

**WORLD
GOODWILL
COMMENTARY**

PROGRESS IN THE LIFE OF HUMANITY

Number 27

May

2011



WORLD GOODWILL COMMENTARY

A bulletin on current trends in world affairs

No. 27 PROGRESS IN THE LIFE OF HUMANITY

...the real issue is in the field of consciousness... the struggle is between form and the life within the form, and between progress, leading to the liberation of the human spirit, and reactionary activity, leading to the imprisonment of the human consciousness and the restriction of its free expression.

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World Goodwill Commentary is not offered on subscription; it is financed by the voluntary donations of men and women of goodwill. To receive future issues or to secure additional copies of this issue, please write to:

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PROGRESS IN THE LIFE OF HUMANITY

“Progress is the law of life. Man is not man as yet.”

Robert Browning, ‘Paracelsus’.

The story of all life is one of progress, one of becoming, one of nurturing latent potential into manifest achievement and of the perpetual emergence of the new. This is the spiritual view. It applies to every human being, to humanity as a whole, to a planet, to a solar system, and, so far as we are able to even begin to sense it, to the manifested universe in its entirety.

In the vastness of this universal picture we are faced with the extraordinary fact that a life-form which we call humanity with a developed self-reflective consciousness has emerged on an apparently insignificant planet in a tiny part of the universe, yet able to grasp the concept of the almost infinite whole of the material Cosmos of which it – we – are a minute part.

Wonderfully now, this is beginning to be paralleled by our first tentative exploration as a species of the inner spiritual dimensions. In response to the kaleidoscope of human experience, we have developed the ability to ponder, to ask questions, to enquire about the different motives that govern our lives and to meditate on the ideals and qualities to which we aspire. This condition of reflection marks the stage of evolution when the first glimmer of light from the indwelling soul is sensed. It manifests in the recognition that there are better values to live by than those which put self-interest first. The desire to meet the needs of others challenges the old selfish habits, and a growing sense of responsibility for the welfare of others becomes an increasingly insistent motive for action. In other words, the person becomes more and more of a giver and less and less of a taker. On a collective level we can see this pattern embodied by the people of goodwill in any nation responding to the higher values and challenging the status quo, often at great personal cost.

For each human being this story has meant the long and painstaking creation of a form through which the inner reality of the soul can express itself; a journey of lifetimes that most of us are still far from completing. On the larger level, the recorded history of human experience – the cultures, the religions, the empires that have been built up and subsequently died away – can be regarded in a similar way, as sequential attempts to build better forms. Naturally and obviously there have been many failures as well as successes on the way. For most of history the truth of this has only been fully understood by a very few. But all the time the goal of “man becoming Man”, to paraphrase Robert Browning, has been visioned by these few, mediated and filtered through mythology and institutional religion, and presented to the humanity of any particular period in a way which could be grasped and in a measure acted upon.

PAST PROGRESS

A backward glance over the relatively few thousand of years of recorded history gives a dual picture of the intensity of human striving toward some form of betterment or freedom, paralleled by the inevitable march towards collapse and oblivion. This is wonderfully expressed in Shelley’s poem, “Ozymandias”, with its depiction of the broken statue in the desert – all that remains of a proud ruler and his lustrous empire. In his fascinating book *A Short History of Progress*, Ronald Wright makes a broad survey of many of the civilisations and cultures that have arisen, existed, and finally disappeared into oblivion. Although all civilisations are unique, he nevertheless highlights recurring patterns in their emergence and development and in the circumstances which lead to their ultimate demise. One of the interesting ideas he explores is the “progress trap”. Every civilisation starts out with a “gift of capital” from the environment. As long as a civilisation lives within its means – in other words, on the investment accruing from the capital and not on the capital itself, then it can – and in a few cases does – continue indefinitely, for it is living in harmony with the natural world. But as soon as it begins to live beyond its means and starts to eat into its capital, as is the usual pattern, then its demise is inevitable.

A perfect example of this is the civilisation on Easter Island in the Pacific where the people at some point in the 15th and 16th centuries became the victims of their own success. An expanding population put increasing strains on the natural environment of the island. More and more of the originally plentiful trees were felled to provide wood for housing, for canoes, and above all for the transport and erection of the statues, or Moai, for which the island is so famous. Analysis of the annual layers of the lakes in the island’s craters show that there were no further deposits of tree pollen after the beginning of the 15th century. In other words, at some point around then the islanders had cut down the last tree. As resources became scarcer, the various clans on the island started to fight for what was left; and by the time European explorers visited in the middle of the 18th century the population had shrunk from an earlier 10,000 to 2,000.

Another example Wright cites is 6th century BC Athens where, in contrast to the Easter Islanders' lack of foresight, there was an awareness of a likely future problem from the unintelligent felling of the forests. At least two rulers – Solon and later Pisistratus – tried to resolve these potential problems: first, by banning farming on the hillsides; and later, by offering grants to establish olive groves which would stabilise the soil. Ronald Wright notes with irony that “as with such efforts in our day, funding and political will were unequal to the task”.

