

**UCLA**  
**Electronic Green Journal**

**Title**

Does the Idealism of Untouched Nature Contribute to Famine?

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7rq2f9tf>

**Journal**

Electronic Green Journal, 1(22)

**Author**

Johnson, William Ted

**Publication Date**

2005

**DOI**

10.5070/G312210619

**Copyright Information**

Copyright 2005 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

## **Does the Idealism of Untouched Nature Contribute to Famine? Bibliographic Essay, Part 2**

William Ted Johnson

*Scottsdale Public Library, Arizona, USA*

.....  
In the last issue of the *Electronic Green Journal*, I introduced this topic, exploring the relationship between the idealism of untouched nature and famine. Since then five sources were selected to validate or repudiate Dr. Wayne Grudem's assertion that the idealism of "untouched nature" hinders wise development of the earth's resources and contributes to famine, starvation, disease, and death among the poor.

I hypothesize that the idealism of untouched nature will not be cited as a factor contributing to famine anywhere in the world at any time in recorded history, based upon the representative sources cited here: Ireland in 1845 to North Korea in 1995. In the interest of fairness and accuracy, it would be helpful to clarify what is meant by the "idealism of untouched nature". Unfortunately, repeated attempts to get clarification from Dr. Grudem failed. He never returned my emails or phone calls, however, two of his assistants left messages in response to the messages I left him. I was never able to speak with anyone directly.

The idealism of untouched nature appears to involve the "radical" position of leaving land uncultivated, where wildness predominates. The result is less land devoted to agriculture, which means less food is produced so more people starve. This simplistic model does not reflect reality. Grudem would develop more land than this idealism would permit. Yet, parks, such as the Grand Canyon, could remain undeveloped. The proportion of uncultivated, wild land to cultivated, developed land was never described by Grudem's assistants, leaving open to speculation what he would do with areas such as the Brazilian rain forest, probably the last significant undeveloped area with the potential of agricultural productivity (Brown, 2004).

If the idealism of untouched nature has nothing to do with the cause of famine, as I propose, what is its cause? It is beyond the scope of this essay to provide a comprehensive answer to this question. However complex the answer is, the causes of famine have more to do with the idealism of human nature as self-centered with a bent toward exploitation and immediate gratification than with the idealism of leaving natural areas alone. Though few, these bibliographic sources reveal the consistent theme that efforts to develop nature more fully can result in a more serious and deadly disaster in terms of human suffering and death. Therefore, human political and economic systems rise to the top as either causing a famine or making one

worse. Leaving some nature alone would do more good than harm when it comes to stabilizing soils and climate, preserving genetic diversity, and conserving natural resources, all of which improve the earth's ability to sustain life, ours included. In terms which Dr. Grudem might appreciate, leaving some nature natural is just good stewardship.

We only have to look at the aftermath behind hurricane Katrina to see how important it is to keep natural ecosystems intact. Human development along the Gulf Coast prior to the hurricanes made the death toll worse and human suffering more intense than would have been the case if more of the Coast had been managed wisely, leaving more land in a natural state. According to one observer, "Our parish was not only destroyed by nature, it was destroyed by man" (Thornburgh, 2005). Whether it is hurricanes on the coast or wildfires in the drought stricken West, human interference (development) can make matters worse for ourselves in terms of human suffering and death in the aftermath of a natural disaster ("Back to the Garden", 2004). Grudem and others like to throw out the term "wise use" without admitting that wildness too is wise. Perhaps that's why the idealism of untouched nature is found in the wisdom literature of the *Bible*, such as Job 38:26, a book that Grudem surely uses with regularity, if only selectively (Johnson, 2000).

By looking more closely at incidents of famine from 1845 to 1995, we will gain a better understanding of the interplay between untouched nature, development, and famine. This will save lives and foster wider efforts to protect intact ecosystems, as "untouched nature" demonstrates its role in the prevention of famine, starvation, and disease among the poor.

**Woodham-Smith, Cecil. 1962. *The great hunger: Ireland 1845-1849*. NY: Harper & Row.**

The British government, during the Irish Potato Famine of the mid 19th century, was the least authoritarian of the political systems considered herein. It was more colonial than totalitarian. Nevertheless, like the other incidents of famine under consideration, it too viewed a select group of its subjects with disdain and treated them with contempt.

