

# *Overpopulation and Social Justice*

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**[The Unitarian Church in Summit](#)**

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## **Reading**

Excerpts from "Be Fruitful and Multiply" by N. Gregory Mankiw (a professor of economics at Harvard University) in *Fortune*, September 7, 1998.

I confess: My wife and I are about to commit what some people consider a socially irresponsible act. Toward the end of the summer, we will bring our third child into the world.

A third child means, of course, that my wife and I are contributing to the world's population explosion, and to some people this makes our decision more than personal. ...

[F]ear of overpopulation has a long and embarrassing history. Two centuries ago, Thomas Malthus argued that an ever-increasing population would continually strain society's ability to produce goods and services. As a result, mankind was doomed to forever live in poverty -- a prediction that led Thomas Carlyle to label economics "the dismal science."

Fortunately, Malthus was far off the mark. Although the world population has increased about sixfold over the past two centuries, living standards are much higher. The reason is that growth in mankind's ingenuity has far exceeded growth in population. New ideas about how to produce and even about the kinds of goods to produce have led to greater prosperity than Malthus -- or anyone else of his era -- could have ever imagined.

The failure of Malthus' prediction, however, has not stopped others from repeating it. The most famous modern Malthusian is biologist Paul Ehrlich, whose 1968 book, *The Population Bomb*, warned of impending worldwide shortages in food and natural resources. Thirty years later, however, most natural resources are in abundant supply and are available at low prices. Even the famines that sometimes ravage less-developed countries are rarely due to overpopulation -- civil war is a more common cause. Nonetheless, the fear of worldwide shortages because of overpopulation remains widespread. ...

Those who fear overpopulation share a simple insight: People use resources. They eat food, drive cars, and take up space. Because resources are scarce, the only way to improve living standards, Malthusians argue, is to limit the number of people with whom we have to share these resources.

The rebuttal to this argument is equally simple: People create resources. They bring into the world their time, effort, and ingenuity. Before deciding whether world population

growth is a curse or a blessing, we have to ask ourselves whether an extra person added to the planet uses more or less resources than he or she creates.

Environmentalists ... view humans as rapacious consumers who devour as much as they can get their hands on. About this, the environmentalists are largely right. But there is no problem as long as people pay for what they consume. In a market economy, the price system ensures that no one can consume resources without first creating some of equal or greater value.

Perhaps the most important resource ... is society's pool of ideas. Every time a baby is born, there is some chance that he or she will be the next Newton, Darwin, or Einstein. And when that happens, everyone benefits. Although the government can easily protect the environment with a well-designed tax system, spurring the production of great ideas is much harder. The best way to get more geniuses is to have more people.

As a serial procreator, therefore, I make no apologies. When I welcome [my son] onto our planet, I will do so without a shred of guilt. I don't guarantee that he will find a cure for cancer or a solution to global warming, but there is always a chance. And in that chance lies the hope for our species.

## **Sermon**

In the 1970s, fear about overpopulation became widespread. Just a journey through the UUA archives of General Assembly General Resolutions -- of which only one is passed each year -- tells you how central this issue was in people's feelings about what faced them and what might obliterate them. In 1970, our delegates passed "The Unitarian Universalist Statement on Survival and Population Control." In its preamble it stated: "Whereas, we recognize that the 'ecological crisis' is not just around the corner; it is here now. Whereas, we are convinced that man's survival as a species is imperiled by his mushrooming technology and by his excessive breeding rate," and was followed by a list of resolves designed to stave off impending disaster. Then, in 1973, we passed the General Resolution for Population Stabilization. In 1975, the General Resolution on Population and the Quality of Life. And so on.

And then we see a lull, until 1990, when the issue appears on the agenda again with the General Resolution on Choices Affecting Population being passed as that year's top priority.

What happened in the early 1970s to motivate such overwhelming concern, and why was it followed by 15 years of seeming calm? Well, as Professor Mankiw points out, in 1968 a neo-Malthusian Paul Ehrlich published a book that foretold the near-end of the world due to a population growth that was, as he saw it, unmanageable. Ehrlich's concern was shared by many others who, looking at the statistics of population growth worldwide and comparing them to the growth of crop yields in the same period, saw an impossibility that Earth could feed the masses soon to be born. They foretold worldwide famine and

upheaval none had ever dreamed of, and, according to their calculations, such events were only a *decade* away.