To the outer eye, these examples seem like a pattern of life from which humanity cannot escape. They inevitably make us wonder if we are collectively on a headlong course that will end in disaster for our present humanity that is overspending its gift of capital at an alarming rate. But to the inner eye, these and many other examples are better seen as experiments, where the motives that led to success or were the cause of failure are recognised and understood, and the learnt lessons gradually contribute to the development of a more responsible and loving character, on both the individual and communal level.

Perhaps it would be helpful if we focussed on human progress as a dual process. There is firstly a materialistic component. It is one that we are all very familiar with, particularly in the West, where material progress has been one of its outstanding achievements. In fact, since the European Renaissance, human ingenuity and the will-to-know have together precipitated among many other things a breathtaking expansion of scientific and technological discovery, invention and achievement. This cannot be gainsaid. Humanity owes a huge debt to the servers in these fields who have raised human life expectancy and living standards, and enormously developed scientific knowledge and skill. In our present time, for example, we have the ability to feed and properly look after every person in the world. The fact that we don't is not a problem of resources or technical ability, at any rate at the moment; it is a problem of the lack of vision and insufficient political will – both qualities of the heart.

This leads us to consider the second parallel dimension of human progress, which embraces the spiritual side of life and covers emotional refinement, the development of inclusive rather than separative thinking, ethical awakening, and a growing sense of universal responsibility, all of which can be described as expansions of consciousness. It is this second dimension which is crucial. What progress can we identify here? Because it is obvious that if we do not go forward spiritually as well as materially, then all other progress is a two-edged sword. For all its enormous benefits, material progress has also often meant, and continues to mean, that we have just been able to develop more manipulative ways to build empires, to destructively exploit the environment and to invent more terrible ways to kill each other. In our own time especially, material progress is creating humanity's nemesis in the form of our growing threat to the integrity of the entire biosphere of the planet. In the minds of some this brings into question the future progress and even continuance of the human race.

THE PRESENT CRISIS

A central theme of the many spiritual traditions is that they look forward to a time when the selfish preoccupations of the outer self or personality are displaced by the motives of the awakening higher Self or soul. This is exemplified in Buddhism in the discovery of the noble middle path with its eightfold achievement of right belief, right intentions, right speech, right actions, right living, right endeavour, right-mindedness and right concentration. Correctly practised, this breaks the wheel of rebirth and the individual attains the permanent state of selfless, compassionate bliss called nirvana. This is the goal, and the various stages of achievement along the way define progress. In Christianity the same story is embodied in the parable of the Prodigal Son, where rampant desire leads to a life of profligate indulgence until the prodigal, in the gutter, comes to his senses and decides to tread the spiritual path or “arise and go to his father”.

There are many signs that we have now reached just this point in the evolution of humanity as a whole. We are beginning to realise that beyond a certain level, more wealth and an increasing number of possessions do not translate into greater happiness or a greater sense of fulfilment and security. Indeed there is much evidence that the reverse is the case. Our intense materialism and consumerism is inevitably leading to a healthy questioning and a growing suspicion that the pursuit of happiness is completely misunderstood as the pursuit of pleasure – surely not what the founding fathers of the United States had in mind over two centuries ago!

All this means that, on a large scale, humanity is beginning to undergo the ‘prodigal’ drama. We are beginning as individuals and societies to want to develop the qualities of right relationship that characterise the noble middle path. We are collectively beginning to experience the awakening to the reality of the soul and are taking the first faltering steps on the spiritual path as the world disciple. There

are many implications to this statement but we will look at just two of them because of their relevance to the state of humanity and the world at the present time. The first is to recognize that it is a triumph to have reached this point in human unfoldment. Our present crisis is a sign of the enormous strides of progress humanity has made through the past centuries. These strides are not to do with the evolution of the human body which has remained roughly the same for hundreds of thousands of years; they are to do with the gradual refinement of the desire nature, the co-ordination of a powerful intellect, and the conscious unfolding of the soul itself.

The second is that when this unfolding consciousness begins to gather pace and people really start to experience something of the living presence of the soul there occur two parallel recognitions of reality. One is the extraordinary sense of joy that arises when we touch, if only for the briefest moment, that exquisite reality of lighted love which we call the soul. It is a joy which surpasses all other human joys, as witnessed to by the testimony of the world's great sages and mystics throughout the ages. It is a mistake, however, to assume that this experience is reserved only for those of a religious inclination. On the contrary, in every field of human activity, striving to fulfil one's higher potential and to serve can give rise to this sort of expansion of consciousness.

Whatever the specific path of approach, over time this experience reveals that life has meaning and is animated by a loving purpose – in other words that there is a Plan. At the same time, however, all who have this experience become acutely aware that the Plan “is very far as yet from consummation,” as Alice Bailey describes it. “The dark becomes more truly apparent; the chaos and misery and failure of the world groups stand revealed; the filth and dust of the warring forces are noted, and the whole sorrow of the world bears down upon the astounded, yet illuminated, aspirant. Can he stand this pressure? Can he become indeed acquainted with grief and yet rejoice forever in the divine consciousness? Has he the ability to face what the light reveals and still go his way with serenity, sure of the ultimate triumph of good? Will he be overwhelmed by the surface evil and forget the heart of Love which beats behind all outer seeming? This situation should ever be remembered by the disciple, or he will be shattered by that which he has discovered.” (*A Treatise on White Magic* p.355) This is a most appropriate thought to include in a commentary on human progress as it highlights in a nutshell both the achievement and predicament of humanity at the present time, and also helps us understand why some people despair about the nature of humanity and only see gloom for the future.

