

In Theory: Should there be morality in the markets?

July 13, 2011

Q. At a time of near-record food prices, Pope Benedict XVI has denounced speculation in commodities markets as “immoral” and called food and water “a basic human right.” According to the UN's Food and Agricultural Organization, overall global food prices have risen by an average of more than 80% in the past 10 years, with sugar rising fastest. High food costs have sparked riots in Cameroon, Haiti, Mozambique and Egypt. The most recent FAO figures put the number of people in the world classed as “hungry” at 915 million.

Speaking to FAO delegates, the Pope said that high food prices require an international response from politicians, faith leaders and corporations. “How can we remain silent when even food has become the object of speculation or is linked to a market that, without any regulation and deprived of moral principles, appears linked solely to an objective of profit?” he asked delegates. The Pope's statements echo his writings in the 2009 “Charity in Truth” encyclical, where he called for worldwide regulation of economies and food production.

Is it possible to see the global economy in moral terms? And should morality be imposed upon it?

Answer:

I was gratified to see that the Pope has addressed the incredible need for people of faith throughout the world to act on the moral imperative for people to have the food and water that are vital to life. It is understandable for people to be concerned about rising food and water prices; but for an increasing number of people, food and water availability is not just a concern, it is a life-threatening reality. In his statement, the Pope has raised this issue to the height of a supreme directive, not just an individual choice.

As a Unitarian Universalist, I am encouraged by our principles to “affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person,” along with “justice, equity and compassion in human relations.” To me, that means that I am compelled to support the rights of all people to the basic necessities of life. And it is that same affirmation that has inspired the Unitarian Universalist Legislative Ministry of California and the UU Service Committee to affirm the right to water for Californians and people throughout the world.

That said, there is a vital omission in the Pope's statement. He seems unwilling to acknowledge the relationship between population control by individuals and the growing need for food and water. Until we recognize that connection, the provision of increasing amounts of food and water will not completely address the large gap between the rich and the poor and the growing number of people who do not have the basic necessities of life, not to mention a quality of life that so many of us take for granted.

My hope and commitment is that we will all dedicate ourselves to nurturing the most vulnerable of our people in the world and that people of all religious traditions will join together to support that vision.

The Rev. Dr. Betty Stapleford
Unitarian Universalist Church of the Verdugo Hills
La Crescenta

Morality inescapably affects everything we do. If we obey God's moral laws, eventually good things are the result. If we ignore them, people will suffer, including ourselves. The apostle Paul put it this way: "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh shall from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit shall from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we shall reap if we do not grow weary." (Galatians 6:7-9). Romans 12:20 instructs us that even "if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink." Compassion that meets this basic need of others supersedes the issue of whether or not we make money off of it.

Morality is already imposed upon the global economy. Most nations have agreed to oppose things like human trafficking, drug smuggling and arms dealing. Most recognize the practical impact of basic morality on the way we conduct business and adjust their ways accordingly. Of course, some leaders and nations still engage in illicit profit-making. Nations, corporations and individuals may ignore and violate God's laws, but they can never escape the ultimate consequences. Or as Solomon put it in Proverbs 9:10: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

Pastor Jon Barta
Valley Baptist Church
Burbank

Without a moral standard, societies will perish. Without morality and values, we are no longer living out the human dignity God assigned us. Human life is valuable, ours no more than others. If we do not view others that way, we are reduced to looking like little more than animals, with the self-survival instincts they exhibit.

If we demonstrate care for humans' rights and value, we cannot ignore that basic human sustenance is connected to profit here. If people cannot afford food, they will suffer, grow sick, or die. How can there not be regulation on this matter, a basic moral principle instilled and adhered to? How can we link a basic human right to profit alone?

The Pope addresses this issue from a spiritual and ethical slant. Should not governments globally come to an agreement? I believe that, yes, it is possible and ethical to see the global economy in moral terms. And I do believe that we should be compelled to exercise morality when it comes to food prices and distribution. We are not in famine. Riots and plunder have not begun to occur. Prices should be within the realm of affordability for the basic necessities of life. Or we act much less than human, let alone like God-fearing people putting worth on all mankind.

The Rev. Kimberlie Zakarian, LMFT
Kimberlie Zakarian Therapy
Montrose

The U.S. diverges radically from the rest of the world in our view of economics. No other country accepts as a given that an entity, human or corporate, is allowed to take whatever can be gotten. Ours is the most rapacious, dog-eat-dog-and-the-devil-take-the-hindmost brand of capitalism.

I believe that the rest of the world does see moral limits to the sway of the free market, and yes, here again the U.S. needs to catch up.

Should morality be imposed upon the global economy? Is the Pope Catholic?

Pope Benedict denies that he is politically partisan in his beliefs, and I am happy for him to call it whatever he wants, but denouncing commodity speculation to make access to food and water more equitable is a very progressive view. I applaud him.

His 2009 Charity in Truth encyclical goes much further than calling for regulation of the economy. It says capitalism is obsolete, and that we must redistribute wealth and value humans as our primary capital.

Oh, and it also says that the United Nations should become a true world political authority and that in order to revive the world economy and protect the environment, we must move toward “disarmament, food security and peace.”

Be still my heart. Next time he visits SoCal maybe he'll swing the Popemobile by both peace vigils here in Glendale and honk for peace.

Roberta Medford
Atheist
Montrose

When people are dying of starvation, as people most certainly are in Africa right this minute, how can we not think of the global economy in terms of morality? It's the old question asked by Cain in Genesis 4, verse 9: “Am I my brother's keeper?” The implication is, “Yes, you are.” I don't know that I'd go as far as Pope Benedict, because the world economy is a complicated animal, and coming down hard on commodity traders may not be the best answer. Still, those of us in the three Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) can do no other, in my opinion, than to think of practically everything in moral terms, and that includes the global economy. In the Christian faith, the words of Jesus as recorded in Matthew 25:35 and 25:42 instruct us to feed the hungry — and if we don't, the consequences aren't good.

