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FOOD, CHRISTIANITY, AND THE STATE

INTRODUCTION

For years the Church has warned of the likelihood of famine in the modern age; but beyond stating that such a condition could occur in the Western industrial world, it has not considered the moral implications of any widespread famine in the Third World.

The purpose of this paper is to do just that. Specifically, there are those who will use any famine as an occasion to push a substantial foreign aid program and government sponsored income redistribution from the United States to the Third World; and they will use Christianity as their excuse to realize egalitarian political ends. This paper hopes to show that any such use of Christianity is philosophically illegitimate; that the Christian scriptures will not brook their being used as the reason for government sponsored income redistribution.

The importance of the topic is immense. As inevitable as any famine will be the voices who will use it, and Christianity, to initiate the kind of government transfer of wealth from United States and the Third World which can have only the most adverse effects on the Church of God and its ability to accomplish its work in this age.

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The human race has never been successful in permanently insulating itself against famine. The most recent major example was in 1973 in the Sahel. Ominously in the ensuing two years world food reserves have not appreciably expanded, remaining at approximately one month's supply, given current consumption rates.

"The power of population is so superior to the power of the earth to provide sustenance that premature death must in

some shape or other visit the human race," wrote the celebrated 18th century economist and demographer, Thomas Malthus. (The Nation, Sept. 17, 1973.)

Malthus, of course, was articulating the "iron law of wages" which holds that the broad mass of mankind would find itself living at a "subsistence level" and, consequently, governmental efforts to alleviate such a poverty level would be doomed because extra children would be born to consume any surplus over the subsistence level.

While the applicability of Malthus' theory has been disputed with regard to the developed countries, the Malthusian metaphor is commonly used for the Third World Countries such as India and Bangladesh who face a real threat of famine from a "surplus" of population vis-à-vis the food supply, and even the most effusive "agrioptimists" such as Agriculture Secretary Earl Butz do not deny the possibility.

There is, subsequently, a body of evidence which holds the very high likelihood of famine in significant areas of the world. Dr. Harrison Brown of Caltech, Lester Brown of Worldwatch Institute, Kurt Waldheim, Congressman George E. Brown (D-Ca), Gerald F. Twomey, a plant geneticist, Senator Mark Hatfield (R-Or), all warn of coming famine, usually in reference to the Indian subcontinent.

America's Role

"In an interdependent world plagued with scarcity, if some of us consume more, others of necessity consume less," states Lester Brown of the Overseas Development Council. (UPI, Nov. 20, 1975.)

Mr. Brown is introducing the key moral question in any Third World famine, should one occur: what will America do? In his booklet, "The Politics and Responsibility of the North American Breadbasket," Mr. Brown writes that "in a world of food scarcity, where there may not be enough food to go around, North America must decide who gets how much food and on what terms."

Since there is an altogether too high probability of famine in the Third World in the relatively near future, the moral dynamics which will affect America's response to such a crisis ought to be examined; and preferably beforehand while the tenor of public discussion would still be immune from the kind of hysteria usually associated with a famine.

Any collective American response will inevitably have profound implications for overall standard of living in the United States, and for every reader of this paper. Moral and material considerations, which will affect the whole of the American population in a very personal and direct way, will become very important should the Malthusian future prophecied by such magazines as the Plain Truth, as well as Time and News-week, ever materialize.

"Civilization and luxury are intimately connected," writes Jeffrey Hart. "If good meals are somehow sinful, what about art collections? Can a man buy a great painting while Bangladesh is foundering. What about symphony orchestras? They are very expensive. The money put into a string quartet would supply a dozen Sahel towns." (Human Events, Jan. 4, 1975.)

On the other hand, a Harris Survey finds that 61 percent of the American people feel it is morally wrong for the United States, which has only 6 percent of the world's population, to consume 40 percent of its energy and raw materials. (AP, Dec. 1, 1975.)