The failure of the potato crop in Ireland in the middle of the 19th century was due to a fungus. This was not understood then. However, the economic system operating at the time created conditions ripe for disaster. In order to fully understand how the potato blight created monumental hardship among the poor in Ireland, we must first understand how the Irish lived.

Agriculture in Ireland at the time meant one thing - the potato crop.

Ireland's sole dependence on the potato was a classic example of putting all your eggs into one basket. The potato enabled great quantities of food to be produced at a small cost from an equally small plot of ground. Many of the Irish were too poor to own or rent the land. A system of "conacre" developed whereby poor day-laborers were allowed to occupy a small plot, erect a modest structure, and grow enough food to support them. If the season was good, the land owner acquired some of the produce, if it was not, all was lost. Conacre was not popular among land owners. You had to be a real gambler. Without it, though, the people would starve.

The economic conditions in Ireland prior to the famine of 1848 were well studied. In the forty-five years since the Union, some 114 commissions and 61 special committees were instructed to report on the state of Ireland's economy. All forecasts were the same - disaster. Ireland was on the verge of starvation. Her population was rapidly increasing, most of her work force was unemployed, housing was poor, and the standard of living was extremely low. Potato crop failures were well known on the Island. Twenty-four such failures were listed by the Census of Ireland Commissioners in 1851.

The Irish Poor Law was passed in 1838 to provide economic relief, but the law actually kept Ireland's poor out of England rather than helped the poor of Ireland. This self-serving attitude of the British, coupled with a prejudice against the Irish, contributed in no small way to the suffering and death brought on by the Irish famine of 1848. The idealism of untouched nature wasn't on anyone's mind. Any land that could be farmed was cultivated and as the famine took hold on the land, public works projects to drain wetlands and build roads to employ the unemployed were instituted. However, conditions only worsened. Having more land to cultivate and more roads to travel did little to alleviate hunger.

Political wrangling and partisan politics assumed priority in the chambers of Parliament over compassion for the poor and hungry. For example, the potato failure was eclipsed by the controversial issue of Corn Law repeal. Corn Laws artificially inflated the price of home-grown grain. Duties on grain imported to Ireland from England insured a profitable price for English farmers. The potato crop failure pressed for urgent repeal of the Corn Law to make food more affordable in Ireland. But, opponents of repeal denied that any potato crop failure had even taken place, except to a very limited degree, in an effort to maintain higher profits for English farmers. Famine in Ireland was soon reduced to a Party question, as was the question of aid for famine victims.

In spite of government interference with the price of grain, as seen with the

Corn Law, a *laissez faire* philosophy was consistently applied to the question of government subsidies to relieve hunger in Ireland. British officials held to a fanatical commitment to free enterprise to compensate for the loss of the potato crop in Ireland. Therefore, the government instituted a plan to purchase Indian corn from the United States, since no current markets existed to be interfered with. However, British officials proved ignorant of the Irish, who had never eaten this food, did not know how to prepare it, and in most cases would not eat it.

During the famine, Ireland probably exported enough food to feed herself. Like Indian corn, however, wheat, barely, and oats were not traditional fare of the Irish. One government official was quoted as saying, "there is scarcely a woman of the peasant class in the West of Ireland whose culinary art exceeds the boiling of a potato." Nevertheless, the Irish retained a burning sense of injustice for the food sent abroad while her own people starved.

The political nature of this famine becomes clear when the government's response to the second failure of the potato crop was to stop providing relief. The rationale was summed up nicely by a treasury official, "The only way to prevent the people from becoming habitually dependent on Government is to bring the operations [of relief] to a close." He went on to say that, "...these things should be stopped now or you run the risk of paralyzing all private enterprise and having this country on you for an indefinite number of years."

The political themes were inflamed by the media. English newspapers represented the Irish as bloodthirsty criminals, rather than famine victims. Cartoons weekly portrayed the Irishman as a filthy brute, begging for money on the pretence of buying food when he really planned to purchase weapons. Ireland was a thorn in the side of the English and it was more comfortable to believe they were not starving at all, or if they were, they deserved to go hungry.