Now the enormity of the problem of hunger may make some of us want to throw up our hands in despair. But as believers, we don't have the luxury of despair. We also can't feign ignorance, as some Germans did during the Nazi regime and the Holocaust. They knew what was happening, or certainly they should have known. The same goes for us, and we do know what's happening. Again, how can any sensitive, moral human being not see the global economy in terms of morality?

The Rev. Skip Lindeman
La Cañada Congregational Church
La Cañada Flintridge

Some set of values is always in play in an economy. There is always a set of rules determining “right” and “wrong” conduct, so of course one can see the global economy in moral terms. If everyone plays by Darwinian rules, for example, the fittest survive and the weak and hungry perish and that is deemed “right.” If everyone plays by the rules of unfettered capitalism, those who can meet demand with supply and make a profit survive, while those who have demand but cannot meet the price of the supply perish, and that is deemed “right.”

The faith community is uniting in these days of perceived scarcity to offer a set of rules — a morality — that says that it is not “right” to allow people to die of hunger because they are weak or poor or have no access to means of production. In a faith-based approach to a global economy, each life is understood to be sacred and worth saving. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, we hear our prophets’ repeated warnings, like this graphic one from Isaiah 3:15: “What do you mean by crushing my people and grinding the faces of the poor?” declares the Lord, the Lord Almighty.” The Lord repeatedly turns our attention to our neighbors, whom we ignore at our shared peril.

I am not sure that the Pope’s idea of worldwide regulation is the correct “fetter” for capitalism. I haven’t studied the details, but I suspect that this sort of regulatory solution could produce unintended consequences that undermine the goal. I do agree that global solutions should be explored in all areas — commodity pricing, trade regulations, agricultural production, development assistance, etc.

USAID Administrator Rajiv Shah said recently that every night, nearly 1 billion people go to bed hungry and that 3.5 million children under 5 die every year from nutrition-related illnesses. Real people and real suffering add up to a global moral issue.

The Rev. Paige Eaves
Crescenta Valley United Methodist Church
Montrose

I wholeheartedly agree that access to food and water represents a basic human right, and that morality dictates that there should never be a hungry man, woman, or child on this planet. However, I disagree with the premise that hunger and exorbitant food prices are primarily caused by “speculation” or the abuse of an unrestricted global economy. World food markets are simply reacting to a reality that is not their doing, one which they can hardly change. The real responsibility for the world’s food and water crisis rests with corrupt governments and evil dictators.

One does not need a degree in economics or sociology to recognize that the majority of the world's starving people live under harsh, undemocratic regimes or (at best) terribly dysfunctional systems. Across the globe, these immoral leaders and their puppet parliaments subjugate their citizenry, condemning their people to starvation while often enriching themselves in the process. Every year the United Nations, United States, the European Union and other countries of goodwill send millions of tons of food aid to these impoverished countries. Yet the impact seems to be minimal.

Scandalous news stories reveal that quite often, the recipient nation’s corrupt government hoards the food, sells it to the highest bidder — or, perhaps worst of all, lets it rot — rather than ensuring that it reaches its intended recipients. For this reason, I believe that even if global food markets were more tightly regulated, it would not make a significant difference to those who are in dire need of basic food and drinkable water. The only hope for these many millions of disadvantaged people is regime change, and that can only happen when it is a widely desired goal shared by a movement that begins at the grass-roots level.

Recently, we have witnessed citizen awakenings in authoritarian countries across the globe. I hope that these uprisings lead to the emergence of honest, competent individuals who will form honorable governments that have the welfare of their citizens as their primary concern. If that change happens, I believe we will finally see a reduction in world-wide hunger and come closer to the day when every person on the face of this Earth can enjoy their basic human right of food and water.

Rabbi Simcha Backman

Chabad Jewish Center
Glendale

Whenever there are hungry people, we are moved to see them fed. Charity organizations abound, offering to take our contributions and translate them into real need-meets for the places inhabited by skin-and-bones children sporting starvation-bloated bellies. “How can such poverty exist?” we wonder. Yet everywhere there are people who have neither resources nor access to healthful levels of food.

It’s hard to imagine this in fat America, but even here we have starving people; Appalachia and the rural south come immediately to mind. In those places there are vast resources, but politics keeps the populations impoverished. It’s this way worldwide. How often we’ve given to foreign missions that not only share Christ, but attempt to meet the life necessities of those to whom they minister, only to have food shipments confiscated or diverted by those countries. So food comes, and people continue to go without.

As today’s question points out, the increase in food costs is led by sugar. Frankly, it isn’t sugar that we should be concerned about, but the stuff that makes bread and nourishes bodies. While people should never starve — given this planet’s rich ability to produce (thanks to God) — it’s those who have much that perpetuate the problem of those who have little.

America is in the red. We cannot afford to feed the world. Unless there was some means of recovering our losses. We have our own people to feed, but if countries needing our aid would only share with us whatever resources might help us to do that for them, we could eliminate much of the problem. It seems that every time we turn around, we are footing the bill for international needs, yet nobody says, “Hey, let’s help America pay down that debt that we caused them.”

Jesus said, “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” (Matt. 25:40 NIV). So yes, it’s a moral issue, but as the adage goes, “Give a man a fish, and he eats for a day. Teach a man to fish and he’ll never lack.” That’s the answer to the question.

The Rev. Bryan Griem
Montrose Community Church
Montrose