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Population Growth and Fertility Control

The role of the moral theologian in the modern world is in many ways a difficult one. The rapid change taking place in many areas of the globe, advances in science and technology, the increased pace of modern living, all create pressures for individuals which would have been unthinkable fifty or one hundred years ago. These pressures give rise to many problems, among them problems of a moral nature. The very rapidity with which these problems succeed one another and their complexity place a much greater burden on the moral theologian today than at any time in the past. While it is unrealistic to expect the moralist to be acquainted with all the complex issues involved in concrete social problems, one cannot escape the uncomfortable feeling that these issues are sometimes, in fact, if not in theory, considered irrelevant to an informed moral judgement. An instance in point is a recent article by Fr. Anthony Zimmerman on birth control in Japan.¹ Fr. Zimmerman seems more concerned with rejecting "baby prevention as an infallible solution" to the problem of overpopulation in Japan than he is with an objective analysis of the actual problem. Few experts in any area of social science propose infallible solutions. They are too well aware of the limitations of their data and the difficulties of prediction to be dogmatic.

Many reputable demographers, among them Catholics, are much less sure of the social and cultural factors that have produced the Japanese experience or of the eventual outcome of the Japanese program than is Fr. Zimmerman.² One thing seems clear, the post-war program of family limitation was not something new to Japan. For a century and a half before modernization began in Japan, "the population seems to have remained stagnant because of the widespread practice of late marriage and abortion among the upper classes and of infanticide elsewhere."³ This would lead one to presume "a distinct cultural tradition of limitation—appearing eccentrically, but still well known to all living Japanese as an acceptable way of handling the problem of people."⁴ This cultural tradition must be taken into account in evaluating the post war program of family limitation in Japan.

After the war 6 million military and civilian Japanese were repatriated from over seas. In Japan as elsewhere the return of military personnel led to a large number of new marriages so that the birth rate rose to a dangerous height. Due to the efficient health measures taken by the Occupation forces and the Japanese government there

¹ "Birth Control in Japan: Medicine or Quack?" 5/1, *World Justice* (September 1963), pp. 41-55.

² See, e.g., Thomas K. Burch's review of *Catholic View on Over-population*, by Anthony Zimmerman, *America*, 106 (October 14, 1961) 50.

³ John C. Pelzel's review of *The Population of Japan*, by Irene Taeuber, *The American Sociological Review*, XXIV, 3 (June, 1959), p. 416.

⁴ *Ibid.*

were no serious outbreaks of sickness and the death rate fell. As a result of these combined factors, the rate of natural increase rose above that of any previous year.

With her overseas territories gone and her agricultural and mineral resources limited, such a rapid rate of increase posed serious problems.⁵ The fact that contraceptive abortion formed part of the overall attack on the problem should not seem too surprising in the light of previous Japanese experience. One need not deny the existence or the complexity of the actual problem nor the cultural factors which very likely inclined the Japanese to contraceptive abortion as part of an overall solution, to disapprove of abortion as an immoral means. To state that abortion may have contributed to the phenomenal economic growth of post war Japan by limiting the birth rate need not imply approval of abortion nor a denial of the fact that a declining birth rate may give rise to other problems.

Despite Fr. Zimmerman's affirmation to the contrary, demographers are not unaware of these problems. The findings of numerous studies have indicated that the decline of population growth in highly industrialized countries tended on the whole to raise the ratio of the labor force to the total population and thus to raise per capita income. The effect has been brought about primarily by the aging of the population which accompanied the declining rate of population growth. In the future, however, unless the population again begins to grow, its age composition is likely to assume a form which implies a relatively small labor force in proportion to the entire population, and serious problems of old age dependency will arise.

