

Education and Religion

"Humanity needs a change of heart to alleviate the threat of hunger and of nuclear weapons" Pope John Paul II

A change of heart is a nice thing for which to wish. If we had a change of heart we would suddenly be able to feed the world and rid it of nuclear weapons. But it is really not so simple. A change in perspective on world problems and how to solve them would be even better. Often those factions which decry the status quo are working to maintain it or make it worse. Working against open communication and birth prevention is the best way to guarantee that the future will be lacking in freedom, opportunity and decent living conditions. Most of our traditions favor indiscriminate reproduction, which makes more hunger likely, and world peace unlikely.

Our traditions establish the direction of our thinking and therefore the manner in which we live our lives. We have seen that the family is the cornerstone of our introduction to the ideas that will shape our lives. The educational system provides further social development. Children at this level have interaction with an extended peer group and adult educators. The purpose of this education is to teach the child skills which will be useful later in life. In recent years sex education has become part of the curriculum in many areas, though it is a matter of controversy as to which institutions should shape sexual mores and instruct children and adolescents on reproductive information.

The preferred religious affiliation of the family may also play a part in socialization of the child. Although direct instruction on the sexual act and its environmental consequences is not addressed by the religious institution, other philosophical aspects often are. Rules regarding proper and improper sexual behavior emanate from religious institutions and are often internalized by the social structure. Individuals who have little or no contact with religious institutions are none the less still affected by societal codes of behavior originating from religious institutions.

The purpose of education traditionally has been, and continues to be, that of preparing people for some position in the economic structure. (Additionally, if possible, individuals are taught to think for themselves). Educators have done an admirable job in dealing with a curriculum that changes emphasis as the job market demands change. However, one aspect of our modern world seems hidden from view, though its effects are stunningly visible. We fail to acknowledge or address the limits of our human expansion and domination of the planet, because it is assumed that reproductive behavior is a right which brooks no interference. Therefore it is not surprising that the formal education system has not supported any position with regard to population management. It is not examined except at the higher levels of education, and then mainly as an academic exercise. This is because population growth is usually looked upon as a secondary consideration in examining our problems. Therefore, radical reduction of the human population probably will seem alien to the majority of people. But talk of human rights is academic when those human rights clash with natural law, and our burgeoning population creates situations deleterious to the health and welfare of humans and most other species, demeaning any talk of rights. In other areas, individual rights have been circumscribed when they threatened the rights of the group to health and welfare, but the right to reproduce without interference seems to supersede all other rights. This atmosphere has not been conducive to examining the effects of rampant population growth in the educational sphere, though careful scrutiny of the ramifications of population growth is essential in explaining much of our present crisis-ridden international scene.

Though it is not tied to concern about population growth, one promising area of change in education of recent years has been the integration in the classroom of a curriculum preparing students for life as adults. One way of increasing awareness regarding the seriousness of reproductive decisions is to show students the impact of a child on their lives in terms of the financial and emotional support that a child needs. Rather than being a fixture in the classroom, however, this type of education is limited in availability. Many parents feel that they should be the ones to impart information on reproduction. Some do; many don't. The result is that much of our population is ignorant of the impact of their reproductive behavior. Traditionally, a student has left school with little information to make decisions that he or she will find are required as an adult. The primary life decisions which have far-reaching effects are:

** Whether to have children

** How many children are a reasonable choice, not only in terms of personal desires but with reference to present world overpopulation.

If we all were aware of the need to reduce population, use of the present educational system would be instrumental in achieving our goals. Biology and other sciences, mathematics, history and civics classes could incorporate these questions in examining an area of our lives that has a demonstrable connection to our future survival and prosperity. However, the present lack of awareness of these issues makes it unlikely that any such changes will be made in the relatively near future. In recent years there has been a backlash by a vocal minority in the United States against school-based clinics offering family planning. Though the number of such clinics has increased in the United States from 12 in 1980 to 61 in 1986, and though the schools with these clinics have reported a marked decline in the rate of student pregnancy, the Pro-Life/Pro-Family Coalition has brought suit to close these clinics. (43) It is obvious that these factions will do all in their power to maintain procreation at its present level or greater levels, regardless of the consequences to anyone else, and regardless of the consequences to themselves which they either do not see, or do not understand.

