

# THE Bet



In 1980, two prophets—secular, not biblical—made a \$1,000 bet about the future of the world. For years they had been fulminating against each other, arguing through charts and statistics (and insults) that the other's views were sheer nonsense. With the bet, they put their ideas to the test. Julian Simon, an iconoclastic economist with the University of Maryland, was the optimist: he bet that the world would get better and better. Paul Ehrlich, a biologist at Stanford University and author of the 1968 best-selling *The Population Bomb*, was more like the biblical prophet Jeremiah, predicting woe upon woe.

Ehrlich's view is that the world is on a disaster course as a result of rising population. Simon's vision is just the opposite: Since people produce most of the good things on this planet, he says, more people can be expected to produce more good things. Not only is our world in the best shape ever, Simon contends, it is getting steadily better.

In 1980, Simon's views were so far from conventional thinking that he found it hard to get a hearing. That year, however, he experienced a publicity breakthrough. The prestigious journal *Science* published an article he wrote criticizing doomsaying predictions. Ehrlich was incensed that *Science* would publish such a thing. He wondered publicly, "Could the editors have found someone to review Simon's manuscript who had to take off his shoes to count to 20?"

A published exchange did not grow more polite. Simon pointed out Ehrlich's history of "wild statements." (Most famously, Ehrlich had begun *The Population Bomb*, "In the 1970s the world will undergo famines—hundreds of millions of people are going to starve to death.") Simon wondered why Ehrlich wouldn't "put his money where his mouth is," and offered to bet him (or anyone) on the future price of raw materials—any raw materials, including grain and oil. The bet was designed to test Ehrlich's claim that we are running out of things, for price is an indicator of scarcity. (When there is an abundance of anything, its price goes down; a shortage of the same item, and its price goes up).

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other greedy people jump in," Ehrlich replied. With two other colleagues, he bet on the price of chromium, copper, nickel, tin, and tungsten. If the price of those metals in real, uninflated dollars went up over the next ten years, Simon would owe them money. If the price went down, Ehrlich and his friends would pay. The bet was that rarest of events, when two scholars agree precisely on their disagreement, and when their prophecies can actually be checked.

## IS DISASTER SURE?

As it happens, I began college at Stanford the same year Ehrlich published *The Population Bomb*. I have lived ever since immersed in its world-view: The globe is getting increasingly crowded. We are running out of food and resources, impoverishing ourselves and polluting our fragile planet. We must act quickly to quell population growth, or disaster is sure. It is a message that, economist Robert Nelson has pointed out, bears many parallels to "an old and familiar one in the Judeo-Christian tradition": Our sinfulness is destroying the world God loves, and only turning away from our wicked ways can save us.

Ehrlich's call to limit population applied to everyone, including Americans. My brother came home from school informing my parents that they had sinned by having four children. Some young men of the time sported lapel buttons, proudly announcing to the world that they had had vasectomies.

In more recent years, however, with American and European women averaging fewer children than the replacement level of 2.1 each, concern about overpopulation has shifted mainly to poor countries in Africa, Asia, and South America. If you read the newspaper, you probably know that underlying the problems of Bangladesh, Zaire, or Brazil is overpopulation—thus poverty, hunger, crowded slums, ecological degradation.

So it is in the newspapers. In academic journals, however, hidden from the public view, such contentions are sharply debated. Ehrlich and Simon represent the two poles, but there are many points on the spectrum in-between. Often, the arguments are not over data. The two sides stare at the same set of numbers and see two different realities. At times, their



argument is virtually theological in nature. Oddly, however—or not so oddly, considering the way in which our world has been secularized—this theological dispute involves no theologians. Those arguing are economists, biologists, and demographers.

I went jogging with Julian Simon. He only reluctantly agreed to an interview, after I convinced him that I had actually read some of his material. Simon gets weary of what he considers reporters' bias, and he does not see much point in repeating the arguments that fill his books. He agreed to meet me, but he was set on jogging. So, tape recorder in hand, I loped along with him through the shaded streets of a Maryland suburb just outside Washington, D.C.

Simon is a wiry, balding, bespectacled man whose darting motions vaguely reminded me of the birds he loves to watch from his back-yard deck. I mentioned to him that it seemed that his prophecies had proven more accurate than his opponents'.

