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The Golden Rule in the Age of the Global Village

By Gerda Bikales

For the last two decades, one of the most dynamic American growth industries has been the practice of immigration law. In the seventies, some 300 lawyers were specialists in immigration, affiliated with the immigration bar. By 1982, the American Immigration Lawyers Association had grown to 1200 members. Ten years later, that number had tripled, to 3600.

Not surprisingly, immigration admissions to the United States reflect a similar growth pattern. From 1961 to 1970, 5.3 million immigrants were admitted; between 1971 and 1980, 7 million admissions were recorded; between 1981 and 1990, the number went up to 9.9 million. The year 1992 set an all-time yearly record — more than 1.8 million immigrants were admitted to permanent residence in our country.

The acceptance of more immigrants has not in any way diminished the backlog of people wanting to resettle in America. Our consulates across the world report larger numbers of applicants for immigration visas. Nearly three million people were waiting for visas in 1992, up from 2.2 million in 1988.

Refugee numbers worldwide have gone from 8 million in 1980 to 18 million in 1992. The majority of these desperate people are fervently hoping for a chance to rebuild their lives in our midst. America is the preferred destination for nearly all refugees.

Hundreds of thousands of people choose to bypass the legal obstacles to immigration altogether, entering and settling in the United States without the requisite documents. The Center for Immigration Studies estimates that despite the 1986 amnesty that legalized more than 3 million illegal immigrants, by 1992, 4.8 million people were again living illegally in the country, and that this core population was expanding at the rate of about 300,000 every year.

THE NEW REALITIES

Behind the crush for admission to the United States lie several developments of far-reaching consequence.

First, and most significant, is the continuing population explosion in all parts of the less developed world. Every year, about 90 million people are added to the world's population, most of them in countries already incapable of supporting their population.

Overpopulation itself is an actual or potential cause of instability, creating masses of restless young people who face a lifetime of chronic underemployment. Furthermore, every political upheaval or natural disaster displaces more individuals than would have been the case if the area had been less populated. This causes rapid buildups of refugees, and the sheer number of unfortunate people in flight commands world attention.

Another major characteristic of our age is the presence of sophisticated electronic communications technology which can quickly bring the suffering of the most remote and unfamiliar people, from every corner of the world, right into our living rooms. Night after night, the television image of the starving children of Somalia, the products of a total breakdown in civil government, became a silent guest at our plentiful dinner tables — a morally painful situation that eventually led to American military intervention on their behalf.

Finally, there is the fact that it is possible to physically remove thousands of people from the locus of their misery and transport them to the United States. Only a few hours' flight separate the wretched refugees in the former Yugoslav republic of Bosnia from a comparatively peaceful life in the United States.

These new realities — overpopulation, instant electronic news coverage, and mass transportation — raise serious questions about the adequacy of the traditional guidelines we call upon in trying to meet our moral obligations toward the world's less fortunate human beings.

The most fundamental principle of ethical behavior, as articulated by society's seats of moral authority, is invariably some version of the Golden Rule: Love thy neighbor as thyself. This precept is deeply ingrained in individuals raised in Judeo-Christian cultures. It underlies our standard codes of neighborliness. Appeals to it can produce collective acts of remarkable generosity. It can be said, without exaggeration, that in Western societies the internalization of the Golden Rule is considered the true hallmark of civilized human beings.

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It is obvious, though usually unstated in religious teachings, that there is a very practical side to the Golden Rule that strongly reinforces its moral sway. "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you" tacitly sets up a social contract that implies long-term mutual benefits: be helpful to your neighbor in his time of need, so that you may count on him to reciprocate when you, in turn, are helpless. The power of the Golden Rule is precisely this: its lofty appeal to conscience, reinforced by the practical wisdom of the command.

With the advent of modern instant communications, the neighborhood has been expanded well beyond the confines of one's community to include the whole world. The suffering of a hungry and hopeless Haitian becomes every bit as vivid as the tragedies that afflict the family next door. More so, perhaps. A sense of privacy separates us from our neighbor's pain, while the rawest emotions are communicated on our television screens.