Sex education in the classroom has been a matter of controversy for years, with institutions such as the family and religious affiliations claiming that it is their duty to instruct children on sexual responsibility, rather than the duty of the public schools. The difficulty we have today with our population-related problems attests to the fact that none of the institutions attempting to inculcate sexual responsibility has done so. In any case, there has been no attempt by our traditional messengers to relate the sexual responsibility of the individual to the larger picture of world concern.

In terms of history it is only recently that another element of education and socialization has appeared. That new element is the mass media, with television as its cutting edge. There is little doubt that children receive a great deal of information on how to behave as adults from the mass media and especially from television. Television provides children with a window through which both the real and imaginary worlds can be observed and analyzed from a very early age. Unfortunately, the distinction between the two is often unclear. Commercials and programming transmit values. Although there is no straightforward attempt to relay any messages about sexual responsibility, messages are there. The messages to a child or adolescent are, without a doubt, confusing. Rather than showing the personal, national or international consequences of unthinking reproductive behavior, commercial television programming and advertising do practically nothing to

promote sexual responsibility. Products are associated with seductive models, and sex in many TV programs is used in an extremely manipulative manner. Indulging in sex outside traditional relationships is discouraged by other proponents of social values, yet on television it is portrayed as a means to get money, further one's career and control the actions of others. Though adults are often portrayed as decent people raising families, there is no consideration of the impact of those families, other than the social benefits to the parents and children in terms of human interaction.

The more serious part of television is its coverage of the events of our time in the daily news and in documentaries and reports. The daily news tends to be characterized by short formats, spot presentation of news and the need to sustain public interest by continually moving to new topics. Transmitting information in the shortest possible time period becomes of utmost importance. Each problem or event, upon being singularly revealed and elaborated, consequently appears as unique and unrelated to other problems or events. More in-depth reporting, debate and analysis are saved for special programs, documentaries or the print media. Though there is some excellent media coverage of population-related stress, the consideration of major change such as reducing the population throughout the world has not been addressed. The focus of the media concerning population growth is consistently on developing nations, or those nations which have been characterized as Third World nations. These nations have been targeted as being in need of population control due to their high fertility rates. While it is incumbent upon these nations to do something about overpopulation, the modern industrial nations are themselves not dealing effectively with such problems as acid rain, smog, traffic-strangled cities and urban sprawl, though the birth rates in the industrial nations may be low by comparison. In view of the industrialized nations' inability to deal with these problems, it is hypocritical to single out any group of nations as being overpopulated.

The media reports on crises, and points to attempts to solve these crises: increased food production and distribution in the case of famine; increased regulation of industry in the case of pollution. The media, along with the rest of us, does not make the connection that a growing population is a systemic underlying cause of our crisis-prone modern scenario. We seem incapable of recognizing it, much less managing it. In all the reporting about war, environmental damage, world hunger, crime or economic ill tidings, overpopulation is seldom mentioned, if it is mentioned at all. We do not see the role of population growth in promoting the destruction of forests, smog and urban blight, traffic congestion and airport gridlock. We do not weigh sufficiently the role of population growth in exacerbating drought-produced famine in African nations. And people remain unaware that we can do something about such crises. Perhaps we will begin to make changes in our acceptance of overpopulation if sufficiently motivated by crisis.

The difficulty is that reducing the population requires sacrifice of immediate gratification to reach a goal that is relatively intangible and demands visionary planning to achieve. Suggesting that individuals have responsibility for our population-related stress is controversial, and therefore not a rewarding topic. The right to non-interference in matters of individual reproductive behavior is considered sacrosanct by all, and therefore goes unchallenged. The uncontrolled proliferation of nuclear arms and its potentially devastating consequences is recognized, and therefore receives substantial and deserved media attention. The uncontrolled proliferation of human beings and its present and potentially devastating consequences to mankind, in contrast, seems to completely escape notice. Stories dealing with population-related concerns are relegated to the back pages of newspapers and occasional news bits on television. There is no continuous, concerted effort to keep the population explosion a current topic of public debate. Considering the impact of our

uncontrolled growth it would seem in the public interest for the media to monitor any progress, any success or any lack of success in this area.

