Restrictions or Resources? Buddhist-Christian Discourse for Our Growing Population

Joel David Daniels

As global population continues to grow, people have become increasingly concerned about the Earth's capacity to sustain and support life. If human population exceeds the planet's ability to produce enough food and clean water then impoverished communities will suffer and international conflict will inevitably arise over resources. According to many of the leading voices in academics and politics, the best way to control population is through implementing severe restrictions on women in regions with the greatest population growth and on immigrants trying to relocate to "Western" countries. Using Michel Foucault's discourse analysis, I contend that restrictions-based solutions are both ineffective and discriminatory, relying on racist and sexist discourses, and that the actual solution to population growth is resourcing underprivileged regions, which global population data confirms. I conclude by arguing that Buddhist-Christian discourse can support and advance resource-focused solutions through emphasizing shared values on generosity, interdependence, liberation, and responsible action.

Keywords: Resourceful Discourse, Restrictive Discourse, Overpopulation, Migration, Michel Foucault, Thich Nhat Hanh, Jürgen Moltmann

Introduction

The United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) and Global Environmental Alert Service (GEAS) issued a report in 2012 entitled "One Planet, How Many People?,"[1] which examined research on the Earth's human carrying capacity. According to the findings, the majority of studies state that the Earth can sustain no more than eight billion people,[2] a number projected to be surpassed before 2025.[3] The apparent population issue is not about physical space, though––indeed, there is plenty of landmass to support human bodies. Rather the issue is related to production and consumption: at some point, the Earth simply cannot provide for all of its citizens. Further problems then arise such as pollution, mass migration, and international conflict over resources. From this perspective, the prognosis is devastatingly bleak unless humankind is able to find a way to better control population growth. So what is the solution?

In this article, I survey the discourse on overpopulation through a Buddhist-Christian interreligious lens, asking who has dominated the larger discussion and how those individuals have shaped the social narrative. I begin by exploring Michel Foucault's discourse analysis. For Foucault, language is not representational or passive but rather generative, creating reality through the propositions communicated. Foucault's framework is important because he corrects the false assumption that discourse on ethical issues like population growth is merely descriptive, objectively

[1] United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) and Global Environmental Alert Service (GEAS), "One Planet, How Many People? A Review of Earth's Carrying Capacity. A Discussion Paper for the Year of Rio+20," *Environmental Development* 4 (2012): 114–135.

[2] The report cites other studies that suggest the world can support anywhere between 16 and 64 billion people; however, they also cite studies that say the capacity is 4 billion. UNEP and GEAS, "One Planet," 120.

[3] The world's population at the time of writing is roughly 7.7 billion people.

surveying the data and then rationally proposing solutions. He argues that in reality, physical events are indeterminate and that *discourse* constructs, defines, and controls perception. For religious people, this reorientation is helpful—instead of participating in and contributing to the discourses created by and for academics and politicians, which are often divisive and oppressive (as I discuss further below), religious leaders and practitioners can redefine the entire situation, infusing the discourse with religious values on generosity, interdependence, liberation, and responsible action. Consequently, I spend an extended amount of time explicating Foucault's philosophy in order to redefine the parameters around population growth.

Building on that foundation, I examine early scholarship that stigmatized population growth, primarily through Garrett Hardin's work, then show how these sentiments remain active in public discourse today. The guiding principle within this discursive position is that imposing heavy *restrictions* on people from regions experiencing the greatest growth is the only way to contain the population. Next I present world population data, which explains how global population is naturally leveling and might soon even decline through *resourcing* underprivileged regions, suggesting a less dire situation. Finally, I propose ways that Buddhists and Christians can work together to alter the discourse on overpopulation by invoking core values that support resourcing rather than restricting others.

Foucault and "Discourse"

Michel Foucault (1926–84) was a post-structuralist philosopher who challenged the prevailing discourse on discourse. Prior to Foucault, discourse analysis was rooted in the notion that language represents reality—that language signified a "real" object predicate,[4] which Foucault called "structuralism."[5] For Foucault, by constrast, discourse actively creates "reality" through finite—not universal—"linguistic sequences."[6] There is no inherent reality or structure that language expresses, as if words were passively accessed and then used. The finitude of language, consequently, leads to specific parameters about what can be said in a given situation; in other words, the particular contextual system in which language is uttered is limited by that system's constructed rules.[7] For example, a courtroom context limits the range of language, creating an exclusive discursive structure.

When individuals deviate from the approved discourse establishment, they are discarded and at times labeled "mad."[8] As a result, people typically stay within the parameters of the defined discourse to avoid alienation and derision, an important point for religious leaders and practitioners to understand regarding population growth. Rather than restricting themselves to politically and academically constructed discourse on "overpopulation," religious people can redefine the topic, rejecting the notion that their discursive perspective is invalid because it does not fit within the "standard" position. Foucault's analysis, therefore, fundamentally reorders the

---

[4] See Alec McHoul and Wendy Grace, *A Foucault Primer: Discourse, Power and the Subject* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 35.
[5] Michel Foucault, "Orders of Discourse," *Social Science Information* 10, no. 2 (1971): 27.
[6] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge & the Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 27.
[7] Foucault, *Archaeology*, 27.
[8] See Michel Foucault and Claude Bonnefoy, "Interview between Michel Foucault and Claude Bonnefoy, 1968," in *Speech Begins After Death* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 59.

entire discussion, enabling religious people to transform the parameters and thus the issue rather than reinforce dominant, oppressive discursive systems.