These demographic and technological changes pose a new challenge to the application of the Golden Rule: how do I love my neighbor as myself when every poor and downtrodden human being in this overpopulated world *is* my neighbor?

THE SEARCH FOR MORAL GUIDELINES

The above question is very new. Until quite recently, moral decisions tended to be made on the basis of absolute principles that disregarded considerations of scale.

But, in a world of limited resources, how many of the world's hundreds of millions of unfortunates is one to help? Is it better to share more fully with a few individuals or is less help to more people the better choice?

We have few guidelines to rely on as we earnestly grope for answers.

Traditionalist authorities might want to call upon the life of St. Francis of Assisi to support their views of moral obligation. This revered saint has given us an inspiring example of a man born to wealth who chooses to abandon its comforts and live a life of shared poverty as a mendicant among lepers and outcasts.

But renunciation is not a serviceable model for today's Americans. The appeal to our conscience is not for us to share the misery of the most miserable on this earth but to improve their lives through our acts of compassion and generosity. The number of totally

selfless saints that a modern society can afford is rather small. A nation of good-hearted mendicants cannot long sustain itself, let alone help others.

The wise sharing of our possessions, rather than their renunciation, is the paradigm we seek. In this context, the example that comes to mind is that of St. Martin of Tours, who gave away one-half of his cloak to a naked beggar he encountered on the road. One wonders, however, what St. Martin would have done had he met up with twenty naked and shivering beggars. Would he have selected one or two for covering and let the others freeze? And, if so, on what basis would he have selected these fortunate few over all the others? Or would this holy man have split his garment into twenty-one equal but inadequate pieces, which would have shielded no one from the cold? Are both decisions equally virtuous, though one is patently foolish?

THE QUANTITATIVE ASPECTS OF CHARITY

For lack of better quantitative guidelines for charitable behavior, we can perhaps draw upon tithing as a nearly universal prescription. The concept that decent people should spend a tenth of their revenues on the Church and on good works is well-established throughout the Judeo-Christian world. A quota of ten percent of income for charity is probably to be interpreted as a minimum, to be exceeded by those who can afford to give more. One respected source in the Jewish literature on *Zedaka* proposes a maximum of twenty percent, cautioning that those who give more run the risk of becoming paupers themselves.

A meaningful inhibition on excessive giving could be deduced from strong prohibitions in Jewish law against suicide. To knowingly risk serious injury to oneself and one's family, albeit in the interest of helping another, could be considered suicidal behavior, which is abhorrent.

In modern societies, many of the functions of the Church that were once financed by tithing have been taken over by governments. Through taxation, Americans already contribute far more than the traditional one-tenth to numerous social programs designed to help the sick, the elderly, the disabled, the very young, and the poor among us. Through taxation, they also contribute to numerous aid programs abroad, including significant payments to the United Nations for refugee relief programs.

In addition to "charity through taxation," Americans voluntarily give to numerous good causes, both here and in other countries. When disaster strikes anywhere, Americans can be counted on for generous assistance. Thus, through public and private channels, Americans are more than fulfilling the moral injunction to contribute at least one-tenth of their incomes to helping others.

RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY

IN A SECULAR SOCIETY

Our country was founded by deeply devout people escaping persecution for their religious beliefs, and looking for a chance to worship freely on these shores. Despite these origins, America is a determinedly secular society. Religion has surely been the foremost spiritual influence in our common culture, but it is by no means the only influence. In fact, despite fairly high levels of church attendance, preoccupation with things spiritual is not one of our national characteristics. Unfriendly critics often describe us as materialistic. Friendlier observers might say that we are pragmatists, people who take pride in their good common sense. Science, and the technological changes it has spawned, have markedly shaped us and influenced the character of our people and our country.

In determining what immigration and refugee policies stand the test of compliance with the Golden Rule, the conclusions reached by religious leaders differ sharply from those reached by the vast majority of the American public. The difference lies, in part, in the classic dichotomy between faith and reason.

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At issue is the question of how real, how immediate, and how tyrannical are our resource constraints. People of unshakable faith can afford to be rather less concerned about all this, convinced as they are that "God will provide." Resource management is definitely simpler for those who believe, literally or figuratively, the lessons of the five loaves of bread and a few fish multiplied to feed a crowd.

