

Global Growth, Poverty, and Inequality

Part I. A Little Christmas Cheer

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The **Christmas season** is a very special time of year, when Americans, in particular, engage in a veritable month-long orgy of holiday revels and festivities, including eggnog sipping, Santa sitting, package wrapping, neighborhood caroling, tree decorating, menorah lighting, turkey stuffing, and generally speaking, spending, getting, and giving as much as possible, at least to their immediate friends and family.

We don't wish to question the sincerity of all these festivities. After all, as this November's Presidential election has reminded us, ours is surely one of the most vehement, powerful, unapologetic Judeo-Christian empires in world history. Like other such empires, it has every right to celebrate its triumph while it lasts.

According to the latest opinion surveys, this is indeed a religious nation, at least if we take Americans at their word. More than [85% of Americans adults consider themselves "Christians,"](#) [another 1.5% consider themselves "Jews,"](#) [84% pray every week,](#) [81% believe in life after death,](#) [60% believe the Bible is "totally accurate in all its teachings,"](#) [59% support teaching creationism](#) in public schools, and fully 32% -- 70 million people, including 66% of all evangelicals -- [would even support a Constitutional Amendment to make Christianity the official US national religion.](#)

In light of all this apparent religious fervor, it is disturbing to read several recent analyses by OXFAM and the UN of certain persistent, grim social realities around

the world – and the paltry efforts that the New American “Judeo-Christian Empire” is making to redress them.

CHRISTMAS CHEER?

- According to the UN’s [UN International Labor Organization \(December 2004\)](#), among those still waiting for economic justice are nearly three-quarters of the world’s population – 4.7 billion people -- who somehow manage to survive on less than \$2.50 per day. These include [1.4 billion working poor](#), half of the 2.8 billion people on the planet who are employed.
- According to the [UN’s Food and Agricultural Organization \(December 2004\)](#), the world’s poor now include at least **852 million people** who go to bed hungry each night – an increase of 20 million since 1997. The continuing problem of mass famine has many side-effects – including an estimated [20 million low-birth-rate babies](#) that are born in developing countries each year, and another [5 million children](#) who simply die of malnutrition each year. In some countries, like Bangladesh, half of all children under the age of six are malnourished.
- Overall, for the 5.1 billion residents of low- and middle-income countries, average life expectancy remains about 20-30 percent shorter than the 78 year average that those who live in First World countries now enjoy. By 2015, this will produce a shortfall of some 50 million poor children and several hundred million poor adults. But at least this will help us realize the perhaps otherwise-unachievable “Millennium Development Goals” for poverty reduction.
- According to [UNICEF \(December 2004\)](#), more than **1 billion children** – half of all children in the world -- are now growing up hungry, in unhealthy places that are suffering from severe poverty, war, and diseases like HIV/AIDs.
- According to [Oxfam \(December 2004\)](#), First World countries have basically [renege](#)d on their 1970 promise to commit **.7 percent** of national income to aid to poor countries. Last year such aid amounted to just **.24 percent** of national income among OECD nations, **half the 1960s average**. And the US commitment level was just **.14 percent**, the lowest of any First World country, and less than a tenth of the Iraq War’s cost to date.
- This month’s [10th UN Conference on Climate Change \(COP-10\)](#) in Johannesburg reviewed a growing body of evidence that suggests that climate change is gathering steam, and that the world’s poor will among its worst victims. Among the effects that are already becoming evident are

widespread droughts, rising sea levels, increasingly severe tropical storms, coastal flooding and wetlands damage, tropical diseases, the destruction of coral reefs and arctic ecosystems, and, God forbid, a reversal of the [ocean's "thermohaline" currents](#).

Overall, as the conference concluded, for world's poorest countries – and many island economies – the threat of such effects is much more threatening than "global terrorism."

So far, however, the US – which, with less than one-twentieth of the world's population, still produces over a fifth of the world's greenhouse gases -- seems [determined to do nothing](#) but stand by and watch while energy-intensive "economic growth" continues. This year's oil price increases have slowed the sales of gas-guzzling SUVs somewhat, yet more than 2.75 million Navigators, Hummers, Land Rovers, Suburbans, and Expeditions have already been sold. The US stock of passenger cars and light trucks, which account for more than 60 percent of all US oil consumption, is fast approaching 220 million -- almost 1 per person of driving age.

Meanwhile, many neoconservative economists and their [fellow-travelers in the Anglo-American media](#) continue to tout conventional measures of "growth" and "poverty." Indeed, according to the most corybantic analysts, a free-market-induced "end to poverty as we have defined it" has either already arrived, or will only require the poor to hold their breath just a little bit longer – until, say, 2015.

As we will see in Part II of this series, this claim turns out to be -- like so many other elements of modern neoconservative dogma – a preposterous falsehood. But it does help to shelter our favorite dogmas – religious and otherwise -- from a day of reckoning with the truth.



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