British officials viewed the famine as an opportunity for traders to make profits and they should not interfere with such enterprise. Government supplied food was not to be sold so cheaply that it undermined local merchants. It was more unjust to deprive traders of profits than to deprive the hungry of food. There was enough food to go around but the political preference was to market it to the advantage of sellers. The management model was driven by the desire for profit rather than the desire to alleviate human suffering. The overt motive was not to increase suffering, as we will see in the Soviet Union under Stalin, but added suffering was the result of the political choice to protect profits rather than poor people.

The cause of this famine was considered artificial from the start. A monument at Grosse Isle in Canada, where many fled from the famine in Ireland, reads, in part:

Thousands of the children of the Gael were lost on this island while fleeing from foreign tyrannical laws and an artificial famine in the years 1847-8. God bless them!  
God save Ireland.

This belief created a volatile situation. Confiding in one another, British officials stated that, "A great social revolution is now going on in Ireland, the accumulated evils of misgovernment and mismanagement are now coming to a crisis." An official named Lord Sligo declared that the "government was responsible for the crowds of paupers." Many commentators and analysts over the years have referred to the British policies during the famine as that of "extermination" and "genocide." Following the famine, no significant efforts were made to improve agriculture, forcing Ireland into a state of perpetual decline. Deaths due to famine and disease in Ireland around 1848 exceeded two million. Many more emigrated. For many of those who survived and remained in Ireland, hatred lingered, killing the souls of millions for many more years.

**Conquest, R. (1986). *The harvest of sorrows, Soviet collectivization and the terror famine*. NY: Oxford University Press.**

You've heard it in one form or another - "The only good *snake* is a dead *snake*." You could substitute any number of creatures, which have fallen from favor among the general population - wolves, bugs, etc. A similar sentiment has been applied to land. The only good *land* is *developed land* and developed for human profit and benefit. This is the sentiment offered by Dr. Grudem and those who have signed on to his agenda of political priorities for the 2004 elections. What would the world look like if the ideology of virtually complete development were judicially pursued? Impossible to sustain or imagine on a global scale (Friedman, 2005), the Soviet Union under Stalin provides a glimpse of what an all out effort to develop every plot of ground might look like on a regional level.

The Land Decree of 8 November 1917 asserted that 'the most just solution' would be the conversion of all land, including State land, 'to the use of all who work on it,' and that 'forms of land tenure must be completely free...as may be decided by individual villages.' From this early date, prior to the Soviet famine of 1920's where millions of people died, we see the establishment of an ideology of full exploitation. This ideology eventually extended to land heretofore considered beyond reach, outside the realm of

the possibility of development. Special settlements were established to push the limits of agricultural exploitation in areas no one had ever found useful - the wilderness. Obviously, using every piece of land did not avert famine at all because it is not as much a matter of land use as it is a matter of political power and economic control.

Government farms in the USSR received the best land while poor and middle peasants were given uncultivated land - marshland, shrubland, and wasteland. In spite of their best efforts to grow food on land unsuitable for this purpose, millions starved. The most just solution, in contrast to that which was proposed above was not full development of their natural resource base for direct production of food. The most just solution involved a complex suite of economic and political reforms but these would come too late for those targeted with extermination under the pretense of food shortages.

Stalin's policies caused this famine, not an idealism of untouched nature. Stalin's policies led to the liquidation of the most productive growers in the countryside, the Kulaks. Crushing the Kulaks and destroying the free market were accomplished with the same stroke since the peasants then had no incentive to produce due to the government's brutal confiscation of grain. The crux of collectivization lay in the maneuvers of Party dogma and the struggle for power. An atmosphere of war communism was created, complete with military jargon, utopian expectations, and brutal coercion of the peasantry.

Belief systems cause famine. Soviet officials were deceived because they wanted to be deceived. They believed so strongly in communism that they would accept any crime if it was glossed over with the least little bit of communist phraseology. Confronted with anything unpleasant, they convinced themselves it was an isolated phenomenon and the country's state of affairs was just as the party described it. Stalin's goal was the universal triumph of communism. Everything was permissible to achieve this noble end - lie, steal, even kill millions of people, many of whom were found guilty of capital crimes for simply picking vegetables in their own gardens.