Anyone who has access to the media is well-informed about the host of crises that our nation and the world face today. Not all of them will be ameliorated by population reduction. However, some of the problems in the world are directly related to overpopulation and could be solved. Others are indirectly related to population stress, but could be rendered more manageable if population were reduced. Every day we see stories in the news that contain elements directly related to population pressure, though it seems no one makes the connection. Will the Soviet Jews emigrating to Israel cause more trouble because they are being settled on land that is already an explosive issue between Israelis and Palestinians, land where people are being killed daily? Who is the villain in the Pacific Northwest of the United States, the spotted owl or loggers afraid of losing their jobs? Environmental groups try to stop drift net fishing. Immigration becomes a major issue for several countries as some begin to see that rapid movement of people into their area causes friction and environmental damage. Few people view these news items in terms of an unmanageable population, however.

Nearly 20 years ago there was a great deal of concern about the growing population of the world and its effects on our lives and environment. Some of the studies done at that time have been discredited, because their models failed to take into account factors other than population expansion to explain the phenomena of pollution and starvation. But in rejecting the studies it seems that we have thrown out the baby with the bathwater. The groundswell of concern about overpopulation which was developing at that time has come to a near virtual halt, though population expansion certainly hasn't. A population of 3.5 billion people seemed to be a matter of urgency demanding immediate attention. A population of 5 billion people rates a mention on the evening news, a story on the third page of the newspaper, and an article here or there---requesting that we take notice and do something before it becomes more painfully obvious that the waves of humanity are engulfing us. If we are to avoid being crushed by our growth, the media must assist in confronting our ignorance of population-related problems. The failure of formal education and the news media to effectively address the issue of overpopulation is only exceeded by the world's religious institutions.

Most organized religions refuse to recognize the strain on our systems engendered by population. Though some religious views have been modified since the original command in the King James version of the Bible to "Go forth and multiply," few of the prominent religions in the world attempt to deal logically with the problem of an overpopulated planet on which many of their flock live in misery and starvation. Much of this inability to provide answers to worldly matters stems from basic religious philosophy and self-interest. One vested interest of the religions of the world in overpopulation is the fact that creating and indoctrinating children is simpler than converting followers. Inertia in basic religious philosophy makes it difficult to change traditions that were functional prior to the industrial revolution, but are dangerous today.

Historically, Western religions view humans as separate from nature. Their place in the scheme of things is to tame the wild land, set up civilization and worship as they choose. It is a paradox that human life is generally interpreted as sacred by most religions, while other life forms are exploited at will. This interpretation has had the effect of promoting procreation with no regard to its hazardous results. One exception to this rule of thumb is found in the beliefs of Native Americans. These beliefs stressed living in harmony with all life--a concept that could be realized in a world with a smaller population. Although many Eastern religions also stress the value of all life living in harmony, their promotion of procreation has the same effect as Western religions in denying the

possibility of such a concept.

In one area religious concepts align well with human biological drives. In the traditional view of Western religions our instinctual urge for the pleasure of sex has been approved, as long as it is for the purpose of procreation. Other instincts do not fare as well. The instinct for survival forces humans into competition, rather than cooperation, under conditions of stress. As the number of people increases, and the resources for which they are competing dwindle, religious concepts of humans living in harmony become highly unlikely. In fighting over the same territory, our biological instincts have historically taken precedence over metaphysical urgings to love thy neighbor. Even if a person is willing to martyr her or himself, very few people would choose strangers or friends over the well-being of their children. Ironically, the best guarantee for the well-being of children everywhere is the idea that many religious organizations cannot seem to absorb or endorse: Reducing population by non-violent means.

Words of brotherhood and the sanctity of human life ring hollow when religious denominations battle fiercely against the very means of realizing these humanistic ideals. Interference by religious groups in matters of birth control and abortion have aggravated the problem. It is futile to urge cooperation, to decry the starvation and conflict on the planet while denying one possible rational means of lessening these conditions. Promotion of procreation ensures the continuance of population pressures. Disapproval of contraception serves to discourage reasonable limitation of population, and leaves women who wish to limit their families with the choice of giving birth to an unwanted child or aborting the fetus. If religions opposed to abortion were to actively encourage the use of effective contraception, the incidence of abortion would lessen considerably, as would the production of unwanted, and as a consequence, uncared-for children. But this part of the controversy over abortion is unheard. By ignoring the effects of overpopulation, many of our religious institutions thwart their own purported interests in ensuring a more humane and peaceful world. The "just say no" policy of curbing unwanted reproductive behavior is not working.