He stopped me. "It's not that my track record is good," he said. "My track record is perfect. I've literally never written a sentence that I feel any need to take back or that's been falsified by events. . . . Every single one of my forecasts has been explicitly or implicitly validated. Everyone else is wrong."

"It does attract the eye of the layman," I said cautiously.

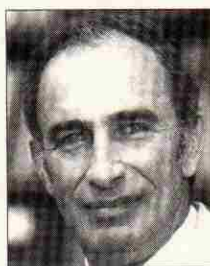
"I don't know about that," Simon said. "It doesn't attract the eye of journalists, who continue to go back to the same totally flawed sources. Just like you. You're going back to those people. The question is, why would anybody go back to somebody who's been wrong at every single turn for 25 or 30 years? But one does, because they're still in the public eye."

To explain his argument, Simon pointed to the gracious older homes we were jogging past. Most of them, he said, had been improved over the years, each one in a different and unpredictable way that suited its occupant. To Simon, that is the story of civilization: people improve their environment, if given a chance. Of course, "there will always be problems. Just like one of the lawns on this block is going to seed. But on the average, the lawns are getting better. If you come back in 20 years, that lawn will have been fixed up. That's just the way it is. We had a water problem here a while back. The reservoir did a lousy job, and we had to buy bottled water for some time. They'll fix it. It'll be better than ever before."

"Julian Simon is like the guy who jumps off the Empire State Building and says how great things are going so far, as he passes the tenth floor." That's the other side of the argument, as Paul Ehrlich gave it to John Tierney, a reporter writing about the bet for the *New York Times Magazine*. So far Simon's predictions of plenty have been mostly right. But for how long? Is the world just part way down in a disastrous fall?

The numbers Ehrlich points to are truly scary. It

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A modern Malthus: Paul Ehrlich.

took thousands of years for the global population to creep up to a billion, sometime around 1800. Only 130 years were required to add a second billion. Just 30 years later, in 1960, the third billion had been added. Between then and now, 34 years, we have added nearly three billion more. We grow by 90 million people per year. A population about the size of the United States's is added to the world every three years.

Most demographers expect we will double world population again. Even if by some miracle women were immediately to reduce their fertility rate to two children each, population momentum would add another three billion people to the globe before the numbers stabilized. (Since the population has been growing fast, we have more young people than old people, and young people tend to produce children. Thus the population keeps growing for some time even after birth rates fall.) Compassion for the poor of the world—malnourished, unemployed, poorly housed, plagued by sickness—must breed concern about population. A growing population will lead to even more people who need clothing, food, shelter. Every one of them will pollute an already strained ecosphere. How on earth can we feed them all, let alone provide for a decent life?

"Stop," says Simon. "Those people have mouths to feed, yes; but they also have hands to work and brains to create." In the short run, they are a drain; but in the long run, they produce more than they consume. The argument, as he sees it, has to do with your image of human beings. Are we fundamentally parasitic, consuming the bounty of the world? Or do we produce the bounty of the world?

It is no accident, Simon says, that some of the wealthiest places in the world—Japan, Holland, Hong Kong—are also some of the most densely populated. People create, and more people create more unless stopped by some external factor like a bad government.

Thus the bet, while necessarily focused on something almost trivial—the price of metals—represents two theologies of humanity and creation. Those in Simon's group are sometimes referred to as cornucopians, because they see the world as a veritable Thanksgiving cornucopia spilling over with good things. The key to this bounty is human creativity—our ability to face problems and solve them. Cornucopians value technology and science. Dominated by economists and neo-conservatives, they stress the importance of leaving people alone to make their own decisions about how many children they want—which means limiting the role of government. Almost (though not quite) inevitably, they foresee an improving future.

Those on Ehrlich's side are sometimes called Malthusians, after the nineteenth-century clergyman and economist who foresaw misery for the human race because population must outpace food production. Malthusians agree that humans are creative, but



they stress the inadvertent damage sometimes done by our creative solutions. Technology is as likely to destroy us as to save us, they believe, if it is not carefully controlled. Malthusians emphasize that humans must work within the limits of our planet. Dominated by biologists and political liberals, Malthusians favor effective governmental intervention. If Simon is utopian, Malthusians are apocalyptic: the future they foresee is stained with war, plague, and starvation.