Most readers of this commentary will know from personal experience that we make the greatest progress in our lives through dealing creatively with the various crises that come our way. It is the times of greatest difficulty that compel us to discover and draw out the previously hidden resources of the soul, of wisdom and creative thought, in order to take a major step forward. Perhaps we had to recognise a destructive habit of thought or a harmful emotional pattern and leave it behind, or a fresh and unexpected insight made us realise we had an opportunity to make a radical change in our life interest and direction. Whatever it was, it took the best in us plus something more to achieve the necessary transformation.

What is true for the individual is also profoundly true for humanity as a whole. At the present time humanity is facing a series of stupendous self-generated crises that are causing even the most optimistic to look at the future with a certain level of alarm. This commentary is not the place to explore these in great detail. Nevertheless it is wise to evaluate them in order that we have a clear picture of what is happening. Major problems of the physical world are increasingly occupying our attention. These include climate change, overpopulation, the supply of adequate and affordable food and fresh water, energy scarcity, environmental pollution, military conflict and the proliferation of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction. Humanity's negative impact on the natural world is generating an extinction rate that matches the great extinction periods of the past when, for example, the dinosaurs disappeared. Some experts predict that up to half of presently existing species may become extinct by 2100. Then there are also the problems of human emotional attitudes such as fanatical fundamentalism, excessive material desires, despair, and the fear of failure. In addition there are the problems of an over-active and destructive intellect with its heightened sense of separateness, selfishness and their associated cruelties. Above all, even though there certainly is a new sense of vision and of values, this does not seem to be evoking the necessary radical response quickly enough from governments and the corporate business world, though NGOs, groups and individuals around the world are responding sacrificially and imaginatively in their millions.

Thus, humanity is now being challenged in all three areas of its form life – mental, emotional and physical. At the same time, many people are coming to see all these crises together as aspects of one fundamental crisis – the crisis of relationship. That people are beginning to see things in this light is in

itself a good cause for optimism, for it is testimony that humanity is starting to bridge between the intellect's natural tendency to separate and divide and the heart's ability to think inclusively and take account of the well-being of the whole.

VALUES AND VISION – THE EVIDENCE FOR PROGRESS

It is said that one of the first signs that the soul is exerting its influence in a person's life is the emergence of new values and the practical application of a developing sense of responsibility. The history of the past 500 years is full of examples where a few individuals working together with a new sense of vision galvanised a larger group of people into planned and dedicated activity. Not only did this invariably lift their own community or nation, it eventually resonated throughout the whole of the human family empowering the role of conscience and raising the quality of life for all.

Notable among the achievements of recent centuries are the abolition of slavery and the proclamation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Of course it is true that slavery or its modern equivalent shamefully still exists in the forms of bonded and forced labour, trafficked people, sexual exploitation and generational debt. This and similar facts are often used to argue that human progress is a fiction. However, a more balanced view sees that, despite the fact that the abolitionists' work is not yet completed, there has been a fundamental change in opinion within humanity as to what is right and proper, and there now exists a multitude of dedicated groups and NGOs and inter-government agencies working hard to achieve the vision of the total abolition of slavery in all its forms. We have thus progressed in 200 years from a general state of consciousness that regarded slavery as natural and legal (and a good money-spinner to boot!) to one that could formulate and give consent to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the fourth of whose 30 articles states: "No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms."

Hearteningly, the same story can be found in all areas of human need, for example the progress towards universal franchise, the emphasis on human freedom, the growing manifestation of gender equality, the prohibition of torture and the abolition of child labour, though these latter two remain sadly widespread. The existence of the United Nations itself, born out of the immense suffering associated with the 2nd World War, is testimony to the fact that people the world over – the United Nations Charter begins with the words "We the peoples of the United Nations" – have understood the universality both of human suffering and of human empathy and compassion, and are acting to heal past hurts and create a path to the future that will lift all people to a better life, not just some. Viewed from this perspective the various instruments, charters and treaties created by the UN and ratified by the vast majority of countries of the world are a wonderful testimony to the gradual ascendancy of that deeper aspect of human nature which is characterised by love, goodness, kindness and a creative use of the mind.

Let us look in a bit more detail at a few of the areas within the life of humanity which have given special concern especially in the past half century and see if there are signs of new vision, emerging values and true progress here.

THE WORLD'S CHILDREN

It has been said that a good way to judge a civilisation is by investigating how it treats its minorities especially its children. This most vulnerable part of humanity has often been brutalised and exploited and many millions of children have been denied the possibility of realising their full potential as human beings. There are complex reasons for this – psychological, social, economic, political and religious – but at root it is humanity's failure to measure up to a sense of responsibility. However all this has been changing. Let us look at some features of this change.