Three years after the start of mass collectivization, the government more than doubled the amount of grain it took from the countryside. Not only was the state's demand for grain in excess of what the peasants could possibly spare, it was also paid for on a system of contracts with the collective farm at arbitrarily low prices. The degree to which the government was squeezing the peasantry became obvious as the prices on the free market were 20-25 times higher than those paid by the government for compulsory deliveries. The resulting manmade disaster was due to economic and political

manipulations.

Many peasants were infuriated to revolt, knowing there was grain close by in government storage facilities to feed them, yet they were denied access. They remembered in Tsarist times when lesser famines raged and they were helped. Then peasants went to the cities to beg in the name of Christ. Soup kitchens were opened to them. Here, in Stalin's USSR, the "government of workers and peasants" gave them not one kernel.

The first who died from hunger were the men, later on the children and last of all the women. But before they died, the people often lost their senses and ceased to be human. In contrast to death on a battlefield where men died relatively quickly and fought back, here people died in solitude by slow degrees. They died hideously without the excuse of sacrifice for a cause. They had been trapped and left to starve, each in his home by political decisions made in a far-off capital around conference and banquet tables.

Some went insane. There were people who cut up and cooked corpses, who killed their own children and ate them. If discovered, they were condemned as cannibals and shot. But they who drove them to madness were evidently not guilty at all, claiming that they did it for the sake of virtue, for everybody's good.

The battlefield for food was as desolate as in any war but stretched wider, over a large part of Russia. On one side of this battlefield, millions of starving peasants could be seen, their bodies often swollen from lack of food. On the other side, soldier members of the GPU carried out the instructions of the dictatorship of the proletariat. The army went over the country like a swarm of locusts and took away everything edible. They shot or exiled thousands of peasants, sometimes whole villages. They reduced the most fertile land in the world to a melancholy desert.

Though sorting out the causes for this famine is complex, two things are simple and certain. This famine was not caused by the idealism of untouched nature. It can be blamed quite unequivocally on Stalin and the Moscow leadership. The State's requirements for grain were the first to be allotted. It followed that much of the residue left to the peasants was imaginary. The ultimate famine cause was one of values. For Stalin and his followers, human life was lowest on the scale of values! Conquest provides a nice summary of this famine's cause, making it clear that the political leadership knew exactly what was happening under their watch. The cause of the Soviet famine in the 1920's and 1930's was setting unattainable grain requisition targets by Stalin and his associates.



- Bread rations were made in the cities but not in the villages.
- Grain was kept in storage in the famine area and not released.
- Peasants were expelled from towns as much as possible.
- Legal food was prevented from going to the Ukraine.
- It was made illegal to suggest that there actually was a famine.

There is a dimension to this famine that goes far beyond the academic discussion made here. Stalin's policies and the subsequent famine caused an almost irreversible destruction of rural life as a whole. The old village with its millennium of history, decayed into oblivion. Its age-old foundations collapsed. The age-old soil which nurtured their national culture disappeared. The village as the physical breast on which their national culture was weaned, dried up.

**Becker, Jasper. (1996). *Hungry ghosts: Mao's secret famine*. NY: Henry Holt and Co.**

Historically, famine is no stranger to China and many factors have contributed to this situation - the interplay of natural forces and human factors. Both Chinese and foreign experts have argued that if in the long term, famines were to be prevented in China, then communications and infrastructure must be improved. In the 1920's China, with an area the size of the United States had only 2,000 miles of roads. Grain was transported by a few canals and rivers but it was slow and costly. It was actually cheaper to transport grain across the Pacific Ocean than across the Country. Plans to modernize and rebuild Chinese agriculture, roads, rails, and canals were frustrated through the middle of the 20 th century. Likewise, efforts to rationalize land ownership and provide cheap credit through co-operatives were frustrated by the greatest problem of all - political instability.

China makes it painfully obvious that politics, not environmental points of view, play a critical role in the occurrence of famine. For example, a famine in northwest China began in 1929, brought on by drought. But the ensuing destitution was caused by the crushing exactions of the warlords, the depravity of bandits, and the enforced payment of excessive taxes. Repeating these actions in the 1950's and 1960's, famine deaths rose to unprecedented levels. Famine throughout the Country was entirely man-made and its chief cause was the state's excessive levies of grain.