For Foucault, one can trace historical discourse by examining the "set of rules" that govern a given society at a given time, a method he calls "archaeology."[9] These "archives" contain important variables in the production and distribution of discourse, such as (1) who is authorized to speak and (2) what dynamics are involved. First, Foucault says that discourse relies on the authority of institutional pedagogy: "the book-system, publishing, libraries, such as the learned societies in the past, and laboratories today."[10] By their very nature, institutions are limiting and exclusive, purportedly able to create knowledge through precise discursive systems reliant on particularity. Moreover, institutions elevate certain types of people to serve as arbiters of knowledge, whether physicians, psychiatrists, professors, or politicians.[11] Foucault explains, "None may enter into discourse on a specific subject unless he has satisfied certain conditions or if he is not, from the outset, qualified to do so."[12] In other words, discourse is confined to certain credentialed authorities.[13]

Second, these institutional authorities are not static in either their leadership or message; indeed, as Foucault suggests, these authorities are a part of a dynamic discursive system of relationships that are constantly changing and transforming.[14] Although each sector contains its own discourse, these discourses nevertheless still interact, affecting and modifying one another.[15] Therefore, as Foucault explains, discourse, regardless of context, is not one particular "thing":

> But what we are concerned with here is not to neutralize discourse, to make it the sign of something else, and to pierce through its density in order to reach what remains silently anterior to it, but on the contrary to maintain it in its consistency, to make it emerge in its own complexity. What, in short, we wish to do is to dispense with 'things.' To 'depresentify' them."[16]

Foucault gives "Natural History" as an example. Within Natural History discourse, categories like "genus" or "species" have been formed, organizing and limiting the scope of the discipline. Certain scientists, who have obtained the proper degrees, are permitted to participate in this discourse, and by doing so, these individuals become the experts that shape society's views on the topic, even as the topic continues to change and develop.

Foucault's discourse analysis is not primarily focused on the words spoken, as if those words represented an actual object; however, he is interested in bringing "to light the action of imposed

---

[9] Michel Foucault, "Politics and the Study of Discourse," in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, ed. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 59.
[10] Foucault, "Orders of Discourse," 10.
[11] Foucault, *Archaeology*, 50.
[12] Foucault, "Orders of Discourse," 17.
[13] Foucault, *Archaeology*, 68.
[14] Foucault explains, "These relationships are established between institutions, economic and social processes, behavioural patterns, systems of norms, techniques, types of classifications, modes of characterization" (*Archaeology*, 45).
[15] Foucault explains, "Each discourse undergoes constant change as new utterances (*énoncés*) are added to it (consider the strange entities of sociology or psychology which have been continually making fresh starts ever since their inception)" ("Politics and the Study of Discourse," 54).
[16] Foucault, "Politics and the Study of Discourse," 47.

rarity, with a fundamental power of affirmation."[17] The discourse on overpopulation, according to Foucault's analysis, is not describing an actual object but instead is working within a defined structure that enables certain people to make biased claims that shape social thinking. Accordingly, the discourse around "overpopulation" is actively prescriptive while masquerading as passively descriptive. Important questions then arise, like: what would motivate certain kinds of people to proliferate the idea of overpopulation? Who benefits from this idea and whom does it repress? Relatedly, what discourses are elicited in order to bolster the claim? These questions can be answered by scrutinizing the data on overpopulation discourse.

Restrictive Discourse

Although he had predecessors,[18] biologist and Stanford professor Paul Ehrlich is often identified as the progenitor of overpopulation discourse because of his 1968 best-selling book *The Population Bomb*.[19] On the first page, he quickly escalates the situation by providing a pretentious and scathing account of his time in Delhi, India, describing the immense number of people as "hellish."[20] He continues by outlining how rapidly modern population has grown relative to history, explaining how it took nearly ten thousand years (8000 BCE–1650 BCE) for the population to double, from five million to ten million people. Yet, as Ehrlich notes, that "doubling time" had condensed to a mere thirty-five years at his own time of writing. Although the book is often extreme, it appears that Ehrlich's main goal is to ensure that everyone is able to have enough resources to survive; he even rebukes wealthy societies for overconsumption.[21] His alarmist tone, however, survived into the next iteration of overpopulation hysteria, which was not so ethically inclined.

In 1974, Garrett Hardin,[22] then Professor of Human Ecology at the University of California, Santa Barbara, argued that over-reproduction and the oppressive tax represented by the international food bank threatened the world's human carrying capacity.[23] Because poorer countries have a higher reproduction rate and, therefore, need for food, Hardin contended that the current system would only lead to misery: "Under the guidance of this ratchet (model), wealth can be steadily moved in one direction only, from the slowly-breeding rich to the rapidly-breeding poor, the process finally coming to a halt only when all countries are equally and miserably poor."[24] Discussing India's population growth, Hardin pronounced, "*Every life saved this year in a poor country diminishes the quality of life for subsequent generations*."[25] Hardin used the metaphor of a lifeboat to explain

---

[17] Foucault, "Orders of Discourse," 27.

[18] For example, Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962).

