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Theological Studies

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Book Review

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FOOD FIRST: BEYOND THE MYTH OF SCARCITY. By Frances Moore Lappé and Joseph Collins with Cary Fowler. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1977. Pp. xi. 466. \$10.95.

The authors' concern and intention had best be left in their own words. "There is no such thing today as absolute scarcity. Every country in the world has the capacity to feed itself . . . Moreover we came to see that no society setting out to put Food First can tolerate the concentration of wealth and power that characterizes most nations today. The heaviest constraint on food production and distribution turns out to be the inequality generated by our type of economic system--the system now being exported to the underdeveloped countries as the supposed answer to their problems. We are not saying merely that the solution lies in better distribution--getting the food to the hungry instead of the well-fed. We are saying something else: that food distribution only reflects the more fundamental issue of who controls and who participates in the production process. Thus to accept the challenge of Food First is to accept the challenge of confronting the basic assumptions of our economic system" (7 f.).

"Hungry people do and can and will feed themselves, if they are allowed to do so. This qualifying phrase--'if they are allowed to do so'--is the heart of our answer . . . Instead of 'How can we feed the world?' we now ask an entirely different question: 'What are we doing--and what is being done in our name and with our money--to prevent people from feeding

themselves?' And 'How should we work to remove those obstacles?'" (8).

The authors' procedure is not so much to expound what Colin Tudge has named The Famine Business (St. Martin's Press), as to explode the myths that make that business plausible and so in the minds of most people respectable. Some forty-eight questions are presented as briefly as possible. Each has been raised over and over in the course of campaigning for Food First. Each is followed immediately by an answer that appeals to matters of fact; the facts are documented in thirty-one pages of foot-notes; and the arguments are incisive.

Since myth tends to be a many-headed hydra, I cannot refer to each of the many issues raised and, much less, to the many points made on each issue. The best I can attempt is a few snippets that illustrate the style. Famines are not due to the population explosion: ". . . only about 44 percent of the earth's potentially arable land is under cultivation" (16). There is no general correlation between hunger and population. "France has just about the same number of people for each cultivated acre as India. Taiwan, where most are adequately nourished, feeds twice as many people per acre as famine-endangered Bangladesh. And China, where starvation was eradicated in only twenty-five years, has twice as many people for each cropped acre as India" (17 f.).

I warmly recommend this book and, as well, its associated Institute for Food and Development Policy. In particular, I would stress the word, policy. In a pluralistic society the human good may be greatly promoted

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by describing concrete evils and proposing concrete policies to remedy them. The reason for this is simple: one is appealing to the human conscience in its native and spontaneous working. On the other hand, an appeal to moral absolutes is tied in with ethical and/or theological systems. Such a system can be, of course, an accurate reflection on conscience and a helpful objectification. But reflection on conscience is no easier than reflection on insight. As there are many theories of human intelligence, so too there are many ethical systems. It is in this fashion that appeals to moral absolutes too easily lead to disputes, divisions, disharmony, ineffectiveness.

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