

Neo-Missionaries and the Polemics of Helping

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Despite the existence of extreme wealth on our planet, billions of persons remain desperately poor. Almost half of humanity – over 3 billion people – lives on less than US\$2.50 a day. Nearly half of the world’s 2.2 billion children live in poverty. According to the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), 22,000 children under the age of five die each day due to poverty-related conditions. One-quarter of the world’s population lacks electricity, and water problems affect half of the people on Earth.¹

Women suffer a disproportionate share of the burdens of poverty. Hundreds of millions of women are living in peril. Women lack access to healthcare. The United Nations estimates that providing reproductive healthcare globally would cost about US\$12 billion (less than the amount spent on pet food in the US and Europe), yet funding is lacking, and women continue to die from preventable diseases and circumstances associated with pregnancy and childbirth. Widespread and systematic discrimination against women contributes to the occurrence of domestic violence and its associated damages. The fate of humanity and the protection of the environment are intimately linked to the health and strength of women, and yet hundreds of millions of women live in embattled circumstances. That so many women are in trouble means we all are.

Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn’s *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide* focuses on the plight of women and calls for action “to battle gender inequity around the world and to push for education and opportunities for girls around the world” (Kristof and WuDunn 2009, 233). While their missive on the struggles women face is informative and important, the prescriptions Kristof and WuDunn preach are counter-productive. In short, Kristof and WuDunn get the problem right but the solution wrong.

The strength of this work is its careful attention to the (largely preventable) harsh and often lethal conditions women face. Its crucial weakness is the call for individual, charitable cash contributions. This is a significant error. Examining the ways in which Kristof and WuDunn succeed in discussing the problem, but ultimately proscribe the wrong solution, is a useful strategy to interrogate the broader polemics of humanitarianism in the era of neoliberalism.

Kristof and WuDunn have ample empirical evidence to discuss suffering. In chapter after chapter, each rich in anecdotes of specific women and their problems, the authors illuminate the struggles women face to survive. Kristof and WuDunn’s narratives offer a useful education on the hardships women face. Inadequate healthcare means women die from otherwise preventable diseases. As they note, it is important to know that “MMR”

means maternal mortality ratio, which in turn refers “to the number of maternal deaths for every 100,000 live births” and that, globally, one maternal death occurs every minute (Kristof and WuDunn 2009, 98). The authors argue, convincingly, that “maternal morality is an injustice that is tolerated only because its victims are poor, rural women” (Kristof and WuDunn 2009, 122). The stories of young girls forced into prostitution appropriately shock and horrify. Kristof and WuDunn relate powerful stories of women who are beaten, raped, and suffer other forms of physical abuse, in many cases from the hands of intimates and/or family members. Failure to see the problem is part of the problem; therefore this intervention is important in raising awareness and provoking consciousness.

Admirably, Kristof and WuDunn do more than merely complain about the status of women. The authors want this knowledge to morph into outrage, which in turn will generate the desire to act to correct the situation. The authors suggest to the readers that the way to combat global gender inequity is through individual charitable contributions. The organizations the authors promote are, almost entirely, explicitly faith-based, and usually Christian.² This is disturbing, because while the authors appear to be widely traveled, sophisticated, and well-educated, there is a startling absence of any deeper awareness of the way Christian missionaries have created at least as many problems as they have solved. If one is going to be a neo-missionary, perhaps it would be useful to rethink why missionaries historically have been the agents of oppression rather than the instigators of equal opportunity.

Charity, past and present, has often failed to accomplish its putative purposes of alleviating suffering. Humanitarian action, despite explicit good intentions, often produces contradictory results. As Marianne Gronemeyer has shrewdly observed, “helping” has a history (Gronemeyer 1992, 53–60). Individual acts of charity, particularly those funneled through religious organizations, have a record of serving the giver more than the recipient of aid. The medieval system of alms, Gronemeyer explains, was explicitly connected to biblical proscriptions and eternal consequences. Rich men believed that their only chance of passing through The Pearly Gates (“a rich man has less of a chance of entering heaven than a camel passes through the eye of a needle”) was to take care of the poor, who were, after all, like Jesus. The next phase of the development of charity, in our modern times, saw “helping” move away from saving the (individual and particular) soul and towards controlling the population.³ The desperate had to be managed in order to avoid disturbing the broader body politic and to mitigate the possibilities of revolt. Helping the poor helped the rich and powerful maintain control.