This polarization—Ehrlich versus Simon—does not give an accurate picture of the debate any more than pitting snake handlers against goddess worshipers represents Christian theological debate today. The vast majority of people who deal with population issues—those who run development programs for the State Department, or research birth-control options for university public-health programs, for example—dislike the polarization intensely.

The mere mention of Simon's name is enough to chill a room. Some of this may be due to his fractious personality. One of his earliest frays involved throwing a drink in the face of a fellow professor at the University of Illinois, whom he felt had vilified him, and then knocking him down.

Similarly, Ehrlich's readiness to insult the intelligence of those who disagree with him does not endear him to many. One population activist, whom I asked for a recommended reading list, wrote, "Don't bother with Paul Ehrlich. He does *not* speak for the population community."

Personalities aside, professionals like to place themselves as centrists, midway between the extremes of Simon and Ehrlich. Yet this is only partly accurate. If you were to ask, "Is rapidly growing population a serious problem?" the vast majority of demographers and others with a professional interest in the question would say yes, though a lot of them would want to add footnotes. While distancing themselves from Ehrlich's extremism, they would follow a lot of his fundamental analysis—much as a sophisticated modern evangelical might find hellfire-and-damnation sermons distasteful, but not altogether misguided. Alarmists like Ehrlich may be extreme, but they help draw attention (and funding) to important issues.

The population movement has never done better than today. World Bank loans for population programs have steadily increased since 1970, reaching \$181 million in 1993. The United States government, historically the strongest supporter of population policies, has a renewed commitment to it through the Clinton administration. The 1994 budget approved by Congress designates \$392 million—a new high—for population policies, with \$40 million more designated to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), which received no monies during the Reagan-Bush years because of its support for programs that used abortion. Tim Wirth,

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Cornucopian: Julian Simon.

the new undersecretary of state for global affairs, says that of all the world's problems, population is number one. He aims to make population concerns one of four pillars of foreign policy.

At the first UN-sponsored population conference in Bucharest in 1974, Western delegates were shocked to hear population programs denounced by Third World leaders as racist and genocidal. By now, however, virtually every country in the world has an official population policy. (The U.S. is one of the few that does not.) Birth control has spread remarkably. Twenty years ago, only 9 percent of women of child-bearing age in developing countries used birth-control methods; 50 percent do so now. They used to bear an average of 6.1 children; they now bear 3.9. Clearly a family-planning mindset is spreading rapidly through the world.

Actually, family planning is something all parties to the bet favor, even Julian Simon. Nor is there any controversy about the proposition that the world's population must stabilize. After all, to take it to the extreme, if we were to continue multiplying at our current rate, the planet would ultimately become a ball of human flesh expanding outward at the speed of light. Sometime before that happens—and presumably considerably before—couples will begin having fewer children.

The controversy is largely over who should decide when that time will come, and who decides what to do about it. Julian Simon does not believe there is any population crisis, but even if there were, he thinks individual families would be better able to judge it than government experts. Why, he asks, should anybody place any faith in the informed analysis of scientists and governments? They have been wrong in virtually everything they have said about population. What makes you think they will suddenly start getting it right?

Paul Ehrlich, on the other hand, believes we are in a crisis, and in such situations—as in fires, earthquakes, riots—complete personal freedom may not be good for society. He believes that governments, following the informed analysis of scientists, should persuade and motivate citizens to accept the correct decisions about family size.

Whom should we believe? Or does the answer not lie with either extreme?

### THE ANCIENT LAMENT

*Plowed fields have replaced forests, domesticated animals have dispersed wild life. Beaches are plowed, mountains smoothed and swamps drained. There are as many cities as, in former years, there were dwellings. . . . Everywhere there are buildings, everywhere people, everywhere communities, everywhere life. . . . Proof [of this crowding] is the density of human beings. We weigh upon the world; its resources hardly suffice to support us. . . . In truth, plague, famine, wars, and earthquakes must be regarded as a blessing to civilization, since they prune away the luxuriant growth of the human race.*

—Tertullian, c. A.D. 200



Tertullian's modern-sounding complaint came in a time when the earth's population was a small fraction of our own. It is an ancient lament: the world is crowded. Our American ancestors complained that the land was filled up even when their largest cities had 30,000 people in them.