[19] Ehrlich explains that the Hugh Moore Fund first used the words "The Population Bomb" in 1954 for a pamphlet; see Paul Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb* (Cutchogue, NY: Buccaneer Books, 1968), opening page. In a follow-up article, Paul and Anne Ehrlich say that the book sold over two million copies. They also say that Anne was the co-author of the original book but the publisher insisted on the book being from a single author. See Paul R. Ehrlich and Anne H. Ehrlich, "The Population Bomb Revised," *The Electronic Journal of Sustainable Development* 1, no. 3 (2009): 63.

[20] Erlich, *The Population Bomb*, 1.

[21] Erlich, *The Population Bomb*, 133.

[22] Ehrlich mentions Hardin's earlier research at the beginning of his book (*The Population Bomb*, 6).

[23] Hardin adds, "An 'international food bank' is really, then, not a true bank but a disguised one-way transfer device for moving wealth from rich countries to poor" (Garrett Hardin, "Living on a Lifeboat," *BioScience* 24, no. 10 [1974], 563–564).

[24] Hardin, "Living on a Lifeboat," 565.

[25] Hardin, "Living on a Lifeboat," 565. Emphasis in original.

what he saw as three responsive options to the crisis[26]: (1) listen to Christian and Marxian values and try to save everyone,[27] (2) let as many people on the lifeboat as can fit,[28] or (3) admit no one, which he ultimately chooses. Hardin's rationale for his third option is that since the lifeboat is not at capacity, those onboard will have enough space to thrive. The main opponent to this solution, Hardin claimed, would be the "guilt-addict" who feels badly for those who will die outside the spacious lifeboat.[29]

Hardin extended his argument in a later article, advocating for the United States to adopt China's strict one-child policy. He praised the Chinese system, which restricted its female citizens' reproductive rights by only providing enough resources for one child,[30] adding that China had successfully capitalized on coercing women through shame.[31] Shaming women in the U.S., Hardin lamented, is unlikely to work, requiring other methods like "monetary rewards for relative sterility."[32] Hardin admitted that restricting reproduction might not be possible in the immediate future, leading him to another solution: "In the meantime, one large step toward population control is already necessary and may be possible: *we must bring immigration virtually to an end and do so soon*."[33] Although the U.S. has the resources to support immigrants, Hardin argued that the country should not admit anyone in order to conserve its resources and to avoid rescuing immigrants that would helpfully perish otherwise; for Hardin, the goal was to thin non-"Western"—or more accurately, non-North Atlantic—populations.

If one is not attuned to the broad discourse on overpopulation, one might assume that Hardin goes unnoticed today due to his extreme utilitarian approach; however, according to biologist John Cairns, former University Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Environmental Biology at Virginia Tech, Hardin was a visionary. After quoting Hardin comparing military warfare to reproductive rights,[34] both of which must be eliminated, Cairns says: "May humankind

[26] He uses the example of being on a lifeboat that can hold sixty people. As of now, the boat has fifty people on it but there are a hundred people in the water trying to survive. Interestingly, Hardin's language assumes *he* is already on the boat, as well as his readers, presumably from the "Western," rich countries, evaluating which assumedly poor people should be let on board. In other words, Hardin appears to place himself, as well as all wealthy "Westerners," in the position to correctly judge who gets to live ("Living on a Lifeboat," 562).

[27] Hardin clearly disagrees with this option.

[28] Hardin says that there is a negative consequence to letting as many people in the boat as it can hold: "This has the disadvantage of getting rid of the safety factor, for which action we will sooner or later pay dearly" ("Living on a Lifeboat," 562).

[29] In Hardin's own words, "The reply to this is simple: Get out and yield your place to others. Such a selfless action might satisfy the conscience of those who are addicted to guilt but it would not change the ethics of the lifeboat" ("Living on a Lifeboat," 562).

[30] Reproductive rights have been well established since the 1960s–70s, though contested. For details, see Barbara Stark, "The Women's Convention, Reproductive Rights, and the Reproduction of Gender," *Duke Journal of Gender Law and Policy* 18, no. 2 (2011): 261–304.

[31] Garrett Hardin, "There is No Global Population Problem: Can Humanists Escape the 'Catch-22' of Population Control?," *The Humanist* 49, no. 4 (1989): 12.

[32] Hardin, "There is No Global Population Problem," 13.

[33] Hardin, "There is No Global Population Problem," 13.

[34] The full quote: "The elimination of warfare by military means is tolerable only in a world that has outlawed reproductive warfare. The competitive use of human gonads in a pacifistic world is every bit as vicious and productive of human suffering as is the militaristic use of atomic bombs" (Garrett Hardin, *Nature and Man's Fate* [New York: Reinhold and Company, 1959], 322).

have the courage to take [Hardin's] advice."[35] Cairns is not alone in his admiration—Hardin was inducted into the Environmental Hall of Fame by the Friends of the Earth, elected into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and given the Humanist Distinguished Services Award by the American Humanist Association, among many other awards.[36] Hardin's influence, either direct or indirect, has led to other population-control suggestions in the name of responsible conservation as well. One of the most notable, or perhaps infamous, studies argued that "after-birth abortions" should be considered in cases where the baby is determined to have a deficiency that would be resource-depleting, both for the family and community.[37] In line with Hardin's call to emulate China's restrictive policies, philosopher Sarah Conly recently published *One Child: Do We Have a Right to More?*[38] Overpopulation discourse has remained a staple within the academy for over fifty years, authorized by spokespeople supported and elevated by respected institutions.

