Population and Consumption – Contemporary Religious Responses

Environmental scientists maintain that the chemical balance of the atmosphere is being upset by the introduction of alien chemical species and the increased flow of greenhouse gases. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change predicts a doubling of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases late in the twenty-first century drastically altering the earth’s climate. Although the atmosphere is self-cleaning, its self-cleaning is too slow to cope with the excess gases pumped into the atmosphere by our industrial development. As a consequence, we face the greenhouse effect that threatens human, animal and plant welfare. This is a problem we have created for ourselves and which population increase will make worse. Some suggest that the rise of the world’s population, together with accompanying increasing levels of consumption, is rapidly outstripping the earth’s carrying capacity so that the very survival of humans, other species, and the quality of our environment are in question. Recently the fifty-eight National Academies of Science from around the world called for zero population growth within the lifetime of our children and for changes in production and consumption patterns. Current demographic projections show a population increase of unprecedented magnitude continuing well into the twenty-first century.

At the 1992 Rio Earth Summit sponsored by the United Nations, the developing countries of the South responded to the developed countries of the North on this issue saying that the problems is not one of overpopulation in the South, but of excessive consumption of the earth’s resources by the well-off few in the North. For example, a baby born in Europe or North America will likely consume thirty times the earth’s resources (and produce thirty times as much pollution) as a baby born in a developing country. But even this generalization is too simple, for there are increasing numbers of well-off people in developing countries such as India and China who consume at the same
unsustainable level as those in developed countries. Also, although consuming less per capita, Asia's 3.2 billion people consume more of the earth's resources than the 0.3 billion people in North America. What the religions think about population and consumption is important for it is clear that religions can and do shape people’s attitudes to nature, to fertility, and to the just sharing of the earth’s resources.

It is only recently, partly in response to growing concerns regarding population and consumption, that the various religions have had to question their sources with regard to the interaction of humans with nature. For example, the advent of ecotheology in Christianity has made nature and environment new, cutting-edge” topics. In the Hindu context, Vandana Shiva offers a similar critique. What responses do religions offer?

In the Jewish tradition the mystical thought of the Kabbalists suggests that humans must learn to limit themselves – their rate of reproduction, their use of natural resources, and their production of fouling wastes. As humans, we are to pattern our behavior after the example God gives in the creation of the world. If God is omnipresent then, reasoned the Kabbalists, the only way God could create the world would be by an act of *tsimtsum* – of voluntary withdrawal or limitation so as to make room for creation. Similarly, we as humans must limit our reproduction and our wants, so as to make room for coexistence with our environment in this and future generations. If we humans are everywhere, our presence would herald the end of the great diversity of nature. The Jewish “exile” metaphor suggests that we humans find ourselves in a difficult diasporic condition in the twenty-first century, one that demands we take seriously the need to limit our population and consumption out of respect for the other communities of plants and animals with which we live as sojourners within nature.

Some scholars judge that Christianity has had a major responsibility for fostering much of
the world’s excessive consumption and overpopulation. Yet within Christianity there are strong forces at work transforming Christianity’s mainstream into a self-critical force for justice, peace and the maintenance of the integrity of nature. The ecology of the planet cannot be separated from population and social justice concerns when seen through the lens of Christian feminist theology. In this context, the traditional Christian opposition to fertility control is being critically examined in relation to the looming crisis of overpopulation. Christian thinkers are recognizing, however, that it is overconsumption by the developed countries and classes that is both polluting the environment and depriving the developing countries of the resources they need. This leads to the radical conclusion that well-off Christians should reduce their own reproduction and resource consumption so as to make room for the migrating poor, and out of respect for our balance with nature. This is seen as a responsible practice of fertility in relation to others and nature. It also challenges the traditional patriarchal family patterns basic to many Christian cultures. Such teaching is in line with the teaching of the Hebrew prophets who maintain that humans and nature are required to live together in justice, and with the teaching of Jesus that one must love one’s neighbor in need (e.g. as did the Good Samaritan). Christians today are realizing that their neighbor’s welfare is strongly affected by the way they treat the environment and by the number of children they produce. The resulting ethic is one of interdependence with the rest of creation.