This crowded feeling, common to urban life, surely contributes to a broad acceptance of the message of those who argue that population is assuming disastrous proportions. Stan Becker, a demographer at Johns Hopkins University and a Quaker who cares ardently about these issues, told me his global concerns often connect best with Quakers when he relates them to American urban sprawl—to freeways and malls and parking lots spreading across the suburban terrain.

Population activists have never been content to explain their reasons for population control in aesthetic terms, however. They give more practical, scientific reasons. But, as anyone can see who reads back through the last 25 years of literature, the reasons continue to shift:

- **Hunger.** When population control roared into public consciousness in the sixties, the chief motive was hunger. India, particularly, was the place where uncontrolled fertility had supposedly run into stern Malthusian realities.

Ehrlich wrote that nothing could be done to prevent widespread starvation in India—it was too late. Another biologist, Garrett Hardin, provoked widespread, serious discussion with his proposal of “lifeboat ethics”—which claimed that richer nations must prevent, by force, “drowning” nations—those unwilling to control their populations—from climbing into the rich nations’ lifeboat. That this ill-begotten metaphor (nations are hardly like lifeboats) claimed serious attention suggests how fearful the possibilities of world hunger seemed.

I daresay that if you ask the average American whether there is more or less hunger in the world today, he or she will say that there is more. But the dire predictions did not prove true, and there is considerably *less* hunger. Famines have come—in Africa, not India—but they have been caused primarily by war, secondarily by poverty (people who can’t afford food can’t eat it), and by poor distribution. In fact, some famine-stricken countries increased their net exports of food, even during famine.

Meanwhile, farmers managed to grow more food than ever. While global population was growing at an unprecedented rate, hunger was *falling* at an unprecedented rate. Food production in the developing world more than doubled between 1965 and 1990, according to a recent article by population scholar John Bongaarts in the *Scientific American*. Caloric intake per person in developing countries increased an extraordinary 21 percent. The number of chronically malnourished people fell 7 percent in the 11 years from 1979 to 1990.

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three years.



When people talk about the population “problem,” they often mean Third World people of color.

WORLD VISION

There are tremendous regional problems, to be sure. Africa, in particular, has enough problems to make anyone heartsick. There are also worries about pollution and erosion and other environmental constraints making it impossible to double food production again in the next 50 years—as will be necessary if the world population doubles as expected. Global warming, in its vast uncertainties, raises further concerns. But, concludes Bongaarts in the *Scientific American* article, “the future of global food production is neither as grim as the pessimists believe nor as rosy as the optimists claim. The most plausible outcome is that dietary intake will creep higher in most regions. . . . Feeding a growing world population a diet that improves over time in quality and quantity is technologically feasible.”

This is not to say that hunger has been vanquished. It is a huge problem that Christians need to care about deeply. But the people who predicted massive famine in the sixties are *still* predicting famine. I have newspaper clippings in my file of headlines of their most recent predictions. I have no clippings reporting record harvests and declining hunger. This good news never made the papers.

It did, however, change the rhetoric of the population debate. Hunger got fewer mentions as a motive for population policies. The concern became “resource depletion.” We are running out of things, especially those things that cannot be replenished, like minerals.

- **Resources.** Of all Malthusian arguments, this makes the most obvious sense. There is a finite amount of iron, bauxite, copper, and oil in the earth’s crust. More people mean that these resources will be used up faster and divided up among more people. The price will go inexorably higher as these resources get used up.

This, however, has so far not proven to be true. More accurate is an apparently nonsensical idea propounded by Julian Simon, among others. He says resources are not limited in any practical or definable way.

This line of thinking seems to stand common sense on its head. Perhaps the best starting point is the truism that 20 percent of the world’s population uses 80 percent of the world’s resources. But, says Simon, this implies that the world’s resources are things found lying around, which a certain group of people has appropriated for its own use. Whereas, he argues, resources are *created*: the truth is more nearly that 20 percent of the world’s population *creates* 80 percent of the world’s resources.

