

Star power: The limits of celebrity activism

by [Douglas A. Hicks](#) in the [March 21, 2006](#) issue

In naming Bono Person of the Year, *Time* labeled him a good Samaritan. But this powerful biblical image misses the point of Bono's significance as a celebrity leader. He goes beyond being a high-profile good Samaritan—he stretches the moral imagination of his musical audience so that they, too, see the need to reach out to their global neighbors. In their own way, Bono and his band U2 deliver the message that we are, or at least can be, one world.

Bono has used his global celebrity to become an organizer and strategizer of Samaritans. He played a significant role in the Jubilee Campaign, which made unprecedented progress in gaining debt relief for highly indebted nations. He founded the organization DATA (Debt, AIDS, Trade, Africa) to work with governments and the international financial organizations to structure development assistance in effective ways. He has led the One Campaign, which seeks additional spending to alleviate global poverty, and worked with Bob Geldof to arrange Live 8, the concurrent benefit concerts in all of the countries of the Group of Eight, or G8 (the world's eight largest economies). At the July 2005 G8 summit, the world's most powerful leaders committed to an additional \$50 billion in annual debt relief. A number of those leaders met with Bono before and during the summit and have credited him with making this agreement happen.

It is these efforts in public education, communication and mobilization that make Bono's work an intriguing case of celebrity leadership. The One Campaign—like the Live 8 concerts—asks fans for no money but “only” a personal commitment to take a stand against poverty. During U2's sold-out concert tours, Bono declares nightly that the One Campaign, which already claims over 2 million members in the U.S., will surpass the membership of the National Rifle Association by 2008.

Like that of the NRA, the One Campaign's goal is to communicate to political leaders that there is a large bloc of citizens behind it—in this case, citizens committed to

addressing global poverty. Politicians, it is said, must be concerned in their public role not about citizens of other countries, however impoverished; rather, they must focus on the wants and needs of their own country's citizens. By making global poverty a concern of U.S. citizens, the One Campaign makes it a concern of U.S. leaders. Even politicians who want to fight global poverty need this public pressure so they can claim that it is in their own interest to act. "Bono made me do it," they can say.

Signing the pledge of the One Campaign requires very little. It is possible that Bono et al. will not be able to sustain the momentum to make a political difference. This is the point at which celebrity leadership can become a vice. At some point, the celebrity leader must motivate citizens to the point that they, in turn, motivate their political leaders.

This raises the question of how much motivation and how much commitment are needed to eradicate extreme poverty. In the grand scheme of things, the relative amount of money needed is small. The United Nations has asked industrialized countries to give 0.7 percent of their gross national product to fight poverty. This money, some \$200 billion, would be far more than what is required to meet the basic human needs of the world's poor. The point: the level of commitment needed to address extreme poverty is not itself extreme. This stance is in sharp contrast to many past moral arguments, such as those of Peter Singer, which imply that the affluent must make drastic lifestyle changes in order to meet the needs of the poor.

Some observers have asserted that a bigger change is needed. The affluence of the industrialized world, in which Bono is part of the wealthiest class, is a scandal to theological and moral understandings of global justice. In international terms, everyone reading this magazine is not just middle class, but rich. In Christian terms (or utilitarian, Aristotelian or Kantian terms, for that matter), we all have the resources with which to address extreme poverty.

This fact suggests another shortcoming of celebrity leadership. It takes for granted the culture of celebrity and affluence and overlooks the question of whether it is morally possible to live with integrity at any level of material comfort in our industrialized society.

Does staging a benefit, such as the Live 8 shows last summer, send not one but two lessons to concertgoers? Although fans may learn to show concern about extreme

poverty and sign up for the One Campaign, they may also receive the message that an economically privileged lifestyle, in which they buy CDs (promoted shamelessly by some of the performers) and enjoy expensive iPods, is morally acceptable. What if material excess is as harmful to us spiritually as absolute material poverty can be for the poor? Bono cannot lead that fight.

On this point, Bono would reply that his goal is actually more modest than a broad critique of Western affluence and entertainment. The sheer economics of the situation suggests that drastic improvement in the lives of the world's poor can be made by using resources that amount to little more than the crumbs on our tables. And, God knows, this would indeed be moral and theological progress.

It is a sign of the times that a celebrity is one of the most visible persons attacking global poverty. Where are our political and religious leaders? Why have they not already headed a more successful effort of their own? The answer is simply that even if we are not, in Neil Postman's words, "amusing ourselves to death," our society is shaped more by entertainment than by politics and is more enamored with celebrities than moved by leaders.

Bono may well prove to be the most successful celebrity leader of our time. He is politically savvy and has used his visibility to leverage a movement that now has prominent international leaders talking about making poverty history.

But what happens when the celebrity fades? Bono's success hinges on the extent to which he can create an enduring institutional effort to reduce poverty—through organizations like DATA and the One Campaign and through lasting political changes in foreign-development assistance. The true measure of Bono's success as a leader is whether his movement can create and maintain an international structure that delivers political and economic change.

Can such an organized effort convince political leaders, not just once but over time, to act for debt relief and for human development in Africa and beyond? As Bono himself has acknowledged, the One Campaign and others like it should be considered successful if political leaders reshape their understanding of their own responsibilities. And in the end, holding political leaders accountable is the responsibility of citizens, not rock stars.