Some Muslims see natural disasters such as floods, hurricanes, and earthquakes as warnings from God that people are embarked upon a fundamentally wrong course of action, and that the disasters the greenhouse effect threatens might be similarly understood. When seen as a “wake-up” call from God, the greenhouse effect resulting from excessive consumption by humans poses a serious dilemma to Muslims around the world, but particularly to those Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia, whose economy has come to depend upon the heavy use of oil. For such countries,
and for the world at large, Islam’s view of humanity as the “custodian of nature” (*Khalifa*) poses critical questions. As Muslim scholar, Nawal Ammar, points out, the *Qur’an* teaches that humans, as custodians of nature, are free to satisfy their needs *only* with an eye to the welfare of all creation. The harmony and beauty God gave nature must be respected by humans in their stewardship of nature. Thus the use of natural resources must be balanced and not excessive. No one owns nature, therefore humans must share natural resources and population pressure will dictate limits to consumption so that there can be just access to resources by all. While fertility control is generally forbidden in the *Qur’an*, some Muslims now suggest that fertility control may be acceptable if seen as part of the self-discipline required from humans to avoid upsetting the divinely established balance of nature.

A Buddhist scholar, David Loy, has argued that when a functional definition of religion is adopted, the global market economy is seen to be the most powerful contemporary world religion. Today, he suggests, the market economy is rapidly binding all corners of the globe into a worldview with “consumerism” as its dominant value-system. This new world religion threatens to overwhelm both the value-systems of the traditional religions and the environment that sustains us. Rather than putting a brake on our excessive growth in consumption, the global market appears to do the reverse. More and more natural resources are needed to fuel the ever expanding global market, leaving less for future generations and producing more climate altering greenhouse gases. To the religion of the market, the challenge of the population explosion does not pose a problem. It simply creates a larger market to be “developed,” which, of course, entails more exploitation of the earth’s already overexploited ecology. The Buddhist response, Loy explains, offers a way in which we may be unhooked from the religion of consumption and gives equal place to the need to discourage excessive reproduction. The key question is what values and practices would convince people to
consume and reproduce less when they have the technological capacity to consume and reproduce more? Buddhism has focused on meditational techniques that have the power to transform one’s consumerism into “the middle way.” Meditational practice allows one to actualize the central Buddhist teaching of the interconnectedness of everything in one’s daily life. This doctrine has potential implications for one’s response to the ecological challenge of today. It means that our individualistic sense of identity can be expanded, through meditation, until one experiences a “we-self” in which we are connected to everything and everything to us. Reality is seen as composed of a web-like causality in which everything affects everything else in some way; everything (including humans, animals, plants, earth, air and water) is interdependent.

From such a Buddhist perspective, the urge to consume more and more and the urge to reproduce are both equally serious problems. Both spring from ego-centric motivations and produce results that seriously damage nature. Meditation on the interdependence of humans with nature can result in the negating of selfish desires for children or material possessions when having them would harm other persons or the environment. In terms of our language of rights and responsibilities, the rights of other beings (including animals and future generations) must not be infringed upon by our excessive reproduction and consumption; and we are responsible not to harm other beings unnecessarily through our reproduction and consumption. All of this happens when trishna, or desire, is renounced through meditation. Happiness, from the Buddhist perspective, comes when the self-centered greed for more of everything, including children, is given up. Then limits to consumption and reproduction, such as our current ecological crises may require, are experienced not as personal loss but as normal and pleasant in the interdependent matrix of nature.

The above is a modern interpretation of Buddhist thought in response to the challenges of population pressure and excess consumption. While this approach has yet to be adopted in many
largely Buddhist societies that have historically maintained high birth rates, it does offer a new and hopeful response.