Energy provides an illustrative history of the way in which resources are created. The first energy resource was wood. Forests were generally a dangerous wasteland until some early genius learned that putting wood together with a terrifying nuisance, fire, could create a source of usable heat. Subsequent inventors learned how to use this heat in increasingly efficient ways. The result was deforestation. The his-



tory of civilization is, until recent times, the story of declining forests.

Then came water power. Rochester, New York, for example, became a prime economic power on a falls of the Genesee River, where water power ran huge flour mills. Soon, though, the best sites were occupied.

Fortunately, coal came quickly into use. During most of human history, coal had been a useless, black rock. Soon it was the most precious commodity in the world. In 1864 Stanley Jevons, a prominent British social scientist, published "The Coal Question: An Inquiry Concerning the Progress of the Nation, and the Probable Exhaustion of our Coal Mines." "In some ways," comments *New York Times* journalist John Tierney, "it was quite similar to the books that appeared during the energy crisis of the 70s." Looking carefully at the increasing consumption of coal, and its declining reserves, Jevons concluded that the Industrial Revolution would soon come to a grinding halt. Jevons also found that oil would never be an adequate substitute.

Jevons was wrong. Three things happened that often typify human use of scarce resources: more coal was found, better methods of mining were developed, and oil turned out to be, after all, a substitute. Today the world has enough coal to go on virtually indefinitely.

And so it has proven with oil. "The experience of the 1970s and the 1980s showed that the main immediate threats to the world did not come from a shortage of resources or even a shortage of energy," writes Clive Ponting in *A Green History of the World*. "World consumption of oil is seven times higher than in 1970 but known reserves have been growing even faster, by about two per cent a year more than consumption."

By now you can probably guess the results of the Ehrlich-Simon bet. Ehrlich lost. The price of all five metals went down, even in real dollars. Ehrlich wrote a check to Simon, and has declined to join in any subsequent bets. But he still believes that, in the long run, prices of commodities will go up.

No matter what the price of raw materials shows, Malthusians will believe that resources are limited. Nor will any enumeration of problems convince cornucopians that difficulties have become insurmountable. On both sides, faith is involved. Sorting the data requires a perspective, a world-view, a larger frame of reference.

• **Poverty.** The argument for population control moved on from resource depletion to poverty, particularly in the Third World. Poor people do tend to have large families.

Any simple-minded equation of poverty with population was exploded early on by Nobel prize-winning economist Simon Kuznets, who found no correlation between the two. Extending the point, Julian Simon compares countries with very similar economic and cultural starting points—Taiwan and China, North and South Korea, and East

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and West Germany. In all three cases, the country with the denser population has become richer.

Andrew Steer, evangelical Britisher and director of the World Bank, the world's largest development agency, sees it somewhat differently. "Every intuition would say that rapid population growth would make it harder for poor countries to raise income, wouldn't it? The plain fact of the matter is empirical evidence is not so clear. Population density doesn't make people poor. Rapid population *growth* does, however, seem to make it more difficult for countries to bring essential services to their people."

Population activists still maintain that slowing population growth is an essential part of fighting poverty, and many economists would agree. But all now recognize that providing birth control must be only one part of a larger program, which also must include women's education, health care, and political and social reform.

• **Ecology.** Poverty's message is muted, but the dominant argument for controlling population growth has shifted again, this time to the ecosphere. When U.S. population budgets come up for congressional review, groups such as the Audubon Society and the Sierra Club are prominent in testifying. They are concerned about deforestation, species extinction, global warming, soil depletion, and pollution. It is in this context that the phrase *carrying capacity* has become common.

*Carrying capacity* is another way of expressing the idea of limits. Malthusians say that the earth is finite and can carry only so many human beings. If we go beyond the maximum, we will pollute ourselves to death. They point to signs of ecological stress everywhere—warning signs that we are on the brink of disaster.

Cornucopians, naturally, see a different picture. They point out that we have improved many fundamental environmental conditions, which is one reason people all over the world live so much longer and see their populations grow. The way to contain pollution is to grow the economy, they say, so that we have the money and know-how to deal with it. Cornucopians point to various signs of ecological improvement in developed countries and suggest that less developed countries, if not stymied by low-growth policies, will follow suit.

No one doubts there are serious ecological problems around the world. The question is whether these are "growing pains" or cancer symptoms.