Child Labour

Many cultures, particularly rural ones, regard children as essential members of the work force. As soon as a child can walk, he or she can help the family for example by fetching water or fuel, or by looking after grazing animals. However, the industrial revolution transformed this relatively benign situation into an institutionalised and often systematically cruel exploitation of child labour. 19th century novelists such as Charles Dickens exposed this appalling practise and laws were eventually enacted to protect children from this sort of exploitation. With the industrialisation of the developing world that is now taking place, many of the newly emerging world economies are experiencing a similar problem. UNICEF's 2010 Humanitarian Action Report reveals that "An estimated 158 million children aged 5-14 are engaged in child labour – one in six children in the world. Millions of children are engaged in hazardous situations or conditions, such as working in mines, working with chemicals and pesticides in agriculture or working with dangerous

machinery. They are everywhere but invisible, toiling as domestic servants in homes, labouring behind the walls of workshops, hidden from view in plantations.” This is an appalling statistic of collective irresponsibility. But the fact that it is regarded in this way indicates a huge progress in human perception and sense of responsibility. And again it is one where many committed groups and institutions are working to ameliorate the situation. At the same time the statistic also reveals that five out of every six children are not suffering in this way. This does not excuse the plight of the estimated 158 million children, but it does put things into a truer perspective.

Education

A very important change that has taken place is that childhood is now regarded as a very special time for the incarnating soul as it develops into adulthood. Evidence for this is in the spread of mass education. One of the earliest articulated plans for this was in 17th century England, where a number of Civil War radicals proposed universal education until the age of 18 for both boys and girls, with ‘literary workhouses’ for poor children. A hundred years or so later the French Revolutionary government authorised a state financed system of universal education to the age of eighteen, though it was never implemented. However, the 20th century did see the full institution of compulsory primary and secondary education in all developed countries with tertiary education now being the norm. This represents a huge increase in the number of people who are learning to think for themselves – one of the important goals of all education.

And today the second of the Millennium Development Goals enshrines humanity’s vision that, by 2015, every child in the world will have access to primary education. While it is clear that this goal will not be fully achieved by the proposed deadline, considerable progress has already been made. The international focus on efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals has meant that many developing countries with the assistance of various NGOs and the International Community have been able to implement educational programmes that would otherwise probably have not happened. For example, in the East Asia and Pacific region, Fiji, Indonesia, Kiribati, Malaysia, Marshall Islands, Mongolia, Palau, Samoa, Thailand, Tonga, and Vietnam have already achieved the goal of universal primary education, though progress in achieving gender parity in primary schools has been slower.

As might perhaps be suspected, the countries in sub-Saharan Africa have the furthest to go. In this respect the economist Dr Jeffrey Sachs made some interesting comments on Africa and the Millennium Development Goals in an article in *The Guardian* (23 September 2010). “There are serious reasons to worry about the successful achievement of the goals by 2015. Africa is buffeted by soaring populations, and climate change could yet make a tragic mockery of the best-laid plans. Yet the main battle may not be technical but ethical. The world is living through a moral crisis, in which our societies are struggling to adapt to new realities of globalisation. ... An age when we should be celebrating our unprecedented affluence and productivity has become an age of fear and even loathing, when basic values of social solidarity, compassion, succour for the poor and mutual responsibility are under unprecedented threat. It is all the more remarkable and important that the millennium goals still attract our focus, as an inspiration, challenge, and as a reminder of our common humanity and shared responsibility. They may yet save us all, rich and poor together.”

Perhaps an anecdote from 18th century England can serve as an illustration of how far we have come in our attitude towards children. Mary Wooton was apprenticed as a maid to a Mrs John Easton. Unfortunately the two did not get on and after a few weeks employment the maid ran away taking with her twenty-seven of the lady’s guineas – a large sum in those days. The maid was eventually caught, tried for theft, found guilty and hung. But the real tragedy of the story is her age, she was only nine years old.

It is unthinkable that such an event should occur anywhere in the civilised world these days. Indeed the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child expressly forbids capital punishment for children. This convention represents a milestone in the development of the way in which humanity values its children who must no longer be regarded as possessions or chattels. Indeed it affirms that all children have basic rights, including the right to life, a name and identity, and the right to be raised by their parents within a family or cultural grouping. Children have the right to express their opinions and be listened to. They must be protected from abuse or exploitation, and have their privacy respected. This convention requires that countries act ‘in the best interests of the child’, and it has now been ratified by all but two countries in the world.

GLOBALISATION, FINANCE AND EMPLOYMENT

The subject of child labour brings us to consider the whole issue of the relationship of money, employment, human need and the rapid trend towards globalisation. Since 1945 the expansion of national

businesses into transnational corporations has led to the phenomenon of huge global business empires thrusting their way into positions of supreme power, buying politicians, promoting the corruption or overthrow of governments and everywhere sacrificing the good of humanity and the natural environment on the altar of company profit. Financial logic dictates that raw materials be procured from the cheapest sources, then manufactured into goods of every description with the cheapest labour (often children as we have already noted) and in those countries that impose the least regulation and tax burden. The finished articles are then exported to wealthy countries where they can be sold for the greatest amount of money. Financial logic also dictates that the system can only work with more and more people consuming more and more goods more and more frequently, all powered by a fossil fuel technology that will very soon run out of cheap sources of power. This is clearly an absolutely unsustainable path, although the corporate and government world is doing its best to continue with “business as usual”.

