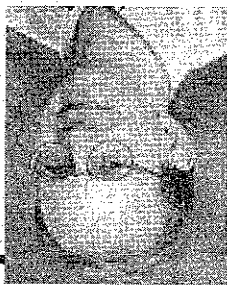


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What the tsunami says about economic justice



A few weeks ago, I was heartened to read the news that my church, Southeast Christian Church, had collected \$732,000 from its members (beyond its weekly giving) for tsunami relief in Southeast Asia. That partially offset the news I had just read — as reported in the Wall Street Journal — that tariffs (i.e., taxes) imposed on Sri Lanka by the United States government were nearly \$250 million in 2003 (it turns out that tariffs imposed on Thailand and Indonesia approached nearly \$2 billion).

Nearly all of that amount was imposed on the Sri Lankan textile industry.

And the amount imposed on that industry exceeded all of the tariffs imposed on all trade with all six Scandinavian countries — despite the fact that those countries export nearly 12 times more to the United States, collectively have about 10 times greater GDP than Sri Lanka and have citizenry whose per capita incomes are far higher than those in Sri Lanka.

Why does this occur? The U.S. textile industry is one of many special interest groups that benefits from having restricted competition. Interest groups and the politicians who work with them find it profitable to impose discriminatory taxes on foreign producers that result in higher prices for American consumers. In contrast to the obvious benefits for the protected industry and politicians — campaign contributions and a passionate voting bloc, to name a couple — the costs imposed are subtle. How many consumers know they pay significantly higher prices for clothing because of these laws? How many voters know or care that foreign workers and investors in poor countries are impeded in their ability to sell product within the wealthiest market in the world?

Because Christians tend to pay almost exclusive attention to relatively few (albeit important) issues, they often ignore other important policies. The passions of the Religious Right flare on issues of social morality and abortion, but they rarely think about issues of economic justice. The Scriptures, especially through the prophets, give a more balanced picture. Ironically, the prophet Amos even points to clothing (Amos 2:6):

"They sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample on the heads of the poor as upon the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed."

The interests of the Religious Left are centered more tightly around the fate of the poor. But their policy concerns in that realm are relatively narrow, focusing

mostly on welfare and foreign aid. Christian Libertarians are excited about voluntary displays of charity, but saddened that political shenanigans can so easily swamp the efforts of compassionate people.

Pragmatism would seem to warrant discussion of a wider set of relevant issues — trade protectionism, labor market restrictions, the government's monopoly in education over the inner-city poor, and a host of other policies that promote economic injustice.

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All that said, care for the poor and oppressed is not a strictly Christian exercise. And very few people — Christian or not — are informed about the primary and secondary consequences of significant policy issues. Although Southeast Christian Church can be pleased and honored to pay a small part of Uncle Sam's tax bill for those who live in Southeast Asia, perhaps all compassionate people should pay more attention to the larger issues of trade protectionism and the mechanics of economic justice. ■

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