There are two immediately apparent problems associated with a restrictive discourse on overpopulation: racism and sexism. Reflecting on *The Population Bomb*, Paul and Anne Ehrlich blame the publisher and William H. Draper, the original source of the book's title, for the racist undertones enmeshed in the book's proposition,[39] but it is clear that restrictive policies, supported by and propagated through discourse, are designed to control certain kinds of bodies, specifically non-"Western" and female bodies.[40] As discussed further in the following section, "Western" countries' birthrates are currently lower than their death rates, meaning their populations are shrinking. The places experiencing the most growth are found in Asia and Africa.[41] There is no need to go into the details here, but it is safe to say that for hundreds of years these continents have regularly been pillaged and abused by "Western" nations, practices supported by discourses of "freedom" and "liberation." Meanwhile, regulating reproduction subjugates women to unjust patriarchal oversight, restricting freedom and personhood. Even if the initial motivation for proffering restrictions on reproduction and immigration by these academics was not purposefully intolerant and bigoted, the outcome remains laced with injustice directed at "those" hopeless people who need "our" salvific and just systems in order to survive and thrive.

Outside of academia, these same restrictive discourses are prevalent, particularly in politics and religion. Some politicians decry immigrants from non-"Western" countries as criminals,[42]

---

[35] John Cairns, Jr., "Garrett Hardin," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* (2005): 418. Although not advocating for Hardin's philosophy as overtly, Philip Cafaro believes Hardin can be very influential in coercing population reduction if needed ("Climate Ethics and Population Policy," *WIREs Climate Change* 3 [2012]: 51).

[36] For a complete list, see "Garrett James Hardin Curriculum Vitae," https://www.garretthardinsociety.org/gh/gh_cv.html.

[37] Alberto Giubilini and Francesca Minerva, "After-Birth Abortion: Why Should the Baby Live?," *Journal of Medical Ethics* 39, no. 5 (2012): 261–263. For one of many responses, see Giuseppe Benagiano, Laurens Landeweerd, and Ivo Brosen, "'After-Birth' Abortion: A Biomedical and Conceptual Nonsense," *Journal of Maternal-Fetal and Neonatal Medicine* 26, no. 11 (2013): 1053–1059.

[38] Sarah Conly, *One Child: Do We Have a Right to More?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[39] Paul and Anne Ehrlich, "The Population Bomb Revised," 66.

[40] In these arguments, both race and sex are typically reified and stereotyped.

[41] Both Hardin and Ehrlich regularly present India as the prime example of the problem.

[42] For example, U.S. discourse during the Trump presidency has been embroiled with immigration concerns. Should the U.S. allow refugees access to needed resources or should the U.S. restrict access under the premise that doing so ensures national security? On this point, President Trump reportedly refused refugees from countries like Haiti, El Salvador, and various African nations, while simultaneously suggesting that the U.S. should accept more immigrants from places like Norway. More directly, Trump has openly informed Mexico and other Central American countries

while others ask "the legitimate question" about whether or not it is ethical to even have children.[43] Among religious leaders, some question the validity of allowing refugees access to the U.S.,[44] and others question the mental stability of people who "need and long to reproduce biologically."[45] These selective examples are not meant to exhaust the restrictive discourse on overpopulation;[46] rather, they demonstrate how academic, political, and religious discourses have worked together to construct and then propose restrictive policies on women and non-"Westerners."[47] By doing so, traditional power dynamics are maintained and cultivated, warding off potential threats to the status quo. Moreover, in each of these discursive strategies, exceptionalism appears to be the motivation: academics' exclusivity to knowledge, politicians' proximity to power, and religions' access to "Truth." Restricting population, either through immigration or reproduction, safeguards these institutions from becoming irrelevant and impotent.

Resourceful Discourse

My argument is that restrictive discourse on overpopulation should be replaced with resourceful discourse, which is supported by the data. Indeed, Julio A. Gonzalez et al. summarize the actual culprit of population growth:

---

that the U.S. will not accept "their" refugees, declaring, "Our Country is FULL!"; see Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump), April 7, 2019, https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1115057524770844672.

[43] See Miranda Green, "Ocasio-Cortez: It's 'Legitimate' to Ask if OK to have Children in Face of Climate Change," *The Hill*, February 25, 2019, https://thehill.com/policy/energy-environment/431440-ocasio-cortez-in-face-of-climate-change-its-legitimate-to-ask-if-ok. The problem nevertheless remains the same: which people *specifically* should stop having children?

[44] Evangelical Christian Franklin Graham came out in support of Trump's ban on immigrants and refugees from Muslim-majority countries, comparing the U.S. to Jerusalem, which Graham claims also had restrictive walls and gates for protection. See Lorie Johnson, "Franklin Graham: Trump Refugee Order is Right, But This Still Needs to Happen," *CBN News*, February 1, 2017, https://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/world/2017/february/franklin-graham-trump-refugee-order-is-right-but-this-still-needs-to-happen. For another perspective, Rev. Dr. Kristin Johnston Largen takes a theological stance, inviting people to consider faith alongside population growth, though admitting that she is "already slightly panicky" at the thought of overpopulation. See Kristin Johnston Largen, "The Theological Problem of Overpopulation," *Dialog* 51, no. 1 (2012): 13.

[45] See Rita M. Gross, "Buddhist Resources for Issues of Population, Consumption, and the Environment," in *Buddhism and Ecology: The Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds*, ed. Mary Evelyn Tucker and Duncan Ryuken Williams (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 293–304.