From a Hindu scholar's perspective, Vasudha Narayanan notes the close connections between teachings in the Hindu epics and puranas on dharma (righteousness, duty, justice) and the ravaging of the earth. When dharma declines, humans take it out on nature. It is in the dharma rather that the moksa or enlightenment texts that Narayanan finds resources for a Hindu response to the problems of population pressure and excess consumption. She searches out dharma texts with helpful teachings and matches up dharma practices in which present-day Hindus are engaged. She finds many teachings condemning the cutting down of trees and supporting the planting of trees – even to the goddess Parvati teaching that one tree is equal to ten sons! Hindu temples such as the Tirumala-Tirupati temple in South India are showing great initiative in fostering the dharma of tree planting by giving out about 100,000 saplings a day to pilgrims for them to plant when they return home. This practice is more powerful than it may seem, since the Tirumala-Tirupati temple is the richest in India and carries considerable dharmic clout with Hindus at home and in diaspora communities. In Hindu texts trees – like cows – are recognized as preservers and sustainers of life and therefore appropriate symbols of God. Turning from trees to rivers, Narayanan notes that rivers also occur in dharma texts as sacred purifiers of pollution, with the Ganges as the prime example. Observing that the rivers of India are rapidly being dammed and fouled by both industrial and human wastes, Narayanan points out that it is the women of India who lead the fight against these practices. Some successes have been achieved such as the protest led by Ms. Medha Patkar resulting in the stopping of the Narmada river dam project. Women have also led the way in pressing Hindu dance into the service of ecology.

Turning to the population problem, Narayanan observes that dharma texts that emphasize the
duty of procreation were formulated during periods when epidemics and famines kept population levels down, child mortality was high and death came early. Now with modern medicine India’s population has rapidly increased to levels that are causing serious ecological damage. However, in certain states, such as Kerala, where girls are educated and women are employed at all levels; reproduction is at the replacement rate only. Thus, the key may be the seeking out of texts such as those in the *Upanisads* that set forth the education of girls and women, as well as examples in the epics and *puranas* of women who do not conform to the patriarchal dharmic ideals espoused in those texts. Regarding consumption, Narayanan notes that Hindu texts are replete with the dangers of futility of possessions. Yet consumerism is rapidly taking over India in the name of modernization. Even worse, perhaps is the use of the dowry system as a way of fulfilling greed for consumer luxury items. While the Hindu theological response is showing some success in producing positive ecological practices, it seems to be losing ground to desires for excess consumption.

Regarding their response to the issues of population and consumption, there is much in common between the Aboriginal traditions and Chinese Religions. Aboriginal scholar Daisy Sewid-Smith maintains that although Aboriginal traditions place a high value on the sacredness of life, contraception and abortion have historically been practiced to maintain an ecological balance. Methods employed included birth control by sexual abstinence during periods of war, hunting or spiritual quest, and the knowledge of medicine people who specialized in contraceptive medicines and techniques. Overall guidance in such matters is provided by the Aboriginal sense of needing to live in interdependence with nature – to maintain a state of equilibrium between humans and their natural environment. This ethic also guided the Aboriginal approach to the consumption of material resources – aided by the lack of a notion of private property which seems basic to much contemporary consumerism.
Chinese Religions should be seen as divergent from the traditional pro-natal approaches of most religions. As the scholars of Chinese thought Jordan and Li Chuang Paper show, during China’s early history the concern was with underpopulation, therefore the sources offer little guidance regarding overpopulation. However, during the past three centuries, overpopulation and its negative impact upon the environment have become a matter of serious concern. With the possibility of a doubling of the population every generation, China in 1980 adopted a one child per family policy. This policy is widely practiced and appears to have the support of the people, who see overpopulation as a threat to the future of the globe and to family well-being. The success of this policy in controlling population growth is especially remarkable as it clashes directly with the fundamental imperative of Chinese Religion, namely the continuation of the patrilineal family. If the one child is not a son to conduct the family rituals then, according to traditional Chinese Religion, the parents, the grandparents, etc., will cease to exist upon the last son’s death and the family will come to an end. However, changes are occurring which suggest that a gender neutral family is developing, in which a daughter or a son could perform the rituals required for the continuation of the family and the support of those in the afterlife. This would enable Chinese Religion to support the one child policy and its goal of preventing overpopulation from disrupting the balance (tao) of nature.

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Further Reading