Declining population growth and the accompanying changes in age composition are also likely to facilitate the education and training of the labor force, and thus to increase labor force productivity. These favorable influences may perhaps be offset to some extent by a loss of efficiency and adaptability due to the increasing proportion of workers past middle age; but the potential importance of that loss has not been clearly demonstrated.⁶

A decline in population also affects the per-capita quantity of productive assets at the disposal of the labor force and the composition of these assets as well as the organization and techniques of production and the trade relationships obtaining between the country in question and other countries. In short, it can be said that it is not easy to determine whether a decline in the rate of population growth in industrialized countries is advantageous or disadvantageous in the

⁵ Warren S. Thompson, *Population Problems* (New York, Toronto, London: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1953), pp. 458-459.

⁶ United Nations, Department of Social Affairs, Population Division, *The Determinants and Consequences of Population Trends*, Population Series, No. 17 (New York: 1953), p. 251.

balance. The answer depends on the relative weight given to certain opposing influences and this may differ for individual countries.⁷

The Japanese population picture is historically a complex one and all the relevant information on the post war birth-control program is not yet in. Though a Catholic may regret the emphasis of the program on contraception and abortion, he should not allow his religious views to color his study of the program as an objective fact. Scientific conclusions as to the success or failure of the Japanese program must be based on a thorough study of the relevant scientific data. The fact that the means used have been immoral does not mean that they could not have accomplished their purpose and in the case of Japan, there seems to be no solid reason for concluding that they did not accomplish their purpose.

In an underdeveloped country such as the Philippines, where the rate of population growth is one of the most rapid in the world, any production gains or efforts toward development are almost immediately absorbed or fail entirely to keep up with the subsistence demands of a rapidly growing population. As a result there is little opportunity for further development through capital savings or increased skills to say nothing of a higher standard of living. An underdeveloped country with a rapidly growing population simply cannot provide a secure economic base from which to develop its potential, no matter how unlimited that potential may be. The result is widespread poverty, lack of educational opportunity and discontent. This being the case, we cannot avoid the conclusion that family planning either through delay or avoidance of marriage or through some morally acceptable form of fertility control must form part of any overall attack on the problem of economic development in the underdeveloped nations. To state otherwise is simply to ignore the demographic facts of life in the Philippines at present.

Regarding the question of fertility control, the discovery of anovulants has led to widespread discussions of the morality of their use. As a result, there seems to be a distinct tendency among theologians to de-emphasize the distinction between the primary and secondary ends of marriage. Both ends, the procreation and education of children and mutual love and happiness seem to be considered of equal importance in this view. The tendency is interesting in itself and can have far reaching significance. I personally feel it places more stress on the totality of the marriage act and is more in keeping with the nature of man. If we consider man as a totality possessing psychic and emotional as well as physical aspects, is it necessary or even desirable to continue speaking of physically pathological states (irregular cycles, sub-fertility or sterility) to justify the use of anovulants? Cannot worry, fear, and anxiety be as harmful to the

⁷ *Ibid.*

well being of the total person as sub-fertility or an irregular cycle? If so, would the use of the pill in such circumstances be justified? If the marriage act is the expression of the total self-giving of a total person, then it would seem that any pathological condition, physical, mental, or emotional, which would ultimately interfere with this total self-donation does not ultimately serve the purpose of marriage and might be corrected by the use of the pill in the same way as an irregular cycle. It would seem that in these circumstances, the "temporary sterility" caused by the use of the anovulant is not directly intended since the dissipation of the fear and anxiety surrounding the use of the marriage act is not due to sterility but to the removal of a pathological condition. Modern psychology and psychiatry have produced sufficient evidence to indicate that pathological conditions should not be thought of in exclusively physical terms, yet many moralists continue to limit their discussion on the use of anovulants to physically pathological states all the while emphasizing the total nature of the marriage act.

In conclusion, it might be well for those charged with applying the principles of moral theology and ethics to the contemporary scene to remember that there are other valid approaches to the study of man which are necessary and legitimate. Though these approaches may not involve personal commitments to action programs, they do develop valid generalizations and theories about society which the moral theologian and philosopher cannot overlook.

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