What sets Mao's famine apart from those in other parts of the world such as Ireland and India, is that it was entirely man-made. China was at peace. No blight destroyed the harvest. There were no unusual floods or droughts. The granaries were full and other countries were ready to ship in grain. The evidence shows that Mao and the Chinese bureaucracy were in full control of

the machinery of government. The idealism of untouched nature was not a view held by the people or the government.

The so-called 'three years of natural disasters' prior to the famine of 1959 were not natural in origin, but caused by erroneous policies. It was Mao Zedong's criminal systems and policies that brought starvation to the people on a scale, never before seen in China, or anywhere else in the world for that matter. Extreme hunger turned parents into cannibals. The moral dimension of what the Party did in creating an artificial famine is entirely avoided by many Chinese historians who omit any mention of this famine and the price paid in human lives, some 30 million.

A famine on such an enormous scale would never have occurred had it not been kept secret. As economist Amartya Sen was first to point out, famines are caused by censorship and are the result of political decisions. Unfortunately, the political system causing this famine was copied elsewhere. In Somalia, Tanzania, Guinea, and Ethiopia revolutionary leaders tried to copy the agricultural ideas of Mao and Stalin. Traditional agricultural practices were abandoned, large-scale irrigation schemes were launched, the small peasant farmer was made a social outcast, and various types of collectives and communes were attempted. As in China, the goal was the mechanization of agriculture but the tractors rarely materialized. Instead many of these governments found themselves grappling with a hostile peasantry, famine, and civil war.

Many Chinese have blamed the tragedy of the famine not so much on Mao as on Chinese culture, claiming that both subjects and ruler were powerless to break the patterns of behavior enforced over 5,000 years. China is the world's oldest continuous civilization. In the famine of 1959 their moral code was still ordered by the injunction of the first Han emperor who 2,200 years earlier had authorized the people to eat their children. Perhaps then as in the 20th century, they felt powerless before the arbitrary will of the emperor. As a Shang dynasty inscription put it, "Why are there disasters? It is because the Emperor wants to punish mankind." Famines are more often than not deliberate, political actions for the purpose of killing target populations.

**De Waal, Alex. (1991). *Evil days: thirty years of war and famine in Ethiopia*. NY: Africa Watch.**

**De Waal, A. (1998). *Famine crimes: politics and the disaster relief industry in Africa*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.**

The titles to De Waal's works are telling, famine is evil since it is linked to

criminal activities as expressed through politics and war. No longer is famine the result of natural disasters alone, though they may play a role. But the key factors are human behavior and choice. In the introduction to *Famine Crimes* he asks, "Can respect for liberal rights ensure protection from famine?" His answer reveals the complexity of the issue. He says, "The reverse case is clear: human rights abuses are invariably an intimate part of famine creation." The shocking truth in this declaration is that famine is created. Someone, somewhere with a totalitarian ideology creates a system of political and economic control, which may be directed at will to kill target populations with starvation. The ideology of leaving nature natural to the greatest extent possible is not mentioned as a famine factor in Africa by De Waal.

De Waal cites warfare and political choices as key elements which can create famines. For example, violations of the residence and property rights of small farmers and restricting the freedom of movement of pastoralists has frequently led to famine in Africa. Additionally, repressing freedoms of expression and association prevents civil organizations from mobilizing to protest against famines and encourages the abusive forces that create famine. His repetition of the phrase "abusive forces" as agents of famine creation is notable.

In his book *Evil Days*, De Waal explains that in the great majority of cases, abuses against civilians often led to famine. These actions were committed by the government, not nature. Specifically, political and military actions included suppression of revolts, quartering soldiers with locals, interrupting trade, and the confiscation of cattle. Combined with drought and locusts, the result was famine. The Wollo famine was popularly blamed on drought, but a backward and impoverished social system, and the cover-up attempted by the imperial government were also factors. Additionally, the forcible alienation of resources and wide spread violence played significant roles.