Morality, then, will make itself felt in any discussion of America's response to famine. Even if it is something else, it is a moral issue. Given a "worst case scenario," one which assumes that famine will occur somewhere in the world, and also that the United States will have the means to alleviate it at considerable cost to its own economy, it becomes very important to establish exactly what are the moral norms which will determine how America responds to the situation.

Foreign aid is the instrument of a collective response to the hunger crisis, and foreign aid will be costly. "The aid concept must be expressed in real sacrifices to be born by the people in the form of taxes," states Gunnar Myrdal.

Karlsson of Denmark, another aid and development expert, believes that "Any change of lifestyle in the rich nations that really will help the poor masses of the world will certainly be so costly that it will call forth tears among ourselves." (National Observer, Aug. 30, 1975.)

The material stakes of a moral question are very high.

The Egalitarian Thrust

A conservative Baptist, Senator Mark Hatfield has introduced a concurrent resolution into the United States Senate that "every person... throughout the world has the right to food." One obvious implication of the resolution is that it would form the foundation for any member of the Third World to make a moral, and perhaps even legal, claim on a part of the food on every American's dinner table.

There is an organization now operating in Washington which sees itself as a "Christian citizens lobby," calling itself "Bread for the World."

Bread for the World is dedicated to institutionalizing Christian morality in American food policy.

Bread for the World states that:

"As Christians we affirm the right to food: the right of every man, woman, and child on earth to nutritionally adequate diet. This right is grounded in the value God places on human life, and in the belief that the "earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." ("The Right to Food," World-view, May, 1974.)

Bread for the World seeks the institutionalization of specific policies:

"In affirming the right to food, Bread for the World seeks: An increase in U.S.

food assistance, especially the grant portion, to at least the level of a tithe of this country's food exports.... A substantial increase in the amount of food made available to the U.S. World Food program and to voluntary agencies for distribution abroad." (Ibid.)

One theologian, Robert McAfee Brown, makes the link between morality and political action explicit: "Any significant coping with world hunger will be very threatening to American power and prestige, let alone the American standard of living. These are matters that should not be glossed over. They require (both in motivation and expertise) the pressure of the churches and synagogues, along with that of politicians, sociologists, political scientists, and all the rest. This is why it seems to me that concern with hunger will inevitably involve us in politics." (Ramparts, July, 1975.)

There is deepseated anti-free market bias exhibited by proponents of government moral action. For example, under the prodding of the Sunagogue Council of America, 34 religious leaders gathered in Ballagio, Italy to discuss the world food situation. They issued the statement that "Food is not just a commercial commodity among commodities and cannot be treated so by society." The implication is that government must interfere in the food markets to bring about socially desirable ends. And Robert McAfee Brown argues that the prevention of world starvation cannot be realized "if we insist that individual and private efforts can solve communal and public problems." (Ibid.)

The Christian Ethic

Leaving aside what non-Christian moral humanists may say, the assertion that the United States government ought to actively implement a moral imperative to feed the hungry has been made by Christians who invoke Christian morality to substantiate their position.

Some Christians seek to define the food crisis as a matter of "justice" rather than governmentally administered "charity."

and the sin of one member was considered the sin of the whole. David's sin in numbering Israel resulted in the death of thousands of his subjects. Likewise, Achan's sin in stealing "the accursed thing" temporarily stalled the Israelite takeover of Canaan and precipitated the unnecessary death of some of his fellow countrymen.

The principle of collective guilt is supported in the Old Testament. By contrast, it is nowhere to be found in the New. Because the nature of the New Covenant is spiritual, it can only be administered individually. Since the spiritual law of God is to be "written in the hearts" (Jer. 31:33; Rom. 2:15) of those who come under its terms, it can only be experienced individually, since there is no such thing as a communally linked "collective" mind.

Where the New Testament does speak in collective terms, that is, to the Church, it is to a group that would be without, and which was intended to be without, temporal power. The image of the true Church in Revelation 12 is one of persecution, without any influence on temporal authority. The references to government in the writings of Peter and Paul are in the context of prescribing proper Christian conduct in the face of hostile temporal authority.

