

‘Economic Inequality, Corruption and the Christian Churches in Low- and Middle-Income Countries’

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ABSTRACT

Extreme economic inequality hinders poverty reduction, because it slows economic growth and because fewer people are lifted out of poverty when growth does occur. Economic inequality is greatest in Protestant and Catholic developing countries, an observation which seems at odds with Jesus’ command to ‘love your neighbour as yourself’. This thesis argues that religions are associated with the main influences on economic inequality, but are not the main influences themselves. Among the 77 never-Communist developed and developing countries with available data, economic inequality is greatest in countries that export raw products and where governments are large and corrupt. Protestant and Catholic developing countries are raw product exporters; governments of Protestant developing countries are large, and they do not control corruption sufficiently to ensure resources benefit the majority rather than elites.

Although countries with more Protestants tend to have slightly less corruption, this association is stronger for high income countries with a long Protestant history than for low- or middle-income countries where Protestantism is more recent. It has been suggested that Protestants may oppose corruption through preaching, through working within state institutions, or through promoting civic oversight of the state. Key informants in four case-study countries did not regard Evangelicals as particularly effective in opposing corruption through any of these suggested mechanisms, but for reasons that differed across the four countries. Evangelicals in two mainly Protestant countries were seen as having lost their moral authority through being compromised by the state. Evangelicals in two mainly Catholic countries have a reputation for honest behaviour, but are seen as too detached from society to have much impact on corruption. To the extent that Evangelicals can maintain, or recover, their moral authority while also engaging with society they may be able to make a useful contribution to reducing corruption, and hence inequality and poverty.