As it turned out, Ehrlich, though right about population, was wrong about crop production. The latter exploded also throughout the 1970s. In addition, Ehrlich's own success in getting the word out spurred a wave of concern that had tangible results. The world aid community responded to the predictions with active efforts to reduce population. Research into contraception received greater attention and funding, and programs to offer family planning at home and abroad also received a higher priority among nations. In 1979, China launched its one-child policy and halted what was to have been the worst population explosion of those foretold by Ehrlich.

The result was that the *rate* at which population was growing slowed down. And economists and ecologists celebrated because they had bought the human race some time. However, world population was and is still *increasing*, and at significant rates. In the next 50 years, the population of the world, according to the Population Reference Bureau, will increase 47 percent. That means our global population will double from 6 billion to 12 billion in less than 75 years.

Moreover, the vast majority of this growth still occurs in the poorest of nations. For example, current estimates are that while population in Western Europe will decrease slightly in the next 50 years, in certain African nations the population will increase from 100 to 300 percent in that same period. This in a part of the world that, according to an article in yesterday's New York Times, is already wracked with civil unrest and drought that has relief workers struggling to find the resources to respond. Eastern Congo alone this year will require food aid for 1.3 million people.

Population growth is not just a concern about feeding people. It has fairly predictable environmental effects. Air and water quality suffer. Forested land must be cleared for cultivated land or housing. Right now, for instance, the net forested area of the world is being decreased by two football fields every second to accommodate growth.<sup>1</sup> And as land is cleared, plants and animals species lose their natural habitats and die out, as they are, right now, at alarming rates.

Moreover, overpopulation, when coupled with poverty, has implications for national security at home and abroad. When poverty and unemployment are coupled with a glut of young people, as happens under conditions of overpopulation, the incidences of civil unrest, political instability and violence in a country increase astronomically. We have seen this in spades this year where the hopelessness in Palestine or Afghanistan and the glut of youth in those cultures has created the conditions out of which suicide bombers and al Qaeda terrorists have been born.

What about our situation here in the United States?

In the United States, we are growing by 2.5 million people a year -- the equivalent of adding another New Jersey every three years. We are the third most populous nation on

the planet. But what makes us even a worse scourge on the planet is our consumption patterns. The United States alone, with 5 percent of the world's population, consumes somewhere between 25 and 40 percent of its resources. That means each additional life added to the U.S. population, because of our consumption patterns here, has an exponentially disproportionate effect on the environment and on available natural resources. In fact, while the fertility rate in the United States has been dropping in the last two decades, our consumption per person has nearly doubled. We have more cars, drive them more miles, build bigger houses, and produce more trash than we ever have before.

If, in general, we don't tend to feel this growth in population, it is because in the United States, we do seem to have elbowroom, and our growth is at a relatively slow rate. Moreover, like Mr. Mankiw, many of us mistakenly believe that basic resources are in no way in danger because they would be priced high to reflect that future scarcity. We believe, perhaps, too much in the market and its ability to regulate resources fairly and effectively.

Tim Palmer, in "The Fate of America," gives this example of the mistake we may be making:

Our population doubled in the last fifty-eight years, as it will likely double again in the 21st century ... Biologists, who see this kind of thing often in experiments, use this analogy: If duckweed on a pond doubles every week, and only one square foot is now covered on a 100-acre pond, when will the whole pond be covered? It will take only 25 weeks. That's fast. But the real lesson for our society is this: In the twenty-fifth week, the pond will only be half covered. At that point there will be plenty of open water. Yet in fact, the pond will be completely covered only one week later.<sup>2</sup>

Palmer raises the question of whether we Americans, seeing the pond half-empty, are fooled into thinking we have plenty of time to deal with the issue, while the reality is we have only a metaphorical week left.

I don't really want to dwell on doom and gloom. The fact is that the rate of population growth is a guess, and our ability to find ways to extend natural resources may continue to buy us more and more time. Indeed, there are many variables at play, and estimating what we face (and by when) is glorified guesswork. However, the fact remains that with women worldwide having 2.8 children (and sustainability being 2.1 per woman), without some radical changes our numbers will *eventually* outstrip our resources.

