

THE END OF CIVILIZATION

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A MODERN WRITER has compared our time to “an elephant hanging from a cliff with its tail tied to a daisy.” Referring to the world’s dilemma, a senior United States government official states, “The handwriting on the wall of five continents now tells us that the day of judgment is at hand.”-William Vogt, *Road to Survival*, page 78. The truth is that scientists and communicators have taken over the role of theologians and preachers in proclaiming that the end of the world is a distinct possibility.

Two major factors have contributed to the alarm felt almost universally by responsible people: rapidly escalating pollution and rapidly expanding world population. Professor Barry Commoner, director for the Centre of Natural Biology at Washington University, states unequivocally:

“Never before in the history of this planet has its thin life-supporting surface been subjected to such diverse, novel, and potent agents. I believe that the cumulative effects of these pollutants, their interactions and amplification, can be fatal to the complex fabric of the biosphere. And, because man is, after all, a dependent part of this system, I believe that continued pollution of the earth, if unchecked, will eventually destroy the fitness of this planet as a place for human life.”

The scope of the pollution problem is staggering. Americans alone discard annually 7 million cars, 20 million tons of paper and 48 thousand million cans. The colossal problems of pollution are continually aggravated by the arrival of more people. According to Sir Frank Fraser-Darling, a British scientist, “Population and pollution are the two greatest problems of our age, and pollution is a function of population increase.” More people inevitably means more pollution, and great pollution leads ultimately to the point of final breakdown in the life cycles of nature. Perhaps the most staggering facts about present population statistics is that approximately 40 per cent of the world’s population is under fifteen.

Further facts which we cannot ignore concern the diminishing reserves of natural resources. Soil quality, for instance, of prime importance to the continuation of life, is threatened on a wide scale by poor husbandry, questionable methods of cultivation, erosion, and technological development. One estimate has placed the daily world deficit at approximately 336 000 hectares (830 000 acres). Trees, so essential to the life processes, are also threatened. One edition of *The New York Times* consumes over 60 hectares (150 acres) of forest. Forty per cent of the tropical forests of Africa and Brazil had been cleared by 1950. How long can the earth stand such ravaging when it takes several generations to replace virgin forest?

“Perhaps the most valuable of all the earth’s resources to have been exhausted in a comparatively fleeting moment will be the fossil fuels: coal, oil, petrol, and natural gas.”-Hugh Montefiore, *Can Man Survive?*, page 24. A computerized study of present resources indicates when they will be depleted by the turn of the century. Similar calculations are available for other fuel deposits. Minerals and metals essential to the continuation of the technological society are likewise running out. Silver, mercury, tin, cobalt, iron, and copper are among those short listed. Highly industrialized countries already annually consume approximately one ton of iron and eight kilograms of copper for every inhabitant. “If the globe’s population doubles in the next forty years, as it will at present growth rates, then the world will have to produce, somehow, twelve times as much iron and copper every year as it does now.”-*The Environmental Handbook*, page 2.

Put together, the population explosion, pollution of the environment, and the diminishing reserves of natural resources make the future bleak indeed. A chorus of informed opinion echoes with dismay at the thought of tomorrow’s world: “Like the lemmings, man is heading for the far bank of the river. Suicide is not his intention. Has he the intelligence to turn back? The lesson of history is that he never avoids catastrophes; he just spends his time recovering from them. No doubt history will repeat itself” G. R. Taylor, *The Doomsday Book*, page 305. Lemmings or not, the question of the future is undeniably of vital importance to twentieth century man.

The Three Alternatives

What are the prospects for mankind and the earth? There are, it would seem, three alternative outcomes of the developing crisis.