[46] Other Christians and Buddhists have said similar things. For example, Christian theologian Sallie McFague, after presenting God as a loving mother, says that contemporary sensibility dictates the idea of population control; see *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 104. Buddhist scholar and practitioner Gary Snyder suggests that human population needs to be reduced by 10 percent to "guarantee space and habitat for all, including wildlife" (*The Practice of the Wild* [Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 1990], 189).

[47] Restrictive discourse has successfully infiltrated social discourse. For example, see Damian Carrington, "Want to Fight Climate Change? Have Fewer Children," *The Guardian*, July 12, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/jul/12/want-to-fight-climate-change-have-fewer-children; Victoria Whitley-Berry, "Want to Slow Global Warming? Researchers Look to Family Planning," *NPR*, July 18, 2017, https://www.npr.org/2017/07/19/537954372/want-to-slow-global-warming-researchers-look-to-family-planning; and Sid Perkins, "The Best Way to Reduce Your Carbon Footprint is One the Government isn't Telling You About," *Science Mag*, July 11, 2017, https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2017/07/best-way-reduce-your-carbon-footprint-one-government-isn-t-telling-you-about.

> Our analysis of World population data by means of Equation (15) fits the UN data satisfactorily and shows clearly that the population increase in 1950–2010 should be attributed more to the transient decrease in death rate level (related to the increase in life expectancy) than to a non-existent increase in birth rate, which was decreasing consistently already even before the 1950s, even before chemical contraceptives and legalized abortion began to play any role.[48]

Life expectancy has sharply risen over the past several decades, and that trend is expected to continue. According to the UN report on world population, "Globally, the number of persons aged 60 and above is expected to more than double by 2050 and more than triple by 2100, increasing from 901 million in 2015 to 2.1 billion in 2050 and 3.2 billion in 2100."[49] The report continues that the number of people living beyond eighty will triple by 2050 and increase by more than seven-fold by 2100. Interestingly, supporters of population restrictions do not typically argue for "age restrictions" and euthanasia.

What is often overlooked by restrictive discourse proponents is that growth rates have been declining since the 1970s, which happens to be when many of these individuals were either having their own children or being born. It is worth mentioning that while Hardin championed the cause of stopping overpopulation by removing aid to poorer countries, essentially producing innumerous unnecessary deaths in the name of responsible conservation, he and his wife had four children of their own. With the population growth rate spiking around 1970 (2.1%) combined with longer life expectancy, global population did rapidly expand in a relatively short amount of time. That growth rate, however, is projected to be around 0.1% by the year 2100.[50] UN forecasts suggest that global population will stabilize by 2100, with the chance that it will even slightly decline.

What is the driving force behind these optimistic population projections? Guy J. Abel et al. explain, "Consistently, more-educated women experience lower fertility and lower child mortality, particularly during the process of demographic transition, and more-educated men and women have higher life expectancies."[51] Abel et al. conduct computer modeling to demonstrate that by following the UN's 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—which are focused on things such as the "end of poverty and end of hunger, reduced inequalities, decent work, economic growth, affordable and clean energy, climate action, and quality of institutions"[52]—population decline can be accelerated. In other words, although the UN's most optimistic prediction is that global population will begin to decline slightly by 2100, going from roughly 9.8 billion people to 9.5 billion people, according to Guy et al.'s research, "The SDG scenarios as defined here result in a world population that still increases to 8.8–9.1 billion by midcentury and then levels off and starts a moderate decline to 8.2–8.7 billion by 2100."[53]

---

[48] Julio A. Gonzalez, Felix-Fernando Muñoz, and David J. Santos, "Using a Rate Equations Approach to Model World Population Trends," *Simulation* 89, no. 2 (2012): 196.
[49] United Nations, "The 2015 Revision of the UN's World Population Projections," *Population and Development Review* 41, no. 3 (2015): 560.
[50] Max Roser and Esteban Ortiz-Ospina, "World Population Growth," *Our World in Data*, April 2017, https://ourworldindata.org/world-population-growth.
[51] Guy J. Abel, Bilal Barakat, Samir KC, and Wolfgang Lutz, "Meeting the Sustainable Development Goals Leads to Lower World Population Growth," *PNAS* 113, no. 5 (2016): 14295.
[52] Abel et al, "Meeting the Sustainable Development Goals," 14297.
[53] Abel et al, "Meeting the Sustainable Development Goals," 14297.

The effectiveness of restrictive policies does not have data to support implementation; rather, advocates appear merely to assume the efficacy of restrictions applied to "others," often relying on China's in fact disastrous one-child policy for support. Additionally, on a practical level, enforcing global reproductive and migratory restrictions is untenable, which is why discourse is the main weapon wielded. Yet while this discourse focuses on restricting "others," U.S. citizens' overconsumption of goods, which is demonstrated by the data,[54] has adversely affected global health and caused ecological degradation. Thus, the actual issue seems to be less about overpopulation and more about overconsumption in wealthier regions, the home of these scholars and practitioners.[55] At the same time, population data does support the notion that increasing education and infrastructure aid to poorer countries greatly reduces population growth.