Remarkably, one Christian Marxist, William Coats, who certainly advocates a Christian experience through state action, admits the same thing:

"The recitation of ethical virtues in Romans, I Corinthians, and the Pastoral Epistles gives clear testimony to the private nature of Christianity. Even when public virtues are mentioned -- as in Romans 13 or I Peter 2 -- the tone is clearly passive with docility and obedience encouraged above all else. The only public work of the early Christian is that of the divine liturgy. However, even here it is quite distinct from the affairs of the city or empire." (God in Public, p. 16.)

A conservative scholar, Richard S. Wheeler, gives us an identical admission:

"The Bible is surprisingly silent about the relationship of Jesus to the government of Judea. One thing is certain: it offers no clear support to any secular faction seeking to appropriate the words or behavior of Jesus on behalf of a political enterprise." (Pagans in the Pulpit, p. 90.)

America, or any other modern state, is not the ancient theocracy of Israel, and is not subject to the same moral dynamics. Under the New Covenant, a group of randomly associated individuals, that is a nation, is judged collectively only as God judges the morality of each individual citizen. The basis on which the plagues in Revelation are meted out is individual: whether one has accepted the mark of the beast, whether one has worshipped the beast: these are things only God can determine, and then only as they relate to individuals.

Is There an Anglo-Israelite Exception?

However, a believer in Anglo-Israelitism may argue that the United States government is still constrained by the moral dynamics of the Old Covenant because the bulk of the population is descended from the ancient tribes of Israel.

One can not assert this, however, without at the same time concluding that the United States should do nothing to help any Gentile nation.

* God never instructed the ancient theocratic state of Israel to come to the aid of any pagan group of people.

Rather, the reverse was the case. Israel was clearly intended to be separate from its Gentile neighbors, hostile, if not indifferent to them. The only suggestion of collective contact is found in prophecies of national blessings and punishments. On the positive side, Israel was to "lend to many nations" (Deut. 28:12); in the sense of commercial self-interest; on the negative, Israel would be subject to military invasion. In any case, Israel would not be interacting with its neighbors to express some sort of obligation to bring

about a "just global society."

As a collective spiritual entity, Israel was to exhibit a measure of redistributive justice within its borders, but was not called on to redistribute its own wealth beyond those borders. Admittedly, this is an argument for a negative; i.e., that there is no scripture which commanded Israel to give to other nations. But it is buttressed by the very conditions of the Old Covenant: Israel was promised in return for fulfilling its part of the contract immense national wealth and abundance, distinct from other nations; the promise would have been empty if the subsequent wealth were to be dissipated beyond the nation's borders.

The proponents of a statist "solution" to the food crisis usually rely on principles derived from Christianity, not Christianity itself, or its scriptures. Usually the argument is based on a God-given right to eat (which translates into a moral claim on others' property), or an appeal to make public the private virtue of feeding the hungry.

Bruce C. Birch, Wesley Theological Seminarian, however, does argue Biblically, and in an Old Testament moral context.

"The implications of a serious study of the Wisdom Literature (Proverbs, Genesis, Samuel II, and the prophetic books) for the hunger issue would mean we would be called upon to abandon a solely aid or charity approach to hunger" and "we would be forced back to an emphasis on the establishment of a more just and harmonious order in the world."
(UPI, June 6, 1975.)

Professor Birch's assertion is riddled with contradictions. He cannot have the Wisdom Literature without the Torah.* If he argues that the Wisdom Literature would force us to create a more "just" (he means egalitarian) world order, then he also has to admit that such an order will include animal sacrifices, tithing, jubilees, land sabbaths, slavery, and laws against homosexuality and fornication. If on the other hand, he is referring to the "internal" order of theocratic Israel, then he must also admit that theocratic Israel is under no mandate from God to redistribute its wealth in the

* That is the Pentateuchal legislation.

creation of a just world order.