1. The first alternative is natural disaster, and in the opinion of a great many scientists of considerable reputation, this is bound to be the inevitable consequence of what is now taking place. The argument is based largely on the population issue, namely that huge disasters are imminent because the population boom has already gone too far. Take famine, for instance. The most conservative estimates indicate that at least three and a half Million people will die of starvation this year—a clear indication of the food-population crisis we face. Professor Paul Ehrlich comments: “Each year food production in undeveloped countries falls a bit further behind burgeoning population growth, and people go to bed a little bit hungrier. While there are temporary or local reversals of this trend, it now seems inevitable that it will continue to its logical conclusion of mass starvation.”

Even while allowing for journalistic license, tell their story all too well. The possibilities of feeding twice as many people in twenty-five years’ time are exceedingly remote. “It is difficult to guess what the exact scale and consequence of the famines will be. But there will be famines.”

It can be argued that increased disease will be a further hazard of the exploding population, although the experts have not had much to say on this point as yet. Certainly if a significant proportion of the population suffers from malnutrition, resistance to infection would be considerably reduced, and although the killer diseases have been controlled or wiped out with the introduction of antibiotics and drugs, there is evidence that immunity to these life-savers is developed in time. One writer calls for vigilance in this field since a new strain of cholera is already evident in the Near East. Nor will it be forgotten that epidemics of influenza have claimed millions this century. Further, there are signs that conditions of overcrowding and increase of pollutants will give rise to new types of diseases equally as lethal as those now claimed to be conquered. The return of bubonic plague, cholera, yellow fever, typhus, and malaria cannot be ruled out.

There is something else that should be brought into focus as a distinct possible consequence of overpopulation. Professor Ehrlich’s study of world population shows that population growth falls into two categories—in the developed countries and in the underdeveloped countries. The developed nations largely in the West, which are highly industrialized, have a high living standard and a relatively slow growth rate. They contain at present about one-third of the world’s population. The underdeveloped countries on the other hand are not industrialized, have inefficient agricultural systems, weak economies, a high rate of illiteracy, a low standard of living, and a rapid growth rate. They currently contain about two-thirds of the present population.

The time taken to double the population in the developed countries averages out at about ninety years. The time taken to double the population in the underdeveloped areas is less than thirty years. The underdeveloped countries, therefore, have no chance of obtaining the high living standard enjoyed by the industrialized societies of the West. Rather there is the sure prospect of an even lower living standard.

Thus as population increases, so tension also increases between the haves and the have-nots. Already, 20 per cent of the population own 80 per cent of the capital resources, 90 per cent of manufactured goods, and 98 per cent of research projects. Inequalities of wealth and opportunity are a positive threat to world peace, particularly as the gulf widens, as it inevitably will with population increase. There is an established connection between major wars and population crises. “If population growth proceeds much further the probabilities of war will be immensely increased.” Paul Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb*, page 125. And the next war will not be fought with bows and arrows, or tomahawks—not even with conventional weapons.

The natural disasters, then, which are likely to emerge from the impending crisis are famine, disease and war. The following comment on the population explosion deserves note: “We can either stop it deliberately or wait until famine and disease or war, or all three, do it for us.”—G. R. Taylor, *The Biological Time Bomb*, page 58. One is reminded of the words of Jesus: “Nation will make war upon nation, kingdom upon kingdom; there will be famines and earthquakes in many places. With all these things the birth-pangs of the new age begin. Matthew 24:7, 8, N. E. B.

2. Another possible outcome is that mankind will react intelligently to the situation and save the future for posterity. The argument here is that, given time and scope, technology will come up with the answers to pollution, population control, increased food production, and a host of related problems. Natural disasters will be averted by human expertise and the application of advanced scientific know-how. In this age of unprecedented development and discovery, the marriage of science and - technology will yield a harvest of good for the betterment of all nations. Thus, stability will be achieved and the continued progress of man be assured.

