just wages,
For as long as we are politically and economically dominated by foreign nations, For as long as we channel more money to the military than to basic social services, for as long as the causes of social unrest remain untouched, There will be no peace.”

The Bishop’s Synod held in 1971 declared: “Action for justice is a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, ...of the Church’s mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation”. It also said, “Genuine peace implies an absolute demand for justice, namely, a recognition of the dignity and rights of one’s neighbour.” The Lausanne Covenant in 1974 also gave due importance to the question of justice and sustainable peace.

It is very right and fitting that the Church and all Christian organizations not only verbalise like these, but also adopts practical agenda to incarnate these words. It is a hard truth in history that the so-called mystical body of Jesus Christ, the incarnation of God and his transforming Word, the one who died unjustly for the cause of justice and true human dignity occupied most of her time in what could perhaps be termed as ‘hatching, matching and dispatching!’ Let God’s Word give us another ‘wake up’ call now. To conclude, an African Proverb: “The best time to plant a tree is 20 years ago. The next best time is today!”