We need, accordingly, a turn to resourceful discourse that rejects restrictive policies, exposing restrictive discourse's inherent racism and sexism. Resourceful discourse is able to redefine the topic by actively opposing restrictive policies and advocating expanded local and international funding for education, healthcare, and food distribution. Regulating human agency through restrictive discourse must be combatted with an alternative discourse that will, in the Foucauldian sense, reconstruct reality, and I believe religious communities can provide the necessary resources and support for the task.[56]

Buddhist-Christian Discourse

Our current situation of ecological degradation encourages all people to consider how best to respond. Population growth is a factor to consider, but by reducing the problem to "those" overly-reproductive people and immigrants, injustice grows while actual ecological issues are ignored. Religions have the ability to assert a different discourse about human value and responsible living that does not acquiesce to academic and political discourses. My choice to focus on Buddhist and Christian resources should not suggest that other religious communities are excluded—all are equipped and needed. Nevertheless, I focus on these communities for two interrelated reasons. First, Buddhists and Christians have enjoyed a relatively healthy interreligious dialogue for decades, exemplified by many books and organized interactions. Second, both Buddhism and Christianity are well represented in the "Western" context, particularly the United States, and both traditions have weighed in on how to understand and respond to the threat of overpopulation.

---

[54] Philip Cafaro, Richard Primack, and Robert Zimdahl, "The Fat of the Land: Linking American Food Overconsumption, Obesity, and Biodiversity Loss," *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 19, no. 6 (2006): 541–561.

[55] The data shows that while countries like China produce the most emissions, Canada and the United States top the list of emissions per capital, emitting over double that of China and over ten times that of India per capita. See Mengpin Ge, Johannes Friedrich, and Thomas Damassa, "6 Graphs Explain the World's Top 10 Emitters," *World Resources Institute*, November 25, 2014, https://www.wri.org/blog/2014/11/6-graphs-explain-world-s-top-10-emitters.

[56] The UN reports that many countries will soon experience a sharp decline in population. Europe's population, for example, will decline by thirty-two million between 2015 and 2050. The declining population, combined with an increasingly older population, could potentially lead to economic issues. Countries with stable and growing economies could consider accepting more immigrants and refugees for mutual benefit: refugees are given safety and the possibility for financial security, while the host countries gain more workers and taxpayers to support the economy.

Foucault's discourse analysis emphasizes two important points that frame the possibility of a renewed Buddhist-Christian discourse. First, in *Discipline and Punishment*, Foucault questions the modern penal system, which punishes behind closed doors, noting the "consequences" of this choice: "It leaves the domain of more or less everyday perception and enters that of abstract consciousness; its effectiveness is seen as resulting from its inevitability, not from its visible intensity; it is the certainty of being punished and not the horrifying spectacle of public punishment that must discourage crime; the exemplary mechanics of punishment changes its mechanisms."[57] Without physically experiencing systematic punishment, the public assumes that the penal system works by treating those imprisoned justly. For Foucault, this removes accountability and responsibility: "As a result, justice no longer takes public responsibility for the violence that is bound up with its practice." [58] Scholars and practitioners who encourage restricting others' reproduction and migration rights follow a similar pattern. They would create a penal system that requires violent acts, whether by sterilizing women or imprisoning families at the border, reprieving themselves from the actual violence necessary to enact their plan. As a result, no one is actually held responsible for the atrocities created by restrictive policies.

Foucault is also clear that discourse is dynamic—no "thing" exists in isolation or remains static. Nevertheless, there are distinct discourse domains that influence and transform one another. Describing this process, Foucault says, "Political practice did not transform the meaning or the form of medical discourse, but the conditions of its emergence, insertion and function; it transformed the mode of existence of medical discourse."[59] These interconnected though distinct discourses contain internal differences that can lead to transformation through opposition.[60] Religious communities in general and Buddhist-Christian communities in particular are able to proclaim an opposing discourse to those endorsing restrictive solutions. While not ignoring religious differences, Buddhists and Christians can maintain a unified discursive position on population through four shared values: (1) selflessness, (2) interconnectivity, (3) liberative freedom, and (4) responsibility.[61] Because of their seminal influence regarding ecological ethics, I focus on the work of Buddhist scholar and practitioner Thich Nhat Hanh and Christian theologian Jürgen Moltmann.

First, while restrictive discourse does not alleviate the problem it identifies, it does expose the source of all suffering: selfishness. Buddhism's First Noble Truth is that all life is suffering. In other words, people suffer because they believe that they inherently and independently exist, only to discover that nothing in life stays the same. Consequently, the inability to control the ever-changing world is the source of all suffering. Thich Nhat Hanh explains that the issue is rooted in the notion of a "self," which is damaging: "The Buddha has a very different understanding of our existence. It is the understanding that birth and death are notions. They are not real. The fact that we think they are true makes a powerful illusion that causes our suffering."[62] To view the self as a distinct object over against different distinct objects creates tension, competition, and division, causing a cycle of pain: "When a person's speech is full of anger, it is because he or she suffers

[57] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 9.
[58] Foucault, *Discipline and Punishment*, 9.
[59] Foucault, "Politics and the Study of Discourse," 67.
[60] See Foucault, *Archaeology*, 67.
[61] This list, of course, could be expanded.
[62] Thich Nhat Hanh, *No Death, No Fear* (New York: Riverhead Books), 4.

deeply. Because he has so much suffering, he becomes full of bitterness. He is always ready to complain and blame others for his problems. This is why you find it very unpleasant to listen to him and try to avoid him."[63] The angry tone embedded within the restrictive discourse is a byproduct of selfishness, believing that others are fighting to take or threaten what is "mine." Thus, even if the global population lowered to whatever arbitrary mark restrictive advocates champion, their anger and suffering would persist because overpopulation is not the actual problem—selfishness is.