The raging controversy over abortion goes on and on, with some religious institutions promoting the fervor that abortion is murder. They imply through their arguments that there is room not only for the present population, but for all the children that would be created if abortions were made illegal. Anti-abortionist factions, using the misnomer Pro-Life, focus exclusively on the fetal right to life, an easy position to take considering that it involves no personal sacrifice. Their arguments do not advocate more open communication in sex education or birth prevention. These factions are also less vocal about the much more intractable dilemma of millions of inadequately cared for children. Are we any less culpable to allow a child to be born and then ignore its needs to the point where it is an infant mortality statistic or dies before the age of 5? The cry that we might be aborting an Einstein carries no great weight when the possibilities available to the child do not allow for a reasonable chance of growing to maturity. The cry of "adoption, not abortion" is meaningless when it is obvious that there are children available for adoption who go through their childhood and adolescence without being adopted.

Life is sacred, say the abortion opponents. They are, of course, thinking of human life, not life in general, because other species do not fare well when humans reproduce at ever-expanding levels. They are thinking of the life of the fetus, not that of its mother. Women in developing countries, denied the availability of contraception, die by the hundreds of thousands as they seek illegal abortions. Estimates of the annual number of deaths due to abortion complications range from 155,000 to over 200,000 women worldwide. Abortion-related deaths are especially common among women living in countries with strict abortion laws. In Latin America (a predominantly Catholic

region) where legal abortion is generally restricted to cases of rape or endangerment of the woman's life, up to half of maternal deaths appear to be due to illegal abortions. (44) But the anti-abortion groups, so concerned with the termination of pregnancies, support family planning cutbacks throughout the world, thereby ensuring that these deaths will continue. Anti-abortionists wage attacks on pharmaceutical companies to stop them from introducing RU-486 into the United States, though in its first year of use in France, Ru-486 reduced the need for surgical abortions by 30% and is being tested as a treatment for a host of other diseases which have nothing to do with abortion. They show films and pictures of fetuses and describe the termination of pregnancies in terms of the imagined pain the fetus experiences. They do not concern themselves with the real pain and misery experienced by large segments of humanity due to the effects of overpopulation. They do not concern themselves with questions raised by overpopulation, because it is a difficult issue which requires examining their "moral" stand.

The traditional argument to encourage people to have children when they would rather not is that they will love the child once it is born. Maternal and paternal instincts will surface, and all will be well. Though that may be true in some cases, an exhaustive study done in Czechoslovakia tends to dispute the inevitability of parental acceptance once the infant is born and matures. (45) An American and three Czech researchers located 220 babies born to women who were twice denied abortions under Czechoslovakia's strict regulations. They were compared to 220 children with similar backgrounds but who were clearly wanted by their parents. Some conclusions of the study:

"Contrary to researchers' expectations, the differences between the two groups of children actually grew more serious over the years. At nine years old, those in the unwanted group had fewer friends and less developed language skills. By their mid-teens more of the study subjects were more hyperactive and less sociable. In their early 20's, twice as many of the unwanted (23 versus 11) had been sentenced in a criminal court, and usually for more serious crimes. Psychiatric disorders were more common among the unwanted; so were marital problems and a general dissatisfaction with life. Although many of the unwanted children were well adjusted as adults, the authors concluded that the 'child of a woman denied abortion appears to be born into a potentially handicapping situation.' One of the authors, Henry P. David of the Transnational Family Research Institute in Bethesda, Maryland, says that early data from the study helped change Czech policy; a first-term abortion is now available on demand." (46)

The great numbers of humans create a situation where people are, in essence, surplus to the needs of the economy and therefore edged out of the systems which are in place to care for them. We always have had people who cannot produce goods or services--children, the elderly and the severely handicapped, but society has developed means of caring for these people. As our population has grown, however, both public and private systems of caring for these individuals have become overburdened. Added to the difficulty of caring for people who are not able to earn a living is the current growing dilemma of those who are able to work but cannot find jobs. Automation becomes increasingly sophisticated and replaces human effort. The problem of inadequate provision for individuals in society who realistically cannot care for themselves is exacerbated (not created) by excessive population, but it is not addressed in any concerted fashion by religious institutions because they do not understand the underlying population factor. This is not to say that religious institutions do not do good works. Many are involved in laudable charity efforts and courageous, politically unpopular positions which make their stand against population reduction even more incongruous.