Gronemeyer argues that current forms of domination deliberately assume a mantle of “helping” in order to function in their otherwise extractive purposes, and that “despite manifold historical instances to the contrary, the welcome ring of the idea of helping has survived in the consciousness of ordinary people. Help thus appears to them as innocent as ever” (Gronemeyer 1992, 54). Contemporary forms of charitable support to poor

populations in the form of “development” constitute “the metamorphosis from a colonialism that ‘takes’ to one that supposedly ‘gives’ (and is) [. . .] an instrument of the perfect – that is, elegant exercise of power” (Gronemeyer 1992, 55).

Social theorists use the term “neocolonialism” to describe the persistence of uneven power-relations between ostentatiously independent decolonized nations and their former colonial overseers. Scholars in colonial studies, especially those sympathetic to World Systems Theory and the Dependency School, have observed that the power-relations, terms of trade, and plague of debt combine to make “aid” a feature of continuing dependence. We should all be suspicious of “development” and “humanitarian aid” schemes, because many such efforts have been shown to empower the lender rather than the “underdeveloped community” being modernized and “helped.” Arundhati Roy makes the point that local peoples can rightly be wary of the alleged benevolent intentions of international humanitarian organization:

[I]n areas of heightened conflict – in Kashmir and in Iraq for example – Human Rights Professionals are regarded with a degree of suspicion. Many resistance movements in poor countries which are fighting huge injustice and questioning the underlying principles of what constitutes “liberation” and “development,” view Human Rights NGOs as modern day missionaries who've come to take the ugly edge off Imperialism. To defuse political anger and to maintain the status quo. (Roy 2004)

The perverse dynamics of altruism get even worse with religion in the mix. Philanthropy and righteousness combine, under the cover of charitable contributions, to further force tithing to the forefront of social activism at the expense of more substantive activities. The effect is to enhance the alibi of the rich (as the solution rather than the problem) as a counterweight to the substantial evidence that wrongs have been committed and retributions must be made. That’s why religious charity fails to alleviate unequal socio-economic relations; its true purposes are elsewhere. In his hostile biography of Mother Teresa, *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice* (1995), Christopher Hitchens demonstrates how this icon of “helping” was deeply invested in the persistence of poverty. Far from trying to eliminate poverty, Mother Teresa strove to convince people to make the best of it and think of their suffering as godly and, at the very least, inevitable – a cross to be borne rather than chains to be broken, resisted and denounced. Hitchens’s invokes George Orwell’s warning that “Saints should be judged guilty until proven innocent”⁴ – perhaps this advice should have been followed before Kristof and WuDunn choose to celebrate so prominently the discredited and disgraced Greg Mortenson.⁵

Yet Kristof and WuDunn appear befuddled when confronted with such critiques from locals in the course of their ventures into Third World suffering. The authors note their

admiration for Bono (who can “talk poverty policy as well as he sings”), and express astonishment at the fact that he “was heckled by some Africans who insisted that aid wasn’t what Africa needs and that he should back off.” “Andrew Mwenda, a Ugandan,” they continue, “complained about the calamitous consequences of the ‘international cocktail of good intentions.’ James Shikwati of Kenya has pleaded with Western donors: ‘For God’s sake, please just stop’” (Kristof and WuDunn 2009, 176).

Kristof and WuDunn also seem curiously untouched by the problematic power-relations of the wealthy white world saving the poor peoples of color. They write, “We in the West can best help by playing supportive roles to local people” (Kristof and WuDunn 2009, 66). Among other problematic aspects, such a position precludes a more sophisticated analysis that examines violence against women as a persistent problem in the (so-called) Developed World. Indeed, the authors invariably locate the problem of women’s oppression as inherent to other “cultures.” “Why is it,” they ask, “that in many cultures, old men are respected as patriarchs, while old women are taken outside the village to die of thirst or to be eaten by wild animals?” (Kristof and WuDunn 2009, 67). Reference to “testosterone-laden values” in certain cultures is, frankly, odd and confusing (Kristof and WuDunn 2009, 238).