The development of right human relationships in the world so that everyone’s rightful needs can be met requires that this dominant economic system of exploiting human and natural resources to gratify institutional greed be brought to a close. As Ghandi memorably noted, the earth has enough for everyone’s need, but not for everyone’s greed.

Thankfully, at various times in the past the inherent instability of the system has precipitated a number of major financial crashes as symbolic warnings to humanity. The crash of 2008 turned into an unusually powerful reality check and concentrated the mind of humanity in a significant and creative way. It gave an enormous impetus to the growing number of people and groups who are thinking deeply about money and what it really represents, about the need to create a system that can supply the genuine material needs of the world’s population and to do this in a way that is not only sustainable in the long term but will be beneficial to all life forms on the planet. A key factor in implementing this vision is that money must cease to be a means for self-aggrandisement and must become instead a living source of enabling energy linking all human beings into a creative and mutually supportive network of vision and enterprise.

The economist and author David Korten has written most perceptively about money, work and the relation of humanity to the biosphere. He asserts: “The values and institutions of the 20th century that led us to recklessly squander Earth’s abundance for the benefit of the few were shaped by an economic mindset that reduces all values to financial values and all human exchanges to financial transactions for private financial gain. This mindset gave us collapsing environmental systems, unconscionable inequality, and rule by global corporations that operate beyond the reach of democratic accountability.” In contrast, he says, “Real wealth has intrinsic value: land, labour, food, and knowledge are all examples. The most valuable of all forms of wealth are those that are beyond price: love; a healthy, happy child; a job that provides a sense of self-worth and contribution; membership in a strong, caring community; a healthy, vibrant natural environment; peace.”

Another strand of thought in this emerging picture is embodied in a recently published book, *The Spirit Level*, by Professors Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett which confronts the issue of the widening gap between rich and poor, both within countries and within humanity as a whole. They write: “Great inequality is the scourge of modern societies. We provide the evidence on each of eleven different health and social problems: physical health, mental health, drug abuse, education, imprisonment, obesity, social mobility, trust and community life, violence, teenage births, and child well-being. For all eleven of these health and social problems, outcomes are very substantially worse in more unequal societies.” Their thirty years research shows that “in rich countries, a smaller gap between rich and poor means a happier, healthier, and more successful population.” As an example they look at what it would mean if Britain were more equal. The evidence suggests that if inequality were halved in Britain, then “Murder rates would halve, mental illness would reduce by two thirds, obesity would halve, imprisonment would reduce by 80%, teen births would reduce by 80%, levels of trust would increase by 85%. It’s not just poor people who do better. The evidence suggests people all the way up would benefit, although it’s true that the poorest would gain the most.” Up till now the argument against the growing inequality of wealth has been largely a moral one. But now it is possible to produce figures validated by research and statistics proving what we know spiritually to be true, that sharing and equality in society is not only better for everyone, but essential for the future.

There are many groups now working on devising ways to help humanity make what is coming to be called the ‘great transition’ to a completely new system. The New Economics Foundation has produced a book with this phrase as its title. In his introduction Executive Director, Stewart Wallis writes: “Humanity appears caught in a trap with no way out. ‘Business as usual’ is no longer an option. However, halting and reversing our consumption of more and more ‘stuff’ appears likely to trigger a massive depression with

serious unemployment and poverty. This is certainly true if all we do is ‘apply the brakes’ without fundamentally redesigning the whole economic system. We are facing a series of interlinked systemic problems – consuming beyond our planetary limits; untenable inequality; growing economic instability and a breakdown in the relationship between ‘more’ and ‘better’. The only way to overcome these systemic problems is through a set of solutions which themselves address the whole... We hope to show with this report that it is possible to envisage a just society where good lives do not have to cost the Earth, and to identify the levers of change that would need to be pulled to start the journey to this society. A different future is not just necessary, it is also possible.” The urgency of the financial and material consumption life of humanity is being widely articulated and represents a global concentration of the human mind in an unprecedented way because of the realisation of how quickly we need to make the necessary changes. As David Korten expresses it: “We humans have a brief window of opportunity to navigate the passage from a 5,000 year Era of Empire characterized by violent domination to an Era of Earth Community characterized by peaceful partnership. This passage to a new level of species maturity promises a more secure and fulfilling life for all. It is ours to choose.”

THE RELIGIONS OF THE WORLD

This brings us neatly to the world of religion where the spiritual values that inform – or should inform – our choices are enshrined. Many thoughtful people find their relationship to the world’s various institutional religions a difficult one. On the one hand there is an intuitive sense that all the world’s major religions as well as the many wonderful expressions of indigenous spirituality embody timeless expressions of great truth and beauty. They are like jewels shining in the mind and heart of humanity, helping to lift us all onto the path of love and selfless service. On the other hand there is also a realisation that often the forms of religions can crystallise into dead husks that obscure the inner light which they are supposed to transmit to a needy humanity. When this happens then there is a tendency for an open hearted tolerance and joy to give way to a more fanatical position that sees only one particular religion as true and correct and by definition all the others as useless, or worse still as instruments of the devil!