An examination of the tenets of major Western religions is enlightening in explaining such paradoxes. Recognizing cause and effect relationships does not seem to be the forte of many religious institutions. The idea that God's will can excuse humans from their responsibility to act in a rational fashion is absurd. People in Third World nations can see that they have "too many children and not enough jobs" and are questioning the concept that each birth is a "gift from God." What kind of a fiendish spiritual power would wish us to procreate to the point of starvation, or to the point of drowning in our own industrial wastes? We use logic in managing animal populations to keep them from outstripping the resources available to them, and no one questions the will of God in such decisions. It is essentially viewed as kindness not to let animals starve to death as a result of their population being out of balance with their ecosystem. We consider it cruel beyond compare to allow animals to live in crowded conditions in which sanitation is a threat to their existence. But it is not at all unusual that humans live in such conditions.

Allowing indiscriminate reproduction is a violent act, leading to violence against our own species and other species. Unless we reduce our population we will not lessen or eliminate various forms of violence which are rampant today. War is the first that comes to mind, and crime is not far behind, but there are other forms of violence which are not as easily discerned. Consider these violent acts:

** Effectively denying participation in the economy to other humans.

** Destroying the means of making a living by pursuing activities which cause ecological deterioration.

** Causing the decline and/or extinction of plant and animal species.

** Allowing starvation and homelessness to exist.

Violence is not confined to hitting your fellow human over the head with a blunt object. Our moral educators should be more comprehensive in their examination of our traditions concerning violence.

We are capable of logic in solving problems and making decisions that will affect our future as a species on earth. The decision to have or not have offspring is reflective of our love for our fellow humans, of our longing for a better world for all life, and of our wish to turn our course from the inevitable excesses of too many people. Few religions would deny the spiritual value of these goals. But abortion and contraceptive methods are condemned as evidence of hubris, or an attempt to take measures reserved for God alone. We are instead urged to rely on the power of prayer to save our world and ourselves. But prayer without action denies our responsibility. The idea that "God will provide" is another indication that we can be excused from responsibility. What has been provided is a planet that is capable of nurturing human beings and many other glorious species, but not if the human beings squeeze out other species and each other by their excessive fecundity.

Not that rationalizations which attempt to deny the role of overpopulation in human difficulties are unusual. One that has been subtly making a comeback in the last few years is the Calvinist tradition which indicates that wealth is a sign of divine favor. Although it is not put forward that poverty is a sign of disfavor, it is hard to ignore that implication. Such interpretations of divine influence do nothing to change our present situation. We must recognize that there is no way to solve a problem except by solving it. The burden of too many people will not go away if it is

ignored long enough. It will only continue and increase the suffering.

If one yells "fire" in a crowded room, the ensuing panic may promote a stampede. If one fails to notice or report the fire the occupants of the room may well be roasted. Continual lamentations come from the Vatican about world policy, but any attempts to soften a medieval stand on birth control and abortion are met with granite resistance. The policy of the Catholic church is reflected in this statement by Pope John XXIII: "We must seek to share the banquet of life, not to reduce the guests at the banquet." The sentiment is easily agreeable, but anyone who has access to a television set or reading materials knows we are not feeding all the guests. We are not coming close. The Vatican's position, as has been stated by various Popes year after year, is that we can eliminate poverty and hunger in the world if only we would be less greedy. While the truth does not give us license for our greed, such issues as diminishing arable land and ecological deterioration are airily dismissed. Holding out such hope that the problem can be solved by a Christmas carol renunciation of greed is a cruel hoax, perpetrated by those men who are characterized by their doctrine as the representatives of God on earth. Instead, they openly advocate indiscriminate reproduction, giving no thought to the consequences.