One certainty is that economic growth contributes to ecological stress far more than population does. Here is how Nahid Toubia, a Sudanese doctor working for the Population Council, put it in *Conscience*, a magazine of pro-choice Catholics: "Let's take an optimistic scenario. Let's drop today's world population by half, okay? And let's drop that half from the Third World, and otherwise let's continue what we are doing. Let all American kids drink as many Cokes as



they like, drive as many cars as they want, pollute the world as much as they like, throw out as many disposables as they like. Will it reduce the environmental problem? No."

"Even were the poor to halt their population growth completely," adds Paul Shaw, writing in *Environmental Impact Assessment Review*, "the fact remains that 1.2 billion would remain entrenched in an entirely

unsustainable relationship to their environment."

"The biggest problem of the environment is inappropriate technology," John Griffiths of the World Bank told me.

"The really big problem in environmental degradation is [urban] migration rates," Nan Astone of Johns Hopkins University said.

Ecologists express concern about population as a

**W**hen Christians discuss issues relating to population, we are often much clearer about what we are *against* than what we are *for*. At one level, this is understandable, even appropriate. We need to speak out strongly against public policies that

## WHY CHRISTIANS SHOULD SUPPORT POPULATION PROGRAMS

diminish the value of human life (including that of the unborn) and threaten to undermine the integrity of the family. At another level, we are missing an important opportunity to bring to bear key biblical principles on a

topic of vital public interest—and thus help shape the agenda, rather than react to it.

Whether rapid population growth is detrimental to overall economic development is a subject of empirical debate. Evidence to date has been ambiguous, although the best recent research suggests that very high population growth does hurt a nation's economic prospects.

An issue of even greater concern to the Christian should be the impact on human well-being at the family level. Here strong evidence indicates that rapid population growth makes it much more difficult (and often impossible) for poor countries to bring vital human services, such as primary education, clean water, sanitation, and health care, to all their citizens. And growing evidence suggests that very large family size with poor spacing between children can adversely affect the well-being of children, especially among poor families.

Does all this mean that Christians should embrace aggressive population policies, involving targets and coercion? Absolutely not. These should be sharply rejected on theological grounds. And the good news is that virtually everybody—including the population "experts"—now reject such policies. Coercive target-driven programs have been found to lead to human-rights abuses. They are an ineffective way to reduce population growth anyway. Such approaches have therefore been opposed by virtually all

the delegates to the Cairo population conference. Replacing the old approach is one more consonant with biblical principles. Its starting point is the family unit, with a special emphasis on the mother.

The reason for this major shift is accumulating evidence that population growth rates fall when couples *choose* to have fewer children much more than when governments try to persuade them to have fewer children. Recent research at the World Bank, for example, shows that over 80 percent of differences in fertility rates among countries is due to these "demand" factors (such as people choosing to have fewer children), rather than the "supply" of family planning services. The best way to reduce population growth rates is to reduce poverty, provide basic education and literacy (especially for girls), reduce infant mortality, and enable greater security of employment and income.

These goals are precious to Christians. They help men, women, and children to live whole and dignified lives according to God's original intention. We should wholeheartedly support governments and groups to help bring such developments about.

Worldwide progress in these areas has been remarkable over the past four decades: primary- and secondary-education enrollment rates have doubled; infant mortality has halved; average nutritional standards have improved; poverty has been reduced in most parts of the world. And families have been choosing to have fewer children.

On the other hand, all is not well. Despite the sharp reduction in fertility rates, total population increase—at almost 100 million per year—is greater than ever, due to the sharp increase in the number of women in child-bearing age. Sadly, interest in and support for international development programs has fallen in recent years in affluent countries like the United States. In earlier times the church was at the forefront, preventing this from happening, but no more; like the nation as a whole, Christians are focusing inward on problems at home. There is now a serious threat to the momentum of development, and in some parts of the world (especially Africa), earlier progress in reducing poverty has been reversed. We thus stand at a critical juncture. This is a time for the church to lead the cause for a pro-poor pro-life agenda rather than merely react to the agenda of others.

*By Andrew Steer, director of the World Bank, with responsibilities for environmental and social policies.*



background factor that exaggerates environmental problems and makes them harder to solve. But it is not the main thing, by almost anyone's accounting.