This is one of the reasons for the present phenomenon of aggressive religious fundamentalism whose intolerance is now flowing into peoples’ consciousness through the many channels of the world’s media, negatively affecting relationships throughout the world. Interestingly, we see a parallel to this in the new brand of an equally intolerant atheism. Together, these two have helped to precipitate the present “Does God Exist?” debate characterised as it is by megaphone exchanges between deaf protagonists. While many may regret this unproductive confrontation, we need to recognise that it has helped spark off a huge level of sensitive and thoughtful enquiry into the nature of reality and the place of the sacred, as the bookshelves in any good book store will demonstrate. We must be grateful that this debate is enabling people everywhere in the world to question their attitudes towards religion, to discard superstitious and glamorous misinterpretations of sacred texts and scriptures and embark on the pilgrimage of enquiry, of love and of sacrifice that will lead us all into a greater experience and understanding of the truth.

In particular the shrill voice of fundamentalism must not be allowed to blind us to the quiet steps of progress which have been taken by the thoughtful adherents of all the world’s faiths in finding common ground, shared values and, increasingly these days, shared worship. While most people might think interfaith understanding is a recent phenomenon, in reality it has an impressive history that bears witness to humanity’s eternal and expanding search for truth and righteousness. In Greece in the 6th century BC Xenophanes worked on a philosophy of religious beliefs. 12th century Cordoba in Spain was an unusual example of religious tolerance in a period we normally associate with bloody religious wars and crusades. Here the co-operative interaction of Jewish, Islamic and Christian scholars facilitated the rediscovery of the classical Greek and Latin discourses on science and philosophy which led directly to the European Renaissance. Nearer our own time in the 17th century Lord Herbert of Cherbury wrote *De Religione Gentilium* in which he proposed five factors that were common to all religions: a belief in God; the duty to give God reverence; the identification of worship with practical morality; the obligation to repent of sin and to abandon it; divine recompense in this world and the next. Also in the 17th century, Jesuit theologians in China made comparative studies, for example, of the similarity between the *Tao* of Chinese philosophy and the Christian concept of the incarnate *Logos* or Divine word. In a similar way towards the end of the 18th century, missionary schools in Calcutta compared the Christian Bible with sacred Indian texts.

The consolidation of the world-wide European empires in the 19th century inevitably led to a cultural cross-fertilisation that prepared the ground for a deepening of the religious life of humanity, notably in

the work of the orientalists and of the various theosophical movements with their motto of “There is no religion higher than Truth”. An important outcome of this trend was the 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago. This represented a major step forward in promoting religious dialogue, tolerance and understanding. For the first time leading exponents of the world’s religions came together in a spirit of dialogue and a desire to learn about each other. This was a ground-breaking event and, as might be expected, there were many strident voices raised against it. But as one of the participants, the Ven. Dr Philip Schaff, noted at the time: “The idea of this parliament will survive all criticism. The critics will die but the cause will remain.” Indeed the cause has remained and the World Parliament continues to convene and do valuable work.

Since the end of the 19th century, very broadly speaking, the world’s religions seem to have divided into two camps. On the one hand there is the conservative camp who see the last word of revealed truth enshrined in the text of their particular scriptures, and on the other hand a progressive group who view the religious experience as a journey of exploration, an opening of the heart, a widening of the horizons of the mind, and a cultivation of an openness to the truth wherever it may be found. This idea is beautifully embodied in the life’s work of the Dalai Lama who has said, “On the level of a religious practitioner, my ... commitment is the promotion of religious harmony and understanding amongst different religious traditions. Despite philosophical differences, all major world religions have the same potential to create better human beings. It is therefore important for all religious traditions to respect one another and recognize the value of each other’s respective traditions.”

A more radical vision is found in Matthew Fox’s book *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*. This calls for a new deep ecumenism involving the participation of people from all the world’s faiths. He writes: “Deep ecumenism is the movement that will unleash the wisdom of *all* world religions – Hinduism and Buddhism, Islam and Judaism, Taoism and Shintoism, Christianity in all its forms, and native religions and goddess religions throughout the world.” One of the effects of this sort of creative encounter is a renewed commitment of religions to serve humanity and the world in a spirit of humility, rather than proselytising arrogance.

An example of this was in 1986 the World Wide Fund for Nature celebrated its 25th anniversary in Assisi, the home of St Francis, the Christian saint famous for his commitment to peace-making and to the natural world. Part of these celebrations involved the leaders of six of the world’s major religions proclaiming the duties of their adherents to protect, care for and nurture the natural environment. Thus, “the interconnectedness of religious and environmental concerns was acknowledged, along with the fundamental importance to all traditions of safe-guarding the planet as a common inheritance.” Explicitly acknowledged, too, was a new and deep respect of the religions for each other. In the words which Fr Lanfranco Serrini spoke at the opening of the ceremony: “We are convinced of the inestimable value of our respective traditions and of what they can offer to re-establish ecological harmony; but at the same time, we are humble enough to desire to learn from each other. The very richness of our diversity lends strength to our shared concern and responsibility for our Planet Earth.”

