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Just Do Aid Right

CATHERINE BERTINI was Executive Director of the World Food Programme (WFP) from 1992 to 2002.

As soon as the Cold War ended, development aid declined and humanitarian needs increased. Wars, civil strife, and natural disasters altered the scope of aid in the 1990s. As a result, aid agencies were reformed to become far more responsive to the dramatic changes that were occurring. But the needs of poor people living in peace in impoverished countries still remained.

There is no doubt that economic development is the engine needed to bring large numbers of people out of poverty, as Marco Verweij and Dipak Gyawali argue ("Against More Aid," Winter 2006). But it is not the only answer. If it were, then the United States, for instance, would not need to spend over US\$50 billion annually on food aid for poor Americans. If it were, then India would not still have hundreds of millions of desperately poor citizens, generation after generation. There is also no doubt that fair-trade policies are a critical component to economic development. But waiting not only for policy changes, but for their impact to be felt by even a small percentage of the poorest of the poor, is hardly an option. Then what is?

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are a critically important step forward. They mark the first time that countries have agreed to work toward specific goals to end extreme poverty. Now everyone can be "singing from the same songbook" on what we are trying to collectively achieve. And those results can be evaluated.

Indeed, adequate evaluation is one of the big black holes in international development. With what little is budgeted for development aid, there has been little interest in establishing priorities for proper evaluation. Therefore, arguments that development is not effective (and some of it certainly is not) benefit because there are few counter arguments that certain aid has worked.

One of the strengths of the MDGs is that each person or community can find one or more challenges within their lives and societies for issues that they believe are important. MDGs can also be used to find like-minded people in a country who are working on that same objective. In this sense, the MDGs are truly global, and they are and will be an effective grassroots tool. It is the local people who will ultimately be the agents of change with support from international agencies, whether or not their own governments are helpful. Those local people must be the main decision makers on new projects.

To determine which communities are in greatest need, one may have to use untraditional methods. For example, the WFP has developed a Vulnerability Mapping System, (VAM). WFP takes data from a variety of official sources

about income levels, agricultural production, education, health availability, etc. The data is entered into a computerized system which then identifies the most food-insecure regions of a given country. The next step is to determine what each region needs to increase food security. The answer is not necessarily food aid; it could be technical advice on agriculture, feeder roads, or any number of inputs. In targeting areas of greatest need, governments and aid agencies can work with local people to create and support long-term sustainable, popular programs.

For ten years at WFP I watched as development aid levels slipped each year. I saw hundreds of communities where small projects to provide education, health care, or food could have made huge positive impacts in many lives. But all we could do was provide support for people living in what the world deemed to be an “emergency.” Indeed, people in poverty live in “permanent emergencies.”

The response to more development aid should not be, as Verweij and Gyawali suggest: “Thank you, but no thank you.” Rather, the answer is: Just Do it Right, and with a lot more resources.

Ode to Reason

SAM HARRIS is the author of *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*. He is currently completing a doctorate in neuroscience.

Robert Hambourger’s unfavorable review of my book, *The End of Faith* (“Ode to Intolerance,” Winter 2006) alleges that I do not understand religion, at least as it is practiced by most people, most of the time. While he sought to illustrate this contention by stringing together many disconnected quotations from my book, he showed no sign of actually having understood my argument against religious faith. The fact that Hambourger has spent some of his considerable academic energies expounding upon “the reasonableness of belief in miracles” is telling.

In *The End of Faith* I argue that religion is quickly becoming incompatible with the emergence of a global, civil society. Despite the ecumenical efforts of many well-intentioned people, irreconcilable religious doctrines still inspire an appalling amount of human conflict. Religious faith—faith that there is a God who cares what name He is called, that one of our books is infallible, that Jesus is coming back to earth to judge the living and the dead, that Muslim martyrs go straight to Paradise, etc.—is on the wrong side of an escalating war of ideas. Given the degree to which our world has been fragmented by competing religious commitments, I argue that we must now find ways of meeting our emotional needs that do not require the maintenance of divisive religious dogmas. We must learn to invoke the power of ritual and to mark those transitions in every human life

that demand profundity—birth, marriage, death—without lying to ourselves about the nature of reality. To this end, scientists and other rational people need to begin talking about ethics and spiritual experience in ways that are compatible with reason. In the last chapter of my book, I argue that the distinction between science and religion is not a matter of excluding our ethical intuitions and spiritual experiences from our conversation about the world but rather a matter of our being honest about what is reasonable to conclude on their basis.

Hambourger writes as if the fact of God’s existence was well established among the readership of the *Harvard International Review*. Yet even pious readers of this journal and perhaps even Hambourger himself must know what it is like not to believe in Zeus. Why do we find it so easy, so painless—indeed, so necessary—to be atheists with respect to Zeus? One reason might be this: there is no good evidence to suggest that Zeus exists. Given this situation, we can all immediately appreciate how grotesque it would be if our public discourse in the twenty-first century were conducted, at every turn, in obeisance to the contents of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Imagine if our debates about public policy—about the ethics of medical research, about the rights of adults to marry, about the value of certain international alliances—were constrained by the imaginary dictates of an imaginary god. Swap Zeus for the God of Abraham, and you will discover that this is precisely the situation we are in.

Hambourger announced in these pages that my book is “an open appeal for religious intolerance.” Not quite. I am, however, appealing for the same “religious intolerance” that currently makes a belief in Zeus impossible to maintain, even in Greece. This is not the sort of intolerance that produced the gulag. We have not passed any laws against neopaganism—and yet, fanciers of Zeus do not become presidents of our universities, or presidents of the United States. Holocaust deniers don’t either. Neither do people who believe that Elvis is still alive or that astrology is an exact science. What sort of “intolerance” has achieved this winnowing of bad ideas? Perhaps Hambourger will permit me to call it by its true name: reason.

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