The purpose of religion throughout history has been to enlighten and comfort the adherents of the particular religion in question. Uncontrolled reproduction sanctioned by any religious body will not make for a comfortable existence or lead to enlightenment. It will only increase the number of people living in miserable conditions. Our traditions, fomented in many cases by religious institutions, erroneously focus on the human species as the top of the evolutionary ladder. Our possible extinction is viewed as disastrous, though we have cheerfully made other species extinct, seeing it as a "divine right." A paradox naturally arises when we have the persistent notion that the care and feeding of humans is the most important activity on the planet. The signs exhorting us to "save the whales" are inevitably replaced by signs which say "save the humans."

Moral instruction has been the province of religious institutions, but it is difficult to find the morality in encouraging indiscriminate reproduction. Resources are limited by the very nature of a finite planet, and thus it is immoral to encourage people to have children which they cannot support. It is immoral to maintain the false hope that we can have world peace and end hunger without a radical change in policy. It is immoral to force other species into extinction or to house them in zoos that, at best, pale in comparison to their natural habitat. It is immoral to encourage the destruction of the natural beauty that a spiritual power (according to most religious philosophy) gave to our care. It is immoral to allow reproduction to go unchecked when the inevitable result is increased violence on all levels, from local to international.

Our religious institutions are becoming more and more involved in secular politics on a worldwide scale. As people experience economic dislocation they turn to their religious leaders to assist them. The religious institution is a potent political force, both in speaking for its adherents and instructing its adherents. But those religions that are encouraging indiscriminate reproduction are sacrificing those who trust them. Encouraging reproduction is not a cynical move on the part of our educators, religious or otherwise. They are passing on what they were taught, and the pro-birth traditions that exist in all societies are essentially unquestioned. We believe in them without thinking. We pass them on without thinking. And we reap what we unthinkingly have sown.

There are only two methods of population control---intervention prior to birth (preferably contraception) or death. Very few people favor the latter, but our inaction makes it seem that we are willing to let increased death on a large scale be the chosen method of dealing with our encroachment on our environment. It does not matter whether or not a person believes in population

control. It will either be a voluntary act by humans, or an act which does not take into account our wills or desires. It is inevitable. And though no one lives forever, most people wish to leave a decent legacy for those who will be here in the future. That has been the purpose of education throughout history.

Our social institutions are operating on the basis of tradition that was not as damaging in a world that had riches yet to be discovered, and a vast amount of open land. It is far from unusual that our traditions developed as they did. At one point in time, survival dictated that we have as many children as possible. For thousands of years there was a frontier of virgin land waiting to be settled, and one of the marks of success for settlers was a large family to help with the tasks that faced them. Today our world is not the limitless expanse our ancestors faced. Our unlimited resource today is people, and our social and cultural messengers have lagged in response to the situation that has been created. We now have the means to reduce the human population and its resultant problems. It would be of benefit to the stated goals of our family, educational and religious institutions to do so. The very institutions mentioned have suffered as a consequence of the traditions they represent. Confidence in the ability of the family, educational or religious institutions to cope with modern difficulties has eroded. All of these institutions could, however, have a demonstrably positive effect on the future by confronting and attempting to ameliorate the population crisis in a concerted manner. Population reduction must become an ethical, spiritual and moral imperative.

Unless one wishes to infer that the population we now have has nothing to do with starvation, pollution and other undesirable aspects of our present condition, then we can assume that these problems are amenable to correction. We can reduce the population. Some of the necessary technology has been developed. Some will be developed in the future or is currently on the horizon. Finding better, safer and more effective methods of contraception is an ongoing process which is stimulated by the market. What is needed, however, is the will to do something about our problems, and the education to make people aware that they can be a part of the solution. Most, if not all, aspects of our lives are influenced negatively by overpopulation. Our traditional messengers of social values are not recognizing this, or taking any action, either due to ignorance of the impact of population growth, a vested interest in the status quo, or a combination of the two. The world is changing rapidly, and most of our institutions are unresponsive to the need for change. Our social messengers are haphazardly trying to deal with problems that they do not, and seemingly cannot, understand. We must ask ourselves where we are going, and why we are going there. Otherwise we leave ourselves in the position of being continuous victims of traditions which are promoting our demise.