### SUSPICIONS

First hunger, then resources, then poverty, now ecology. When you dig into the serious literature on each of these issues, you find population assigned a nuanced, partial causality. Yet somehow population keeps popping up as a chief cause, if not *the* cause, of global problems. Dozens of specialized organizations, a whole UN agency, world conferences: all emphasize the role of population. When the 1992 Rio de Janeiro conference on sustainable development failed to make much of population, that became the story for many journalists: why were they ignoring the real issue?

Sharon Camp, a prominent population activist, summarizes the situation this way in *Conscience*: "No one expects [population stabilization] to eliminate world poverty or protect the global environment. It may increase the prospects for doing both, however, and it may be critical to do both simultaneously. A growing body of scientists believes so, even though their conclusions are based more on intuition than science."

What is behind the intuition? Calvin Beisner, an evangelical who has written extensively on these issues, says population activists run the risk of falling into an anti-human ideology: they may see humanity as consumer and polluter rather than created in the image of God.

Others charge that the population movement is eugenic—concerned to "improve" the human race by eliminating births from the "unfit." Feminist Linda Gordon writes that demographers in the 1950s "repeated on an international scale the motifs of the eugenics sensibility, the distinction between the moderate, restrained 'us' and the teeming, profligate 'them.'" New York's Cardinal John O'Connor charges that U.S. population policy aims to control "the black poor, the brown poor, the Latino poor, the Asian poor, the African poor, the Middle Eastern poor."

A third charge is that the population movement has become a self-reinforcing government lobby. And there is a close and sometimes incestuous relationship between government and many population groups. One activist told me, for example, that the Population Council has spent much energy lobbying the U.S. government to restore funds to UNEPA—a UN agency that helps pay for the Population Council. Many population programs depend on government funds, which they use directly or indirectly to rally support for government action. (The same complaint could be made about many other causes, from cancer research to defense subcontracting.)

I talked about these suspicions with Steer. He affirmed that the population movement has changed its ground over the years, but suggested a less sinister way of looking at it. Why not, he asked, see it as an

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intellectual journey? Why not celebrate the fact that population researchers have arrived at far more nuanced ideas about their subject, that they now see the vital importance of economic development, women's education, and health—concerns that Christian missionaries have long held dear?

Conversations with people involved in the population movement convinced me that these people were genuinely and deeply concerned about human beings.

I had lunch with Robert Engelman, director of the Population and Environment Program for Population Action International. It was the day before I was to interview Julian Simon, and I asked Engelman—a former journalist—what he would ask Simon if he were me.

Engelman is a soft-spoken man who tries to be charitable, even in the way he talks about Simon. He thought a while and said he would like to ask Simon what he thought about falling water tables in places like the American Southwest, where farmers are pumping up reserves for irrigation much faster than the reserves are being replenished by natural processes.

I said that if I understood Simon correctly, I thought he would say he didn't know what the answer was, but he was confident that when the problem got bad enough—that is, when water was scarce enough to send the price up—someone would figure out an answer. I said I thought that was a pretty strong argument. Engelman grew passionately angry. He said he was shaken that an intelligent person like me could think that was a good answer. He asked why problems had not gotten bad enough to find an answer for the millions of women who die in childbirth, or the millions of children who die of diarrhea each year. Simon, he said, simply lives in a comfortable suburb, insulated from the world's problems.

It was a deeply emotional outburst. I could see that suffering people were at the front of Engelman's mind much more than the technicalities of an economic argument. Is it not scandalous to sit back and wait for problems to fix themselves instead of doing something? The problems of our world are too pressing and too painful for that.

I understand and sympathize with that reaction, as any evangelical would. It is the same kind of response we have taken to a world without Christ. We cannot afford to sit and argue theology, it says. We have got to act before it is too late.

Urgency and heartfelt concern have limits, however. A great deal of good can be done by people passionately concerned for others. But so can a great deal of harm, if they are misguided. And the prophetic record of the population movement does not suggest overwhelming confidence. Andrew Steer is right: This can be seen as an intellectual journey. But there is another possibility: that the population movement is a crusade, pushing beyond the boundaries of science.