

[Published as “Ted Turner Should Move to Calcutta,” *Chattanooga News-Free Press*, October 27, 1998, p. A5, and as “Don’t pin overpopulation on Christian multiplication,” *Atlanta Constitution*, Wednesday, December 2, 1998, p. A23.]

Ted Turner vs. Christianity on the Environment E. Calvin Beisner

TV mogul and Atlanta Braves owner Ted Turner stopped by Chattanooga last week as a featured speaker for a conference of environmental journalists in the “environmental city.”

The heart of Turner’s message was that Christianity is to blame for overpopulation and environmental degradation. He says people who disagree with him are “dummies.” Fascinating.

His proof? “In Calcutta, it’s a hell-hole. So [Christianity’s] not an environmentally friendly religion.”

Calcutta has for thousands of years been dominated by Hinduism, with large doses of Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and Islam thrown in for spice. Christianity’s influence there has been minimal by comparison. So who’s the dummy?

In contrast, Turner’s beloved Atlanta arose in a culture dominated by Christianity. Only recently has it had tiny bits of other religions thrown in for spice. Its population density probably matches Calcutta’s. Calcutta he calls a hell-hole. So what’s Atlanta?

The obvious material difference between Atlanta and Calcutta isn’t that one has few people per square mile while the other has lots. It’s that Atlanta’s people are rich and Calcutta’s are poor. And economic historians are about as nearly unanimous as can be that Christianity’s world view and ethic are among the most important underlying causes of Atlanta’s (and the rest of the West’s) prosperity, while the world views and ethics of Hinduism, Buddhism, and other such religions are among the most important underlying causes of Calcutta’s poverty. (If you doubt this, try reading, for starters, *How the West Grew Rich*, by Nathan Rosenberg and L. E. Birdzell—both Jewish economic historians, by the way.)

There’s another big difference between Atlanta (and other rich cities of the West) and Calcutta (and other poor cities of the Third World). Atlanta’s basically a clean, safe, healthful environment; Calcutta’s basically a dirty, dangerous, unhealthful environment. Consequently people live a lot longer in Atlanta than in Calcutta. But which city is more influenced by Christianity—Atlanta, or Calcutta?

Actually, all of Turner’s ideas about overpopulation are the stuff of the real dummies—people like Paul Ehrlich, author of 1968’s *The Population Bomb*, which declared that the battle to feed humanity had been lost and predicted that hundreds of millions would die in mass famines throughout the 1970s and that by the 1980s we would run out of most of the world’s most important resources. All of his predictions proved false. And today? World food prices are so low, because supplies are so high, that American farmers can hardly make ends meet, and just this morning world oil futures prices, already near an all-time low because of a worldwide oil glut, began tumbling again with news that Venezuela intends to crank up production.

Of course, any historian of long-term resource price trends could have known this, since long-term prices for all resources—mineral, vegetable, and animal—are sharply downward, especially compared with the price of human labor, which is upward. (You economists out there will recognize that this means resources are getting less scarce while people are getting more scarce. Go figure!)

The reason for Turner’s blindness (and that of his fellow Malthusian doomsayers) is fundamental.

It's not just that they ignore data (which they do). It's that they start with false assumptions in the first place. They see people as no different, in principle, from other life forms.

Ehrlich, for example, is a butterfly biologist by training, and the foundation of his overpopulation theories is "population biology," which starts by reminding us that bacteria in a petrie dish will multiply geometrically until they exceed the dish's nutritive capacity, and then all of a sudden they'll die out. What he forgets is that people aren't bacteria. Bacteria don't transform their environment and so make their own resources. People do.

People do, because they're made in the image of the Creator God to be creative. And they're made in the image of the Triune God to be creative in cooperative community. Which explains why, as economists have long noted, there is a strong correlation between rising population density and rising rates of invention and wealth creation. Consequently, the more people there are, the more wealth they will create, particularly when their world view and ethic, the foundations of their culture, are in accord with God's Word, the Bible.

Turner, of course, is blind to all this. He's not a historian of long-term resource price trends. He's not an economist. He's not a scientist or philosopher of any sort. He's just a successful crony-capitalist with a big mouth, a failed ideology, and a passionate hatred for Christianity.

I have a suggestion for Ted: if he hates Christianity so much, why doesn't he divest himself of all the accoutrements of living in a culture shaped by it (which includes practically all his money) and go live without them in a culture shaped by Hinduism?

Why not move to Calcutta, Ted? Maybe you could do some good there, the way Mother Theresa did—if you could humble yourself to pick up starving lepers on the streets. But when your stomach begins to turn at the stench of their rotting flesh, remember: it was her love for God that kept Mother Theresa going.