Moltmann takes a similar position on selfishness, arguing that industrialized countries, shaped by Christian values, have separated creation into two categories: nature and humanity.[64] Nature became an object, inherently different from humans, that could be exploited for human expansion. This position, Moltmann says, was advanced through Christian reasoning: "The goal of the scientific knowledge of natural laws is power over nature, and with that the restoration of the human being's resemblance to God and his hegemony."[65] For scriptural support, Christians have historically stressed Genesis 1:28, which encourages people to "subdue" and "have dominion over" all other aspects of creation.[66] These notions of resembling God and subduing creation have intensified through modernization, as the "scientific objectification of nature leads to the technological exploitation of nature by human beings."[67] Exploiting nature, however, never produces satisfaction but instead only greater desire and craving:

> As needs are fulfilled, demand grows. Growing demands are the driving force for rising production. But this race between rising demands and the compulsion to fulfil them cannot be won. There cannot be unlimited progress with limited resources, and a limited potentiality cannot satisfy unlimited demands. Even if mankind discovers new sources of energy and produces new kinds of food by way of genetic techniques, this race is forcing humanity into a global crisis, if demands continue to be as totally unrestrained as they are at present.[68]

With limited supply and unlimited selfish demand, forced restrictions and violence are inevitable. Yet, regardless of how many restrictions are levied and violence exercised, fulfillment will never arrive because the real problem is selfishness.

Second, the acknowledgment and appreciation for universal interconnectivity is present in both Buddhism and Christianity. A typical Buddhist position is to declare that everything is interdependent.[69] Thich Nhat Hanh slightly alters the concept by developing the term "interbeing," saying, "Cause and effect are no longer perceived as linear, but as a net, not a two-dimensional one, but a system of countless nets interwoven in all directions in multidimensional

---

[63] Thich Naht Hanh, *Anger* (New York: Riverhead Books), 3.
[64] Jürgen Moltmann, *God of Creation: A Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 20.
[65] Moltmann, *God of Creation*, 27.
[66] Moltmann, *God of Creation*, 29.
[67] Moltmann, *God of Creation*, 27.
[68] Moltmann, *God of Creation*, 28.
[69] See Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, trans. and commentary Jay L. Garfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

space."[70] Every thing is interrelated with and to every other thing, according to interbeing. Explaining further, he writes, "'Interbeing' is a word that is not in the dictionary yet, but if we combine the prefix 'inter' with the verb 'to be', we have a new verb, inter-be. Without a cloud, we cannot have paper, so we can say that the cloud and the sheet of paper inter-are."[71] People inappropriately dissect the world through objectification, declaring that "this" is inherently different from "that."[72] As Thich Nhat Hanh says, paper does not exist independent of the cloud that was necessary for its "being." In this way, paper *is* a cloud, and it is also the rain, trees, sun, animals, and every other "thing." Meditating on interbeing moves people toward "compassion for all."[73] There is no longer an "other" to point at and label as the problem because everything inter-*is*.

Moltmann presents Christian theology similarly, arguing that Christians often contribute to ecological destruction because they construct a God of complete transcendence, stripping God of God's "connection with the world."[74] When God and God's ultimate plan is separated from creation, Christians are given the impression that the Earth is not very important, creating a duality between objects and between places. The image of a transcendent God opens up the possibility that human intellect or reason can also transcend creation, further establishing bifurcations between objects and subjects, the physical and the mental, and the secular and sacred. Moltmann disagrees with that assessment, claiming, "We shall have to understand that everything real and everything living is simply a concentration and manifestation of its relationship, interconnections and surroundings." [75] The goal, Moltmann contends, is for people to recognize their interconnectivity with everything, which removes dualities and encourages participating in "mutual relationships" with creation.[76] Through God's cosmic Spirit, God "is present *in* each of his creatures and *in* the fellowship of creation which they share."[77] Like Thich Nhat Hanh, Moltmann declares that everything is inextricably connected, removing the duality of "us" and "them," the very system required for oppression.

Third, Buddhists and Christians value freedom for all. Thich Nhat Hanh clearly states his Buddhist conviction by asserting, "Freedom is one of the most basic rights of all human beings—of all humans and not just some. To be able to respect others' freedom, we need to free ourselves from attachment and fanaticism and help others to do the same."[78] When people are able to see the interbeing of reality, they cannot pursue isolated instances of freedom. Moreover, like Foucault, he believes that it is imperative that people do not shield themselves from suffering: "Suffering can have a therapeutic power. It can help us open our eyes. Awareness of suffering encourages us to search for its cause, to find out what is going on within us and in society."[79] When hidden and

---

[70] Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Sun My Heart: Reflections on Mindfulness, Concentration, and Insight*, trans. Anh Huong Nguyen, Elin Sand, and Annabel Laity, ed. Arnold Kotler (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 2010), 60.
[71] Thich Nhat Hanh, "Clouds in Each Paper," *Awakin*, March 25, 2002, http://www.dailygood.org/pdf/ij.php?tid=222.
[72] Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Sun My Heart*, 63.
[73] Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Sun My Heart*, 68.
[74] Moltmann, *God of Creation*, 1.
[75] Moltmann, *God of Creation*, 3
[76] Moltmann, *God of Creation*, 2-3.
[77] Moltmann, *God of Creation*, 14.
[78] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing: Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism,* ed. Fred Eppsteiner (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1998), 28–29.
[79] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing*, 30.

concealed, suffering flourishes; however, when exposed, people's interbeing-ness spontaneously seeks freedom from all suffering. Thich Nhat Hanh warns, though, that governments often try to purchase religious discourse with "material well-being." Rather than conceding, he argues, "Speaking out is the first step, proposing and supporting appropriate measures for change is the next."[80] Religious discourse must remain distinct, not submitting to opposing discourses.