Kristof and WuDunn fail to demonstrate an awareness of the problems of “helping” and particularly the ways that aid has historically served the interest of the helper more than the recipients. But, at least the authors are trying to offer solutions. Certainly this is a necessary challenge, as cynicism might inform but rarely motivates. For example, David Rieff in *A Bed for the Night; Humanitarianism in Crisis* (2002) offers a devastating critic of the current state of humanitarian activism and its associated failures. Rieff’s narrative is compelling and informative, but leaves the reader in a *cul-de-sac* of frustration. Rieff can point out everything that is wrong, but offers very little sense of how to do things right. It is important to do more than critique attempts to help. Alternatives should be offered, and this is precisely why it is important to avoid pushing the wrong actions.

Individual charity might make the individual feel better (as Hitchens observes, “the rich world has a poor conscience” [Hitchens 2003]), but it is a bad strategy to develop the collective action necessary to transform society and politics. Yet individual action is all the rage under neoliberalism, the hegemonic ideology of our times. Neoliberalism elevates the market place to a central position in society, insists that “free” markets are the best way to satisfy human needs and organize society, and promotes the role of the individual consumer as the chief protagonist in social relations. The intersection of international humanitarianism and the cult of individualism combine to present individual acts of charity as the solution to global problems. It is seductive and appealing to think that we can act, and act well, with a meager contribution of cash. But this neoliberal tithing is unlikely to address structural social change, because it has invariably failed to do so.

In this respect, Kristof and WuDunn overlap with other well-intended but ultimately ineffective neoliberal approaches to reform that rely on the sovereign consumer. For example, Vice President Al Gore does a terrific job in *An Inconvenient Truth* explaining the impacts of climate change on the planet and the detrimental effects on human populations. Yet he concludes with a rather feeble call for the viewer to purchase better light bulbs. Rather than addressing the need for widespread and extensive changes in lifestyles and consumption, Gore instead asks consumers to choose a better product. Likewise, the creators of the documentary *Food, Inc.* startle the viewers with graphic visual footage of the horrors and health consequences of industrial agriculture and livestock production. But instead of a call for social and political organization to pressure for better regulations, the directors ask the (newly educated and therefore theoretically motivated) audience members to convince Walmart to offer organic products.

For the record, I am in favor of action, and I recognize that all collective action must start with individual agency. “Think global and act local” – indeed, for most of us, how else can we act? But confining one’s ability to influence the world to an occasional US\$20.00 donation funneled through charity is part of the problem rather than the solution. The belief that we can “purchase” our way out of these problems by being better consumers fails to address the need for social organization and political change. We’ve been watching too much television and become convinced by marketing that we can solve our problems by buying the “right” product.

Approaching the global problem of oppression against women as a problem to be solved through neo liberal tithing is counter-productive because it is a form of power posing as “helping” which is more likely to contribute to the replication of the uneven power-relations that are the source of the conditions of oppression in the first instance. The call for modern day neo-missionaries will likely fail to help the needy, as it did in the nineteenth century. Or worse, such tactics could work as well as they did in the nineteenth century, to establish colonial, extractive relationships that create power and wealth in the core but fail to promote human welfare for the bulk of the periphery.

Kristof and Wudunn would rather be identified as abolitionists than as missionaries (although, inexplicably, the authors resist the term “women’s movement,” stating that “if the international effort is dubbed a ‘women’s issue’ then it will already have failed” [Kristof and WuDunn 2009, 233-4]). But the abolitionists took risks. It is difficult to see what Kristof and WuDunn are asking in the form of sacrifice; for a wealthy person to spend a bit of money is the easy way out. The audience for *Half the Sky* is most likely those readers who can afford the US\$15.99 cost of the book (80% of the world population lives on less than US\$10.00 per day) but who might be more hesitant to take on the hard work of sustained political commitment to social change.

The absence of a call for political interventions is disappointing: giving cash is a substitute for political participation. The central lacuna in *Half the Sky* is the curious absence of government as a player in supporting women’s welfare. Individual acts of

charity actually seem to *replace* the need for effective government action. For example, Kristof and WuDunn relate the story of Edna Adan, from an “exceptional” family in Somaliland that broke with tradition and sent her to school. Edna, educated and working as a teacher, becomes “her country’s first qualified nurse-wife, the first Somali woman to drive, and then Somalia’s first lady” before being “recruited by the World Health Organization” (Kristof and WuDunn 2009, 124). Yet, despite government connections and experience with the preeminent global health organization, Edna’s contribution to her society is an individual act of charity: “[W]hen Edna retired from the World Health Organization in 1997, she announced to the Somaliland government [. . .] that she was going to sell her Mercedes and take the proceeds, as well as her savings and pension, to build a hospital” (Kristof and WuDunn 2009, 125). Where is the call for government action?