HUMANITY’S RELATION TO THE ENVIRONMENT

The World Wide Fund for Nature’s Assisi celebrations bring us appropriately to consider in a bit more depth humanity’s relationship with and growing sense of responsibility for the natural environment. One enormous sign of progress in human development is the fact that this is now almost universally recognised to be of crucial importance both for the immediate and the long-term future. Much has been written on this subject in recent years that highlights humanity’s utter dependence on the natural environment for supplying not only all the physical necessities of life, but also, and equally importantly, a sense of beauty and wonder to nurture the human spirit. This recognition is already compelling a better care for and use of the world’s resources.

But a second strand of thought has emerged in the past few decades, which signals a change of consciousness that is of even greater significance for human progress as we begin to step aside from centre-stage and start to realise that all life forms have an intrinsic right to exist. This change of consciousness will be as profound as the Copernican revolution that revealed the sun to be the centre of the solar system – not the earth. We are at the beginning stage at the moment. Nevertheless the 1982 United Nations Charter for Nature asserted that, “Every form of life is unique, warranting respect regardless of its worth to man.” Aspects of this attitude have been well articulated by thinkers such as Rachel Carson in her 1962 book *Silent Spring*, and by Peter Singer in his ground-breaking book *Animal*

Liberation and many subsequent books and philosophical essays, who argues cogently that animals have similar intrinsic rights to exist and develop as has humanity.

This developing attitude carries echoes of the moment of the Buddha's enlightenment when he saw with exquisite clarity the pain of the insect devoured by a predator, and vowed that he would stay with humanity until all sentient beings – not just humans – have achieved nirvana. This is indeed a far cry from humanity's normal default position that the environment, and all the non-human lives that exist in it, is there for free exploitation with no moral, social or indeed environmental consequences. As we observed in the introductory paragraphs of this commentary, such an attitude does indeed invite consequences in all three areas. This is something we are now awakening to, and if we do not act upon this understanding now, the consequences will be disastrous.

Rachel Carson noted that, "We stand now where two roads diverge. But unlike the roads in Robert Frost's familiar poem, they are not equally fair. The road we have long been travelling is deceptively easy, a smooth superhighway on which we progress with great speed, but at its end lies disaster. The other fork of the road – the one "less travelled by" – offers our last, our only chance to reach a destination that assures the preservation of the earth." In the decades since she wrote this, many leading groups within humanity have not only recognised the truth of this statement, but are anchoring it as a vision in practical ways that would have been unthinkable in the past. This is yet another instance of humanity beginning to measure up to the growing sense of responsibility not just to humanity but this time to all life forms. We see in this an indication that humanity is beginning to manifest its planetary destiny as the nurturer and lightbearer for all the kingdoms in nature.

HUMAN UNITY

There are many other areas of human crisis and real progress that would repay our investigation handsomely, but together they would stretch what is intended to be a simple commentary into a lengthy book. However, there is one final aspect of contemporary human development which it is essential to consider and that is the amazing impetus to human understanding, relationship, integration and incipient unity that is being expressed and generated through digital technology and the internet.

To the outward eye the phenomenon of instant global communication, which is what the internet is, has been generated and driven by technology. Even if this were the sole causal reality behind it, it would still be a most remarkable achievement. But to the inner eye the precipitating cause is the emergence of humanity's unity in consciousness. Half a century and more ago nationalism and national boundaries defined much of human consciousness. International communication was by the older postal and telegraphic infrastructure, or by a cumbersome manually operated telephone system, where long distance calls that were prohibitively expensive had to be booked through various international exchanges several days in advance. Now consciousness is increasingly global and the internet is rapidly becoming universally available to match this. Conversations, all forms of communication, information, audio and video files, financial transactions – the whole spectrum of modern living – are throbbing round the world as pulses of light through the global fibre optic cable network that now, like a new nervous system, underpins all human relationships. The significance that it is now light that is the transmitter of all this will not escape anyone with a degree of spiritual understanding.

At the click of a mouse on Skype we can be talking with colleagues the other side of the world in an instant at no cost other than our monthly connection fee to the internet. The sum total of human knowledge and experience is gradually becoming available to all who wish to access it. All events within the human family – the revolutions, the wars, the natural disasters, the humanitarian efforts to rescue and salvage, the sporting events, the artistic achievements – are posted onto the web as they happen, bypassing government censorship and the biases of the traditional news media.

The internet is actually a wonderful 'warts and all' mirror of our present state of consciousness. On it we can see the very worst that humanity has stooped to, side by side with the very best of humanity's great achievements. Like all human inventions its use reflects the broad spectrum of values and motives that characterise humanity at the present time. Will it be predominantly used to promote human understanding and unity, or will the forces that seek to sow hatred and disunion gain the upper hand? This is an important question. But the web's anarchic nature is unquestionably stimulating both the sense of human relationship and a growing sense of empowerment. It has been said that the next superpower will be world public opinion. The internet is now the medium and the facilitator of world public opinion. Used well it can become a great levelling agency for all humanity; indeed it already is. It is a means to a world democracy that is more powerful than any ideology or military power. It is the means whereby we

can “put down the mighty from their seat, and exalt the humble and meek” to use one of the most inspiring and revolutionary passages from the Christian Bible, and also to hark back to the comments on the deep changes needed in the financial structure of the world. This technology is still in its infancy, and what it will give to us in the future will be a fascinating revelation. It is a wonderful expression of the conscious unfoldment of humanity.

