

# FORWARD

## What We Could Learn From Pope Benedict

### Good Fences

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‘Turn it and turn it again, for everything is contained therein’ — so says the Talmudic compendium of wisdom known as the “Ethics of the Fathers,” in trying to describe the value of the Torah. It’s got everything you need right inside, tradition teaches. It’s the all-in-one roadmap for living in this world. After all, people have been turning to it for thousands of years for guidance in times of crisis and doubt. There’s a reason they call it the Good Book.

You would think, then, that at moments of really big crisis — say, a global economic meltdown — we could look in the book and find some big idea that helps us make sense of it all. Alas, most of us gave up trying a long time ago. Some have turned it and turned it upside-down and shaken it, but what came out, it seemed, were mostly lists of who begat whom and how many cows to sacrifice on weekends and holidays. Even those who do believe usually find that we go there for the personal, small-bore things like practicing kindness and coping with loss, not redeeming society or saving the planet. For the big stuff we look to the politicians and scientists.

On July 7, however, a very, very big idea was drawn out of Scripture, offering a framework for fixing and humanizing the global economy so that it feeds and houses people instead of fattening offshore banks. The author is Pope Benedict XVI, formerly known as the very conservative Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. What he has to say about the economy reads like a left-wing social-democratic tract, albeit overlaid with a lot of camp meeting-style calls to faith.

The document, titled “Charity in Truth,” was published as a papal encyclical. That means it is a letter to the church, spelling out a doctrine with all the authority of the papacy — and, according to an earlier pope, it “ends theological debate” on the topic at hand.

Here’s what has just been put beyond debate:

All people have a fundamental human right to food, clean water and a job.

Economic decisions are not neutral. “Every economic decision has a moral consequence,” and economic activity must be regulated by “just laws” enacted through the political process.

The current state of economic inequality is a “cultural and moral crisis of man,” and demands “distributive justice” through a redistribution of wealth.

Profit should not be the goal of a business, but a means by which it achieves the goal of providing human needs.

Investment and incentives should be structured to encourage long-term business development rather than short-term profit.

Managers should be accountable not just to investors and shareholders but “to all stakeholders,” including workers, consumers and surrounding communities.

Society must protect the right of workers to form unions “that can defend their rights.”

The globalized economy requires a global economic authority that can prevent companies from escaping national regulation by moving offshore, and can negotiate a fair distribution of capital and resources among rich and poor countries.

There’s much more, of course, in the 130-page document. It speaks several times of what Catholicism calls protection of life — partly to say that economic justice must flow from a value system that respects human life, and partly to say that protecting life is incomplete unless it includes human dignity and economic justice.

The encyclical also says that moral values underpinning this doctrine can be found in many religions, not just Christianity — and that believers and non-believers should work together in alliances based on shared human values.

Commentators have been falling over themselves to insist it isn’t left or right wing, since it mentions abortion along with unions and redistribution. But nobody seems to be fooled. One leading Catholic neoconservative philosopher, George Weigel, wrote in National Review Online that the encyclical reads like a “duckbilled platypus,” meaning an incoherent mishmash. It’s not clear how much longer a defender of church authority can get away with that. After all, it is a papal encyclical, not a Twitter tweet.

As for other religions that don’t have a papal authority, they can only look on in wonder and envy, and perhaps seek ways to link hands. Judaism has a long tradition, older than Christianity, of reading the Bible in very much the same way, as Rabbi Jill Jacobs argues elegantly in a new book called “There Shall Be No Needy: Pursuing Social Justice Through Jewish Law and Tradition” (Jewish Lights).

But Jacobs’s views are all too rare in Judaism these days. For a long time now, those Jews who seek the sort of structural justice that Benedict is talking about haven’t been very interested in Jewish law, and those most attached to Jewish law aren’t jumping into the sorts of coalitions Benedict proposes.

It used to be different. In the Middle Ages, communities were governed by their rabbis as mutual aid societies, following the sort of biblical principles the pope writes about. But rabbis don’t govern the community anymore, now that the ghetto walls have come down.

A century ago the voice of the community was its working class, the unions and populist community organizations that answered to their public. Nowadays the organizations answer to their donors, and rabbis are afraid to preach unionism when the synagogue president is around.

Reading the papal encyclical is a reminder that we're quickly losing a big part of our tradition. It's part of what made the Jews a light unto the nations. Look, even the pope is copying us.