

WTE Column of Dec. 24, 2014. Editor's headline: "Adoption or child theft?"

A child is born.

A child is born into poverty. Will someone decide, the child deserves a better life—and a Christian education—in a country far away?

“We’re thinking of adopting,” a young woman told me recently. At my raised eyebrows she added, “I know. We are blessed with two healthy children. But think of all the AIDS orphans in Africa!”

The trouble with adopting internationally pertains to orphanages set up in impoverished countries that spring up because adoption agencies are motivated by the hefty payments they may extract from Americans eager to adopt. Sometimes the young inmates have been culled from their families with untenable, even fraudulent, promises. In the worst cases, some children have been abducted outright.

Even children from AIDS-ravaged countries like Ethiopia who end up in orphanages may have families. Sometimes such families are led to believe that giving up the child is for the sake of the child’s education, and the youngster will return to help support his or her siblings. Other families hope that giving up a child will rescue them from grinding poverty.

When Jessie Hawkins’ adopted daughter told her she had another mom in Ethiopia, Jessie was aghast. She thought her adoption was about a family led by God to adopt, and about a child who needed a home. Instead, she learned about a birth mother she’d assumed was out of the picture. So begins Kathryn Joyce’s inquiry into the “Child Catchers.”

One reviewer commented: “I started to research adoptions in Ethiopia, the orphan crisis and street children there.” When she began meeting Americans who had adopted, she was shocked.

“The first time an adoptive parent said, ‘When I met her mother.’ ‘When you met her mother? She has a mother?’ ‘Yes, but she is very poor and cannot take care of her.’ ‘So you spent \$30,000 to take [the daughter] away instead of helping the mother keep her own child?’

“As a Christian, I cannot believe that my fellow Christians do not have a huge problem with this. Americans don’t understand, when you pay to adopt a child from a third-world country, you’re inadvertently supporting child trafficking.”

Troublingly, evangelicals control much of the practice through an infrastructure of adoption agencies, ministries, political lobbying groups, and publicly-supported “crisis pregnancy centers,” writes Joyce. These groups convince women not only to “choose life” but also to choose adoption. In impoverished countries, conservative Christians preside over spiraling boom-bust adoption markets. Influential Christian leaders promote an “orphan theology” with little thought for the youngsters’ families. Often these policies erase birth parents. For certain they deny poor families the support to raise their children.

Adoption demands create an “adoption underworld.” Children are procured from parents, sometimes with small payments, sometimes through coercion and deception. In 2007, at the height of the Guatemalan adoption frenzy, nearly 5,000 children—one of every 100 children born—came to the United States, compared to 257 in 1990.

By then the tactics of “child finders” had become so abusive, the Guatemalan government shut down the system and vowed to restructure it according to the Hague Convention. A poor woman might become pregnant explicitly to relinquish her newborn, others were pressured socially or financially to give up a child. Yet adoption lawyers and advocates defended the system as rescuing children from near-certain death.

No sooner had Guatemala closed its borders to adoption agencies but another market opened in Ethiopia, also a country that is not party to the Hague Convention. Because in 2010 thousands of hopeful adoption parents had been diverted from Haiti to Ethiopia, the African country quickly accredited 22 U.S. agencies to set up shop. Inasmuch as an “umbrella” process permits accredited agencies to process adoptions for unaccredited ones, “there were in fact more than seventy agencies in total performing Ethiopian adoptions.”

Adoptions rose from 82 in 1997 to 2,511 in 2010. Radio show host Ellene Noria lamented that children are “the new export industry for our country.”

Some agencies accused of deeply unethical behavior in Guatemala are thought to have moved their operations to Ethiopia. They make deals with finders who tell them, “If you give me \$5,000, I’ll get you a child.”

“Unfortunately, with that kind of a system, when the supply gets low, they tended to go get children,” Joyce quotes the head of America World Adoption.

Joyce recounts a heartbreaking instance where an Ethiopian mother sobbed at the gate of an orphanage. Told it was too late to recover her child, she was chased away. Her little boy witnessed the terrifying confrontation from inside. Where is that boy today?

A child is born, “shivers in the cold,” we sing this time of year. “The Child Catchers” is must-read for people considering international adoption.

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