So how does this relate to us as religious people? Loving our neighbor, called to be stewards of our planet, what is it that we religious folks must do? First, we must speak up. Other religious groups have contributed to the problem, most notably the Catholics with their stance against contraception. At the Cairo Conference on Population in 1994, my brother-in-law, a Catholic, said he watched as the Catholic Church gutted some of the best resolutions proposed. As responsible lovers of life and caretakers of the world our children will inherit, we must state that this is an issue to which we demand political response. We need to speak out because we have to stand on the other side of a church

that, in this country, is 60 million strong, though thankfully not all standing with the church powers on this issue. It is a church whose voice and power stood behind some of the most recent and devastating cuts in international aid for family planning -- \$34 billion from the U.N. Family Planning Program.

Second, we must support efforts to control population abroad, where it is growing most quickly, and where pre-existing poverty makes that growth most dangerous. We have to be careful when walking this ground. Talk of population control abroad, particularly in lesser-developed nations, can smack of ethnocentric paternalism. It brings up for me the specter of the worst of China's one-child policy, namely the forced abortions and forced sterilizations that are rumored to have been part of their success. Yet, according to health workers abroad, it turns out that women, even poor and relatively uneducated women, *want* to reduce their fertility.

In India, Gita Sen, a professor of economics at the Indian Institute of Management in Bangalore, said that in a recent family survey of 90,000 married women from across India, the number of children women wanted was much lower than the number of children they already had. One-third of all pregnancies are unwanted or unplanned, and women are beginning to say that access to birth control and family planning advice would have enabled them to make the decisions they needed to in order to avert having the children they found it hard to support.

Studies also have found that, in regions where women receive greater education, are offered some equity in society, and where their economic power in the family is increased, there is also a decrease in their fertility. Moreover, when medical care reduces infant mortality, women also feel more comfortable having fewer children, because they can be assured that these children will survive.<sup>3</sup> So we know where our support needs to be directed abroad -- to the empowerment of women and the provision of good family planning services.

What about here at home? What must we do *here*? This is the stickiest wicket. It is clear we need to enter into the efforts, by restricting our population and, just as important (if not more important), to reduce our consumption patterns so the Earth isn't so taxed by our existence.

But we like our freedoms. And we were raised to believe that if you can pay for it, it is your right to have it. Moreover, we love instant gratification. And population control is all about making the decision, based on selfless convictions and an ambiguous payoff, to restrict your own freedom, and in some very important and personal ways.

I know at least one environmentalist who, when it came to his own family, started talking about four or five children. Intellect and heart just couldn't meet on this one. This isn't about giving up your pantyhose for the war effort. It's also the classic tragedy of the commons problem: If everyone else is doing what they want, having as many kids as they want and living the big life, why should I hold back?

I guess this is where the rubber of being a principled person -- bound by the golden rule, free but responsible in your search for meaning -- hits the road of sacrifice and selflessness. I hope no one thought that being a UU freed him/her from such words as sacrifice and selflessness.

The easy part of facing the realities of overpopulation is committing to provide family planning and women's empowerment in poor nations that have rapid population growth. The hard part is admitting that we ourselves, with our sinful consumption patterns, are as big a part of the problem, and *then* making the sacrificial changes we need to in order to change that. The questions it will raise for us are some of the most personal and difficult, but the reality is that we, in this nation, are far too hard on the planet and somewhat cavalier about our impact, and there are only so many of us that a single planet can sustain.

So let us find a way to respond with heart and head so that our children and grandchildren inherit a future worthy of inheriting. And the duck pond has plenty of open water for millennia to come.

So may it be. Amen.

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### **Footnotes**

<sup>1</sup> 7/11/1999, Georgie Anne Geyer, "Population Growth Is Pivotal Issue in Economic Development," United Press Syndicate.

<sup>2</sup> Tim Palmer, "The Fate of America" (NPG Forum, Negative Population Growth, DC 2000).

<sup>3</sup> NYT 3/28/02 editorial "The Population Slowdown" is one source for this triad of women's education, availability of contraception and infant mortality.