

POPULATION ETHICS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

by Michael Tobias

Awareness exacts a price. In a world of scarcity, political and ecological triage will inevitably figure. Even with a projected \$50 trillion annual economy, the increasing number of newborns on the planet will not make decisions any easier. Will one set out to assist Russia, Brazil, Indonesia, or Mali? The school system in Alabama, or teenage mothers in India? And when conflicts arise, which are to become our national priorities in terms of intervention! Nuclear proliferation in India and Pakistan, or illegal clear-cutting causing huge fires in Sumatra? Such questions have always weighed upon political leaders, in one form or another, but never before have ecological and population considerations played such dramatic roles in analysis and national determinations.

Hence, individual men and women are called upon to become policy makers, to make those same determinations, to take their lifestyles into greater consideration than ever before. By example they can inspire surprisingly huge assemblages of people. Ethical solutions, reasonableness, beauty, and inspiration, all have in their favor the force of silent majorities, the equivalent power of chain letters, the quiet seduction of an ideal.

From my perspective, it would be a very good thing indeed, if even a smattering of the Jain monks' daily vows infiltrated the consciousness of every nation. That would mean a life choreographed according to possibilities of nonviolence, the basis for any sustainable, compassionate, and equitable community on earth; universal one-child families, the only way to begin to slow down the human population explosion in those more than 150 countries and territories where there is a demographic problem; and an emphasis in our lives upon sharing, that human and humane capacity that best reflects the abundant generosity inherent to the creation.

Our species, by its very nature, has long been engaged in a war against the planet, a pattern that is ecologically insane. We know this to be true by now. Our acknowledgment itself is an act of meditation poised for selfless, even heroic change. Among more and more of the world's religious thinkers, there is a surge of ecologically aware activism. Buddhists in Thailand are fighting to save forests. Jews, Catholics, and Anglicans in the U.S. have sponsored a National Religious Partnership for the Environment. And in late 1997 the leader of some 300 million Orthodox Christians, Bartholomew I, finally declared that "To commit a crime against the natural world is a sin. For humans to cause species to become extinct and to destroy the biological diversity of God's creation, for humans to degrade the integrity of the Earth by causing changes in its climate, stripping the Earth of its natural forests, or destroying its wetlands... for humans to contaminate the Earth's waters, its land, its air, and its life with poisonous substances -- these are sins." It was the first time that word -"sin"- has ever been officially linked by the Church to human behavior towards the environment.

The same week Bartholomew made this pronouncement, demographers also made big news. They had gathered in New York to examine the whys and wherefores of a silent revolution underway. In a not altogether unexpected trend, an inexplicable dynamic was shown to be at work, showing smaller families in at least 45 countries. The demographers predicted that by the year 2015, 88 "countries and territories will have replacement levels at or below 2.1 children per woman." Granted, few of those countries cited were among the high population nations, yet the pattern seemed to be spreading.

We must remain optimistic if such new trends and attitudes are to gain fuel; to augur the kind of changes necessary to preserve the planet. Awareness itself must be nurtured and protected. It takes great courage to be an optimist, to be in love. There are important spiritual, behavioral, and self-fulfilling reasons for adopting a positive perspective.

A generation must be raised that is able to understand the complexity of the world. Our children need to be informed and inspired.

As a species, we need all the clarity-grounded optimism we can muster. Our children need to be informed and inspired, not daunted. Although the planet is held captive by much that defines our personality and behavior, that aggression and its myriad tragedies need not be destiny.

But in refashioning global fate beyond simple hope, certain sobering truths must be firmly absorbed and embraced. First among them is the harrowing truth that our species' fertility is out of control, even after half-a-century of family planning efforts. Based on current (mid-1998) global fertility trends, there is little doubt that we will number at least 12 billion people late in the 21st century.

And second, our consumptive patterns are disastrous. Habitat is vanishing, or burning up, and species are disappearing, or verging on disappearance, at a rate of between 10 and 800 per day depending on the acreage in question. Fertility trends and consumptive patterns can change, and they must. It all hinges upon personal choices.

Throughout human history, hope and dread have always mingled. But never before have the risks been so permanent. Paradise is here, now, if only we will own up to it, accept it, and do our part to keep it true.

While timing is everything, we must all be prepared for a lifetime of service and diligence. The ethical and ecological responsibilities that being human entails will only increase as humanity finally comes of age.

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This essay is adapted from Michael Tobias' unsettling book, *WORLD WAR III -Population & the Biosphere at the End of the Millennium*, first published in 1994. A new paperback edition, revised and updated, with photographs and a Preface by Jane Goodall, is published by Continuum Publishers, New York. From *Pop!ulation Press* vol 4, # 6, Summer 1998.