Contra-Statism

Christian Socialists, such as Ralph Gabriel, hold that "man can be the master of his fate, that his only reliance is reason, that the state is his instrument and that the planned society is the solution for his social ills." (Ibid., p. 20.)

From such a position, it is only logical to conclude that the State must actively use its powers of redistribution to fulfill the Biblical commands to feed the hungry. Christian Socialists, therefore, seize upon the food crisis as an opportunity to advocate that the United States government tax its citizens to redistribute their wealth to the Third World.

But both the premise and the conclusions of any such Christian Socialism are antisciptural, and directly contrary to some valued doctrines of the Christian Church.

One of the major themes of the Bible is man's inability to create any "just order" for himself, and the necessity of God's direct intervention in order to establish any utopia. Christ does not return until any number of horrible plagues have taken place. Christ flatly stated that His Kingdom was "not of this world." (John 18:36.) While Christians are "in" the world, they are not "of" the world. (John 17:14, 15.) Temporal authority, where it is depicted in New Testament prophecy (such as Matthew 24, II Thes. 2, Rev. 12, 13, and 17) is always viewed as something hostile to the Christian Church. And both Christ and St. Paul recognize that Satan is the "god of this world," (II Co. 4:4) -- and consequently of its governments-- whose dominion shall not end until the second coming of Christ.

The teaching of the New Testament is clear: Christians are not to use the State to impose their Christianity upon nonbelievers until Christ returns and appropriates the State to Himself.

But there are other scriptural reasons why the State cannot be used as a Christian instrument.

The Christian doctrine of "freedom," while not the doctrine of libertarianism (which is intrinsically hostile to State action), does require the element of "free will" to have any meaning. When the State uses its power of physical coercion to enforce virtuous conduct, the idea of Christian freedom is assaulted.

"Christian freedom," of course, is the liberty to be virtuous. Admittedly, one can be virtuous in circumstances in which one's freedom is strictly circumscribed, but only when there is still freedom not to be virtuous. When St. James speaks of the "law of liberty" (James 1:25) and St. Paul admonishes his parishioners not to use their "freedom" to bad ends, they are saying that a Christian must, at the very least, have a physical option to do virtuously in order that the free will can be exercised in favor of the right.

Seen in another light, acts which the State physically compels cannot be virtuous acts because there is no latitude for free will. With regard to the food crisis, then a statist enforcement of the Christian virtue of feeding the hungry obviates the necessity of free will in faithful Christian conduct.

The Christian doctrine of charity also cannot be reconciled with "statist virtue." Charity must also involve free will, and be completely voluntary in order to even be Christian charity. St. Paul put it very plainly:

Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give, not grudgingly, or of necessity, for God loveth a cheerful giver. (II Cor. 9:7.)

Clearly, to give "not grudgingly, or of necessity" means that the State cannot be a coercive agent forcing its citizenry to charity, no matter how noble the cause.

The example here is even more telling when one realizes that the particular project for which St. Paul was asking

donations was a famine relief effort for fellow Christian Judea. If giving in such clear circumstances for Christian charity is not to be "of necessity," then how much less should the State compel giving for pagans, who are tens of thousands of miles away.

Coercion is not a New Testament moral principle. The very idea of a "law written in the mind" implies that physical coercion must be absent; ergo, the State has no part in Christian charity.

Furthermore, the Christian idea of "witness" is also involved. Christ said "let your light shine" (Matt. 5:16) so that men would be inspired to emulate Christians by their good example. Christians are to be good examples to unbelievers, and the last thing implied in the concept is the idea that unbelievers should be physically compelled to good works by Christians. Christians should certainly set a good, private, moral example in such matters as a world food crisis -- but they should not feel that their religion can be used as an excuse to compel unbelievers into doing the same thing.

One must also note the Christian concept of the State in this "present imperfect" world. The only elaboration of anything which might be remotely called Christian political theory is found in Romans 13:

For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then be afraid of the power? Do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same. For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. (verses 3-4.)