Most Americans, however, whether church-affiliated or not, rely on their empirical observations that quantities do matter. That is why they choose to have small families. That is why they want to reduce, rather than expand, the incessant flow of refugees and immigrants.

These differing understandings of the nature of resource-constraints have produced a coalition of vocal religious leaders who unabashedly use their influence with politicians to plead for more refugee and immigrant admissions; on the other side we see much of the American public experiencing severe job shortages, spiraling budget deficits, a declining standard of living, a sense of cultural unraveling — and suffering from a prolonged case of "compassion fatigue" — resisting the official policy of increased immigration admissions.

Democratic societies can accommodate many divergent viewpoints, of course. It would hardly create a ripple of interest if those still anchored to the ethical standards of a time when "neighbor" meant the people next door would follow their own conscience and share all their personal possessions with the world's suffering poor. But immigrant and refugee admissions to the United States are not the religious leadership's to give. That gift must come from the American people, many of whom now feel a compelling need to cut back on immigration.

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In our society, religious institutions and their leaders are highly respected and exert great moral influence. They have, however, been carefully kept from exercising official authority, in application of the principle of separation between church and state. Yet, time and again, the religious leadership has skillfully manipulated its prestige and moral influence into political coercion, winning concessions on immigration, in a process somewhat akin to moral blackmail. The technique has been highly successful, but inevitably creates resentment.

For, once the refugees are admitted to the United States, the costs of their resettlement and ongoing support does not fall crushingly upon the religious institutions that lobbied for their admission, but are imposed upon the American commonwealth. The pattern of resettlement practice that has developed concentrates the prestige and moral glory of the resettlement effort in the hands of the religious humanitarians, but the taxpayer is made to pick up the tab, and to feel unworthy because he isn't happy about it.

Secular humanitarians have also found much to like in this arrangement. And so has that entire spectrum of professionals engaged in "the helping professions" and "human services," for whom the continued refugee influx represents not only a livelihood but a *raison d'etre* and a source of social prestige.

THE PERMANENT CRISIS

Working together, the coalition of religious and secular humanitarian interests has succeeded in keeping American refugee and immigration policies on an expansionary course. It has failed, however, to alter the increasingly negative attitudes of many

Americans toward massive immigration.

By any available measurement — national public opinion polls, constituent mail to congressional offices, offers from host families to sponsor incoming refugees — there has been a steady decline in support for more refugee resettlement in the United States.

There are many obvious explanations for this development, including fears about the economy and competition for jobs. But there are also some less obvious reasons:

1. **The Failure to Induce Guilt** - In view of their historic generosity toward the world's poor and homeless, Americans fail to feel sinful because they are not doing more; on the contrary, they tend to perceive pressure from the humanitarian lobby as a case of the self-righteous browbeating the righteous.

2. **The Obligation Toward America's Disadvantaged** - In the sixties, Americans pledged themselves to helping our own disadvantaged minorities move toward full participation in American life. This has required enormous sacrifices on the part of the majority population, not only in unprecedented outlays of monies for social programs but also, through affirmative action and other compensatory programs, the sacrificing of opportunities for themselves and their children in the interest of greater social equality. Even so, the promise to disadvantaged Americans has not been fulfilled. Events such as the riots in Los Angeles in the spring of 1992 bespeak of increasing competition between inner city blacks and immigrants, and point to immigration's role in obstructing the economic advancement of our black citizens.

3. **The Breakdown of Assimilation** - Two decades of massive immigration have strained our assimilative capacities. As immigration spiraled toward record levels, government policies veered away from encouraging assimilation, toward support for programs that emphasize cultural differences and downplay our common bonds. The consequences are palpable in the ethnic segregation of our classrooms and urban neighborhoods, and in deteriorating intergroup relations. In many parts of the country, the evident displacement of English and of the core civic culture has alienated the members of the host society, who find themselves unwelcome and out-of-place in their own communities.