CONCLUSION

It does not require an exceptional gift of insight to notice that we are living in extraordinary times. Half a century ago Alice Bailey noted that: “Humanity, as a whole, is in a state of turmoil, prior to a great step forward in self-conscious unfoldment, and in the expression of the sense of responsibility which is the first flower and fruit of self-conscious awareness.” (*Esoteric Astrology* p.162)

Around us and within us the tensions of our current period are bringing insistently to the surface all the many qualities, both good and bad, which humanity has developed over the millennia of its existence. They are also highlighting a great collision of ideas about the human condition and the purpose of life. Indeed, some question whether life has a purpose at all! Many people cope with the unbearable uncertainties that this situation is producing by clinging to the apparent certainties of the past as a drowning person will clutch at a straw, unaware that past models at best only embody partial truths and many are being swept away by newer understandings that are more appropriate to humanity’s present achieved level of development. Others bury their heads in the sand wishing reality away. Still others look at the future with an attitude approaching despair as they recognise both the immensity of the challenge and the belief that too few are willing and able to help humanity take the “largest stride of soul” we ever took. Nevertheless these few are in reality many millions of people all around the world. They (can we say ‘We’?) come from diverse backgrounds and base their life efforts on a number of convictions, among which are the following. They know that in the heart of every human being lies a central point of pure goodness and that this can be nurtured into vibrant and creative expression. They see that the present situation is one that is actually the result of past human progress, and, despite its enormous difficulties, it is one which can nurture the seeds of a future progress of a much more profound nature than anything seen hitherto, as long as the opportunity is grasped.

Despite all the horrors of the past and the present, the slaughter, the misery, the deprivation, the consciously inflicted cruelties, the genocides, the gratuitous and damaging selfishness, something amazing and extraordinary has happened to humanity. For centuries, beneath the surface – and very close to it – has been bubbling the light of the soul, struggling against tremendous odds to find expression in human affairs. In some ways it is our resistance to this loving intent that has caused much of the suffering we have experienced. Now, however, it is emerging in the outer reality of the life of humanity with a much stronger note and is shining a light into the world in a way that has never happened before. The founding of the UN, the triumphs of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the more recent Declaration of the Rights of the Child, the marvels of scientific enquiry, the widespread recognition of the need for tolerance and co-operation, the desire to heal the wounded body of humanity, the deep commitment of the international community to the children of the world, the wonderful developments in the arts, the recognition of the need for a completely new way to regard money and material possessions, all these indicate deep and real human progress. Further evidence is revealed in the growing expression of spontaneous compassion and generosity to people on the other side of the world when man-made or natural disaster strikes, for example in the aftermath of the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York and the 2004 Southeast Asian tsunami.

But humanity stands at a critical juncture, and the urgency is for all people of goodwill to renew their efforts to think and act in the right way now. Otherwise there is a real risk that the whole progress of our planetary life towards a state of expression in which a consciously loving and serving humanity radiates the energies of the soul into the entire material world, which in essence is our world’s destiny, will be set back by centuries, if our present civilisation perishes under the heavy weight of institutionalised selfishness and narrowness of vision.

If we are to *Let the soul control the outer form and life and all events, and bring to light the love that underlies the happenings of the time*, Humanity must accept its collective responsibility for spiritual and therefore true progress, realising that spiritual progress is not an abstract ivory-tower achievement; it has to be wrought out in the daily world of physical living – indeed, its only evidence is practical application in service. This is the arena in which all people of goodwill can and must work. Then in deed and in truth will we have helped “man to become Man”.

If the urge to satisfy desire is the basic urge of the form life of man, the urge to serve is an equally basic urge of the soul in man.

Alice Bailey

THE OBJECTIVES OF WORLD GOODWILL

To stimulate and encourage men and women of goodwill everywhere to establish right human relations between races, nations, and classes by an intelligent understanding and adequate communication.

To assist men and women of goodwill in their studies of world problems and in the effective application to these problems of goodwill, cooperation and sharing for the common good.

To cooperate with other organizations in constructive activities contributing to world unity, stability and right human relations.

To make available up-to-date information on constructive current action in the main areas of human life through the publication of a quarterly newsletter.

To establish a goodwill Commentary on issues of world interest.

To aid in establishing goodwill as the keynote of the new civilization.

To create a worldwide mailing list of men and women of goodwill.

To support the work of the United Nations and its Specialized Agencies as the best hope for a united and peaceful world.

WORLD GOODWILL is an activity of the **LUCIS TRUST**, a non-profit, educational organization first incorporated in the USA in 1922.

The Lucis Trust is on the Roster of the United Nations Economic and Social Council. World Goodwill is an accredited non-governmental organization with the Department of Public Information of the United Nations.