Moltmann arrives at freedom for all, too, but in a very different way. He avers that all of creation was aligned toward redemption from the beginning—reclamation has always been God's plan for creation. The person and figure of Christ, then, inaugurated the "new creation of the world" through the cross and resurrection.[81] The Spirit is now active in the world, creating, preserving, renewing, and consummating all things.[82] Moltmann's fundamental understanding of God supports his Trinitarian proposal: "So when we say that God created the world 'out of freedom,' we must immediately add 'out of love.' God's freedom is not the almighty power for which everything is possible. It is love, which means the self-communication of the good."[83] Bringing his points together, Moltmann says that God's desire for creation is redemption, which Christ's resurrection introduces and the Spirit proliferates, and this entire system is held together by God's freedom-love, producing "the good." There cannot be Christian freedom without love, and Christian love cannot result in anything except for the good of ultimate redemption for all.

Finally, Buddhist and Christian faith requires responsible participation. During the Vietnam War, Thich Nhat Hanh was a monk in Vietnam. Watching his people senselessly killed, he knew that his faith entailed action—he had to do something to help. He recounts his experience:

> In 1976 several of us organized a program to help the Indochinese refugees in the Gulf of Siam. The program was called *Mau Chay Ruot Mem* ('When blood is shed, we all suffer'). At that time, the world did not know about the 'boat people,' and the governments of Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore would not allow them to land. So we hired two large ships, the *Leapdal* and the *Roland*, to pick up refugees on the open sea, and two small ships, the *Saigon 200* and the *Blackmark*, to communicate between them to transport food and supplies.[84]

Because of these rescue efforts during the war, Thich Nhat Hanh was expelled from his country, but the political cost could not sway his religious conviction. Regardless of what "reality" political discourse attempts to construct, his Buddhist teachings remain consistent about how to responsibly and compassionately act; as he explains,

> *Ahimsa* (nonviolent action) begins with the energy of tolerance and loving kindness, which will be expressed in gentle, compassionate, intelligent speech that can move people's hearts. It then moves into the field of action to create moral and social pressure for people to change. Understanding and compassion must be the basis of

[80] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing*, 44.
[81] Moltmann, *God of Creation*, 8.
[82] Moltmann, *God of Creation*, 12.
[83] Moltmann, *God of Creation*, 75
[84] Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Sun My Heart*, 116.

> all nonviolent actions. Actions motivated by anger or hatred cannot be described as nonviolent.[85]

People's interbeing creates compassion, resulting in nonviolence action. Individual meditation and contemplation is not enough—compassionate participation is required.

Moltmann seems to create a similar nonviolent system by calling *evil* "the negation of the affirmation of life."[86] To do violence, in other words, is to enact evil, which opposes the goodness of God. Moltmann is also interested in the "openness" of history, enabling human participation to shape the future. Regarding time, he says, "[T]he past, which determines the present, is fixed; but the future, which opens itself to the present, is not fixed – it is partially undetermined. This means that the present is partially determined and partially undetermined. It hovers between necessity and randomness, and unfolds its character in its selection of chances."[87] History is not preordained, forcing creation simply to enact an inevitable outcome. Moltmann intends something different when saying, "The openness of all life systems for the inexhaustible fullness of the divine life also leads to their perfected communication among themselves; for God's indwelling drives out the forces of the negative, and therefore also banishes fear and the struggle for existence from creation."[88] Hence, Christians should enact their faith, which affects the future by dispelling fear and the struggle for existence.

Conclusion

Religious discourse has the power to effect change in the world. Rather than being limited to political and academic discourse, religious communities can oppose and transform those narrow propositions by asserting their own values, guided by their faith convictions, philosophies, and doctrines. Restrictive discourse does not address the actual problem of the world's "carrying capacity," and in many ways it exacerbates the problem by dividing the world into "those" imbalanced people and "us" superior people. Consequently, restrictive policies rely on racism and sexism. Resourceful discourse, however, is supported by data and is already a part of religious discourse. Religions can profess a unified discourse that does not require religious synthesis or "sameness," but that instead relies on values already shared, though established and articulated differently. Through resourceful discourse, religious communities have the ability to relieve suffering through nonviolent compassion and grace. As Thich Nhat Hanh says, "The purpose is to have peace for ourselves and others right now, while we are alive and breathing. Means and ends cannot be separated."[89]

Joel D. Daniels is a Ph.D. candidate at Georgetown University, where he researches Christianity and East Asian Religions. He is an ordained minister with the American Baptist Churches, serving as a Residential Minister at Georgetown and co-editor of the online platform Engaged Pentecostalism. Joel also teaches part-time at American University in the Department of Philosophy and Religion.

[85] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing*, 29.
[86] Moltmann, 168.
[87] Moltmann, *God of Creation*, 202.
[88] Moltmann, *God of Creation*, 213.
[89] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing*, 5.