The theory is passive: government is to constrain the evil doer, not to create a "just social order." Admittedly, the perception of the State which St. Paul articulates would allow for totalitarianism, and certainly for an activist state. But from the Christian's perspective, the State is seen as a restrainer of evil, not the agent for a Christian

social order.

As William Coats puts it:

"...the Church [the Apostolic Church mentioned in scripture] did not see itself addressing the world with either moral or spiritual advice." (God in Public, p. 52.)

Those who use the food crisis to make the case for State enforced Christianity are wont to cite the numerous scriptures in the New Testament which are egalitarian in their effect and result, (if not in their methodology). Christ's teachings about the first and last, the parable of the self-satisfied rich man who tore down his barns and built more, the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, and especially the episode in Matthew 19 where Christ tells a rich young man to sell all he has and give to the poor are all cited as support for State initiated egalitarian actions.

Several important points are ignored, however. The thrust of such moral teachings is aimed at the ultimate objective of virtuous conduct in a rich man, not a better life for the poor. In Matthew 19:21, the poor are mentioned as an afterthought.

The egalitarian scriptures are concerned primarily with a rich man's attitude toward his wealth, not the poor man's physical benefit. Furthermore, they invoke the ideal of a rich man voluntarily parting with his goods, not the State taking them from him.

One may assert that the scriptures promote the general morality of egalitarianism, and hold equality up as a moral ideal, the proper object of a Christian "just state." Indeed, Christian Socialists assert that such scriptures equate the Christian ideal of justice with equality.

But equality is not an absolute moral imperative from the Biblical point of view. One major parable deals directly with an imperative of equality, and equality doesn't fare well at all.

The parable of the pounds and talents shows that God's justice does not operate on any mandate of either equality of opportunity or equality of result. The initial condition of the servants is unequal, and their end condition is unequal, and God approves. The principle of Biblical justice is the consistency of God's judgment, without favoritism, not any overriding vision of equality.

There was even one time in Christ's life when He had the direct opportunity to apply egalitarian justice Himself. He refused. Luke 12:13-15 demonstrates that Christ refused to administer egalitarian justice when one brother came to Him to request that Christ divide the other brother's inheritance. Christ turned down the opportunity, warning of materialism. And it was against materialism, then, that he spoke the parable in the following verses about the self-satisfied rich man who built more barns and took his ease.

Christian Socialists allege the moral superiority of the poor as a class, and reason that such a superiority, combined with Christ's obvious solidarity with them, mandates a redistribution of wealth during a time of famine with the State as an integral agent.

Again, the assertion is circumscribed by scripture. Christ did not endorse Judas' pompous moralizing that a certain ointment should be sold and given to the poor because "the poor ye have always." (John 12:8.)

Furthermore, St. Paul in his letter to the Thessalonians flatly states that "if any shall not work, neither shall he eat," (II Thes. 3:10) an assertion which eliminates the moral superiority of at least some poor people. Exodus states that "thou shalt not countenance a poor man in his cause," (Ex. 23:3) and in so doing, shows that while the poor may be deserving of sympathy and charity, their cause is not always the one with which God Himself is in sympathy.

There is one more principle inherent in any Christian case for redistribution. St. Paul specifically affirmed what the Old Testament taught about the fruit of the individual's labor -- he has a right to keep it.

A government may wish to consider Biblical aspects of the problem in dealing with Third World famine: the potential for famine and drought in Biblical prophecy (Lev. 26:19), the "curse" of a nation's food being eaten by its enemies (Lev. 26:16), and the wisdom of Joseph in having Egypt store food and then use it for national self-advantage (Genesis 41) in selling and lending it out, not giving it away. But these are things which will have to be considered in the realm of political philosophy, and apart from the Christian religion. Where the Christian religion is relevant, it is clear that there is no imperative for the United States to give food aid to the Third World in times of famine.

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