The group that suffered the most from the Ethiopian famine of the 1980's, were the Afar pastoral nomads of the Danakil desert. Some twenty years earlier, the Tcheffa Valley became the location of commercial sorghum farms and small farmers from nearby also began to use much of the land. Meanwhile, large cotton plantations were developed along the Awash River. By 1972 50,000 hectares of irrigated land had displaced 20,000 Afar pastoralists. Nature was not set aside to be left alone. It was developed to the greatest extent possible, which created terrible conditions leading to famine.

During the years of good rainfall, the loss of grazing reserves was not noticed by the Afar, but when repeated drought struck, they found that a

necessary resource was no longer available to them. Famine among the Afar was certainly caused by drought - but drought acting upon a society that had been deprived of the means of responding to that threat. Official indifference to the plight of the Afar was illustrated by the diversion of water to irrigate cotton. The resident Afar were not informed of this decision and 3,000 lost their homes to this diversion/development project.

The famine was much less severe in the Tigray province despite the drought affecting both provinces. The difference can be largely accounted for by the different modes of land tenure. In Tigray, most farmers owned their land. In Wollo, most were tenants. Finally, Emperor Haile Selassie considered that peasants and nomads of Wollo were only trying to shame his reputation by starving. Therefore, he ignored their plight. It is widely recognized that the agricultural and economic policies of the Ethiopian government contributed to the creation of this famine.

The Ethiopian government adopted several strategies to transform agriculture from a system of peasant farmers to a system of government workers on state-run cooperatives much like Stalin and Mao. Haile Selassie instituted:

- Heavy and punitive taxes
- Strict controls on private grain trade
- Restrictions on peasant movements
- State farms run with forced labor

A coercive government policy implemented systematically and often brutally had the effect of impoverishing many thousands of peasant farmers. Traditionally, Ethiopian farmers kept a large amount of grain in reserve so that the complete failure of one year's crop would not lead to famine. Government policies made this impossible so that the harvest failure of 1984 led directly to famine in many parts of the country, even those which were unaffected by war.

**Natsios, , A.S. (2001). *The great North Korean famine: famine, politics, and foreign policy*. Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace Press.**

According to Natsios, famines at their core are principally economic and political phenomena with public health and nutritional consequences, not vice versa. All famines occur in a political context. Some government nearly always presides over the crisis - it may moderate, exacerbate, or even cause a famine.

The poor peasants of the Korean peninsula are intimately acquainted with famine and epidemics. During half a dozen periods - some of them decades long - the peasants have suffered from widespread famine stimulated by a variety of factors such as war, confiscatory levels of taxation, outright expropriation of the peasant harvest by rapacious landlords or royal officials, and by natural disasters. Measures taken by the central government to deal with a large number of destitute North Koreans have been largely ineffective, as the oppressive economic system that produced this human disaster remain unchanged.

When the symbiotic relationship between North Korea and Russia collapsed in the 1990's, North Korea plunged into an economic crisis that led to famine. In fact, a complex suite of political decisions at the local level plunged the country into one of the most severe famines since the Chinese famine during the Great Leap Forward. As is so often the case with other famines, this one too was not caused by a food shortage but by the inability of poor families to afford the drastically increased prices of food. When the Russians pulled out, industrial production declined, so farmers did not receive the inputs necessary to produce at a higher level. Consequently, farmers lost the incentive to produce for the industrial sector. The long standing economic cycle of artificial trade-offs was broken.

In totalitarian regimes, the political objectives of the state have a profound influence over who lives and who dies in a famine. Several forces transformed a small regional famine in North Korea into a national catastrophe. These forces included, the central government's decision to cut off food supplies to the northeast plain, killing more than one million people. Additionally, the government reduced the farmer's per capita rations from 167 kg per yr to 107, after the disastrous harvest of 1995. This forced farmers to redirect their attention from cooperative plots to private and secret plots, thus reducing local production available for widespread distribution.

Marxist economic systems affect famine victims in very different ways from traditional, free market economies because wealth is more difficult to accumulate. Politically powerful officials have access to resources of the state. Access to these goods and services is the equivalent of the ownership of wealth, protecting party elites and their families from vulnerability during a crisis. Farmers were also protected to a limited extent, not because the state fed them but because they had direct access to food.

According to Natsios, food on the black market paid 17-26 times more than the government through the Public Distribution System PDS. This dysfunctional system created an incentive to steal, however, more than it

created an incentive to produce more food. Those who were unable to change their source of food from PDS to the black market due to income limitations faced certain starvation.