The issue of the cultural breakup of the American mainstream, and its relation to immigration, has not yet been fully articulated. But it is deeply felt by ever more Americans whose values and traditions are undergoing steady devaluation.

4. **The Permanent Crisis And Psychological Self-preservation** - In the past, refugee "crises" seemed to be temporary problems that really could be resolved through swift resettlement in another country,

particularly the United States. Under this assumption, we enacted legislation to accept some 400,000 displaced persons after World War II, and again 100,000 Hungarians after the failed revolt of 1956. The Cuban exodus that started when Castro came to power has brought us some one million refugees over two decades. The flow continues today at a diminished rate, but Castro's eventual demise seems sure to launch another massive exodus. The size of the Cuban migration should have given us occasion to reflect on the chain-effect of refugee admissions, but that phenomenon has hardly received any attention.

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Beginning with the airlift of some 100,000 Indochinese in the wake of the American pull-out from Vietnam in 1975, we have seen a steady succession of refugee crises. The first wave of refugees were accepted on the basis of their direct association with Americans during the war years, and the dangers they would face in the communist takeover. In subsequent waves, the American connection with those in flight became more tenuous, and the term "refugee" underwent constant reinterpretation. Today, nearly a million Indochinese live in the United States, virtually all refugees who came after 1975, and their American-born children.

Other refugee crises have arisen across the globe with regularity — Afghans fleeing civil war, Ethiopians running from hunger and armed conflicts, Sri Lankans escaping religious and ethnic persecutions, Gypsies fleeing Rumanian nationalists, Somalis running from starvation, Haitians running from poverty and oppression, and people leaving the chaos of former Soviet and Yugoslav republics engaged in wars of vengeance.

These unceasing crises, projected in full color on our television screens, tend to have a dulling effect over time. This is not mean-spiritedness but a psychological survival mechanism that sets in after emotionally wrenching expenditures of sympathy. It is a fact of life that extraordinary mobilization of compassion cannot be maintained indefinitely; to stay psychologically and emotionally balanced, we must "turn off and tune out" at some point in order to go on with the routine business of living our own lives.

5. **The Reciprocity Factor** - It is especially difficult to adhere to the most generous interpretation of the Golden Rule when the "neighbor" is a stranger in a distant land. In the case of refugees from very different cultures in unfamiliar parts of the world, the assumption that we can expect reciprocity from these

individuals in the future is very weak, and fails to reinforce the charitable impulse.

Yet Americans, like other people of good will, can become deeply aroused again and again when a new political or natural catastrophe is visited upon some corner of the world, and the distress is relayed through the electronic media. People's most generous impulses are reawakened, and once again they look to the traditional sources of moral authority for guidance.

The moral authorities they consult at those times have only predictable answers, dating back from an era when the world was not yet a Global Village: "Open your door, open your heart, open your pocketbook."

Unfortunately, that is no longer serviceable advice. The symbolic resettlement of a small number of true political refugees is surely desirable and consistent with the benevolent affections of our people, but large-scale refugee resettlement in the United States has ceased to be a practical option. In an overpopulated world, the capacity to unleash disasters and to inflict suffering far exceeds this nation's capacity to absorb the victims.

The humanitarian establishment has been notably reticent to re-examine the meaning of neighborliness in the Global Village. It has been unwilling to acknowledge America's limits, and to assuage and comfort the troubled conscience of people seeking to do what's right.

The attitude of our moral leaders is not likely to change — at least not as long as the government continues to pay for the resettlement work done by churches and other "humanitarian" lobbies, instead of requiring them to carry the costs of resettling the people they bring in.

We thus find ourselves in a moral leadership vacuum that must be filled. We can hope that a new generation of theologians and secular ethicists will soon arise, steeped in the ecological and demographic realities of the Global Village, to articulate appropriate contemporary corollaries to the Golden Rule.

And while we await a teaching tailored to our age, we may do well to ponder that of Rabbi Hillel who, nearly a century before the Christian era, related selflessness to the imperatives of self-preservation, in a passage of disarming simplicity (the emphasis is mine):

If *I* am not for myself, *who* will be for me?

If I am *only* for myself, what am I?

If not *now*, when? ■