Even when the authors acknowledge collective action by women, it is somehow sidelined from government. In another bizarre episode, the authors recount how a group of women in a slum outside of the central Indian city of Nagpur organize for collective action – but as a vigilante posse that lynches a rapist. Kristof and WuDunn celebrate this violence as an example of women “standing up for themselves” (Kristof and WuDunn 2009, 47-52).

Kristof and WuDunn have made a strong argument in favor of investing in women, particularly in the form of education. The authors also recognize that “This is not a tidy world of tyrannical men and victimized women, but a messier realm of oppressive social customs adhered to by men and women alike” (Kristof and WuDunn 2009, 69). The crisis women face is as systematic as it is serious. Kristof and WuDunn recognize that the oppression of women is widespread but fail to go beyond the individual stories of suffering to identify and address the root causes. Women are abused on purpose, rather than as an unfortunate aberration in an otherwise just and functional system. Women are abused in an attempt to control social reproduction and wealth, and so that some men, and some other women, can benefit. Women are abused in the twenty-first century because accumulation often occurs through dispossession.

The stakes are high. The universal oppression of women is as grave a threat to human welfare, and the environment, as poverty and climate change. Indeed, these problems are interwoven in terms of both the causal factors and the material consequences. These problems and oppressions are interlinked, where the disempowerment of women serves to enrich others.

In conclusion, the chief contribution of *Half the Sky* is the information it provides about the status of women. The main problem is the authors’ directive to donate money to charity. This is hardly an innocent mistake; it is neoliberalism in high gear. Neoliberalism has made us consumers rather than citizens. It has made us believe that a US\$20 donation is adequate social action – but it’s not. Strategies that ask the rich to “help” the poor generally fail. Rather, the social body should insist on reparations and redistribution. The

populace should demand social justice rather than beg for crumbs of “help,” or, worse still, massive public debt in order to finance loan-payments that go back to wealthy nations. Why are we afraid to demand, organize, and implement redistribution?

Women will need to be at the forefront of the social and political struggles for equity, sustainability and more just social relations. Kristof and WuDunn agree with Former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan that women are central for effective development (Kristof and WuDunn 2009, 185). As Arundhati Roy insists “A political struggle that does not have women at the heart of it, above it, below it and within it is no struggle at all” (Roy 2004).

Notes

1. “Poverty Stats and Facts,” *Global Issues*, <http://www.globalissues.org/article/26/poverty-facts-and-stats>. See also the United National Development Program, *Human Development Report*, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/>.
2. Christian charities highlighted include World Vision and the International Justice Mission. About such groups, Kristof and WuDunn write: “If there is to be a successful movement on behalf of women in poor countries, it will have to bridge the God Gulf. Secular bleeding hearts and religious bleeding hearts will have to forge a common cause” (Kristof and WuDunn 2009, 143).
3. Michel Foucault has termed this suite of ideologies and material practices “biopolitics,” and described “the conduct of conduct” – the ways in which laws, norms, and other forms of regulations modified social behavior. See Michel Foucault, “Governmentality” in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991); Michel Foucault, “Part Five: Right of Death and Power over Life” from *History of Sexuality, vol. 1* (New York: Vintage, 1990); and, Michel Foucault, “*Society Must be Defended*”: *Lectures at the College de France, 1975-76* (London: Picador, 2003).
4. Orwell’s remark appears in “Reflections on Gandhi,” first published in *Partisan Review*, January 1949.
5. Greg Mortenson is the author, with D. O. Relin, of *Three Cups of Tea; One Man’s Mission to Promote Peace...Once School at a Time* (New York: Viking, 2006) and of *Stones into Schools; Promoting Peace with books, not bombs, in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (New York: Viking, 2009), both of which were celebrated as examples of successful humanitarian narratives until Mortenson was exposed as a fraud. Kristof and WuDunn refer to Mortenson’s philanthropy as “the kind of grassroots, rural program with local buy-in that has often been the most successful in the developing world” (Kristof and WuDunn 2009, 161), and use Mortenson’s endorsement on the back cover of *Half the Sky*. Investigations by *60 Minutes* and other news sources revealed that Mortenson had benefited from

personal enrichment in the name of “helping” Afghani and Pakistani school girls.

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