But is the problem that faces mankind really a technological problem? It is worth noting that a great many people feel that the problem is far more basic than that. The following opinions cannot be dismissed lightly: The recent Biosphere Conference, in its final report, contained the following statement: “Natural science and technology alone are inadequate for modern solutions to resource management problems.” An eminent biologist states: “The population problem cannot be solved in a technical way.” Lord Ritchie Calder suggests that past civilizations have died through moral and spiritual apathy, and applies the lesson to our own global civilization. Another writer, Hugh Montefiore, spotlights the same basic problem as the root of the present situation. “The crisis which faces Homo Sapiens today is fundamentally a spiritual crisis. Until it is faced and met, the future of mankind is in doubt.” Another

authority goes even further: “More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecological crisis, until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one.”

What leads scientists and ecologists to speak so frankly in terms of moral and spiritual values? It is surely the realization that mere technology simply cannot supply the desired answers. A land flowing with milk and honey is not produced in factories and laboratories.

The present and impending needs of mankind can be met only by a complete and world-wide change in outlook. There must be immediate international co-operation in the interests of mankind as a whole. There must be an immediate and genuine concern for the dying and starving majority. There must be an immediate concern for future generations destined to be born in a hostile world. There must be an immediate willingness on the part of Western society to accept a lower standard of living. There must be an immediate willingness on the part of the great religious systems of the world to compromise on what up to now have been fundamental issues.

Put simply, there must be an immediate selflessness at individual and government level such as has never been seen in the history of man. Such moral and spiritual reorientation is essential if man is to overcome the population and pollution crisis through applied technology within the next ten or twenty years. To quote once again, “A colossal change of outlook and attitude is required on the part of billions of people.”-Hugh Montefiore, *Doom or Deliverance*, page 18. Such renewed moral and spiritual values are certainly worth striving for. But are they really attainable?

Man’s basic nature remains the real problem. Kenneth Allsop talks of “denatured men,” “the pig greedy and purblind, and the vandals,” who, in the last analysis, are the creators of the crisis. The sage rightly remarked, “We have met the enemy, and he is us.” “It appears, on present showing at any rate, quite out of the question, that in a permissive age, man can find unaided sufficient self-restraint to achieve what is necessary for his survival. There is no possibility of such huge changes in personal, national and international orientation taking place except under the compulsion of strong religious conviction.” - Hugh Montefiore, *Doom or Deliverance*, page 25.

It seems beyond doubt that innate human greed and selfishness will prevent the successful application of technological skills on a world-wide basis. Nor do current trends suggest that a great spiritual revival is enough to stem the tide of evil. Crime figures continue to rise on local and national levels. Society appears to be growing even more permissive. Last year in the United Kingdom abortions totaled 75,000 and approximately 75,000 illegitimate births were recorded. There is no lessening in the suicide rate. On the contrary, there is every prospect that, with increased overcrowding and tension, it will increase. The frightening thing is that scientists are themselves subject to the same human nature as the rest of mankind. Man has yet to learn the lessons of self-control and consideration for the future. The basic issue remains wide open-whether or not man is sufficiently morally and spiritually oriented to aspire to the high goals necessary if planet Earth and life upon it are to survive. What on earth next? If the two outcomes of the growing crisis so far discussed seem improbable to twentieth-century man, the third alternative will almost certainly appear impossible.

3. Yet, if colossal natural disaster is to be avoided, and if responsible human reaction is seriously beyond reasonable hope, there is only one other solution possible-Divine intervention.

God, if He exists, and if He so chose, could prevent the threat to civilization posed by pollution and overpopulation. Western culture with its sophistication, affluence and materialism will sneer at the very suggestion. “God is asleep [or dead],” many feel, and “unlikely to be awakened in time to prevent the threatened global catastrophe.” In any case, the very idea of God-is unacceptable to the “enlightened” mind. “God” is “the creation of primitive man, a hangover from medieval credulity.” So why bother further with such a preposterous and febrile suggestion? Simply because NO OTHER SOLUTION OFFERS ANY REASONABLE HOPE IN AN OVERWHELMINGLY HOPELESS PREDICAMENT.

While to man the outlook seems bleak, there is hope after all. Man’s extremity is actually God’s opportunity. What on earth next? God!

“O God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast,
And our eternal home!”

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