As far back as 650 BC, Asians have recognized that food shortages did not cause famines, distribution problems did. One observer remarked that, "People are starving because the grain is hoarded in the storehouses of the rich..." As was true of all 20th century famines, the one that descended on North Korea was preventable. For centuries analysts have known what factors combine to cause famine, what the immediate warning signs are, and what measures may stop a famine before death rates rise. In North Korea's case, its exhausted yet unyielding economic and political ideology impoverished the Country, setting it up for disaster.

Some expert observers argued that North Korea's political leadership systematically used the famine to exterminate certain segments of the population. As the Public Food Distribution System broke down, North Korean authorities focused food supplies on three groups, members and immediate families of the: military, the Party, and strategic workers such as miners. Consequently, death rates among the general population climbed to an estimated 2.5 million.

Surveys of food refugees about the cause of the famine are revealing. Sixty percent cited the failure of government leadership, including an absence of economic reform, bureaucratic misrule of the Party, too much spending on the military, bad policy, and lack of an open door to the outside world. Only a fourth attributed the catastrophe to natural disasters, which was the official explanation. Some workers went so far as to sabotaged factories and trains, as retaliation against the central authorities whom they blamed for their suffering during the famine.

## **Conclusion**

The conditions associated with each famine I studied from 1845 to 1995 occurred where colonial or totalitarian governments reigned. Nowhere did the idealism of untouched nature contribute to the loss of life in a famine, nor was it discussed as a factor contributing to the severity of a famine. On the other hand, the idealism of total environmental exploitation did contribute to famine creation and when it did so, even more people suffered and died from starvation and its associated diseases. Famine is more of a political issue than an environmental issue.

Repressive regimes foster the exploitation of nature, all of it. Classic as well as contemporary literary works illustrate this well. Did not Tolkien (1982) in

*The Lord of the Rings* show this in the extreme while Hosseini (2003) in *Kite Runner* portrayed this mindset in more realistic terms? Military conquests and authoritarian rule have a well established track record of environmental degradation with its subsequent high cost in human lives (Maret, 2003). Surely Dr. Grudem remembers the accounts of how the Assyrians fouled the waters and eliminated the vegetation on a grand scale when they marched on Jerusalem in 755 BC? To suggest that environmentalists who promote the idealism of untouched nature, contribute to the human carnage associated with a famine is laughable, since the exact opposite is the case. Ideally, environmentalists promote the highest quality of life for the most people over the long term. And that is a value worth standing for anytime.

## References

Back to the Garden. (2004). *Christianity Today* 48(1), 35.

Brown, L. R. (2004). *Outgrowing the earth: the food security challenge in an age of falling water tables and rising temperatures*. NY: W.W. Norton.

Friedman, T. L. (2005). *The world is flat: a brief history of the twenty-first century*. NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

Hosseini, K. (2003). *The kite runner*. NY: Riverhead Books.

Johnson, W. T, (2000). The Bible on environmental conservation: a 21 st century prescription. *Electronic Green Journal*, 12. Retrieved October 17, 2005, from <<http://egj.lib.uidaho.edu/egj12/johnson1/index.html>>

Maret, S. (2003). "Wrecking fields are a terrible place": A global look at Earth Day, war and the environment. *Electronic Green Journal*, 18. Retrieved December 10, 2005, from <<http://egj.lib.uidaho.edu/egj18/maret1.html>>

Thornburgh, N. (2005). Unsafe harbor: natural barriers that might have slowed Rita and Katrina were ruined long ago by human development along the fragile Gulf Coast. How Louisianans plan to protect themselves by protecting the environment first. *Time* 166(15), 32-37.

Tolkien, J.R.R. (1982). *The lord of the rings*. NY: Ballantine Books.

.....

William Ted Johnson <[TJohnson@ci.scottsdale.az.us](mailto:TJohnson@ci.scottsdale.az.us)>, Senior Coordinator, Scottsdale Public Library - Palomino Branch, 12575 E. Via Linda Suite 102, Scottsdale, AZ 85259-4310 USA. TEL: 1-480-312-6110. Fax: 1-480-312-6120.

