

World climate change a wake-up call

from Reggie Norton

Beware Apocalypse

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By the middle of the twenty-first century, people will be looking back on the last years of the twentieth century as a blissful era of security and peace, aware that science let a genie out of a bottle which no-one proved able to control. Almost everything that has mattered hitherto will get worse and worse, though millions of people may remain mesmerised by the glossy image of a controlled virtual reality all around. Babies born at the start of the new millennium will be faced in their sixties, if not before, with a crisis in human history so unprecedented that it is hard even now to imagine it. But let us try.

The most uncontrollable factor will be global warming, working more rapidly than anyone thought possible until very recently. The rise in sea level may already have wiped out the Maldives, most of Bangladesh, the Netherlands, the Mississippi Delta, Florida, the English Fens, and much else, generating a frantic exercise of rehousing tens of millions. Almost every seaside town will be struggling to survive while accepting that its lowest, oldest, parts have become too dangerous to inhabit, even if they have not

been already submerged. Millions of houses will have been lost on every coast, if not from permanent submersion, then at least from the battering of enhanced winter storms combined with a higher sea level. Expenditure, often, ineffective, on raising sea defences will escalate astronomically.

The effects of global warming will, however, be far wider than that. The whole ecological balance of the world will have changed and the weather everywhere will become increasingly erratic and violent with a great increase in wind force. Food chains we relied on hitherto will in many cases be disrupted. In dry areas, notably the Middle East, the very provision of water may be a cause of war, precipitated by the diversion of rivers and the building of dams. Nowhere will be unaffected, but Africa, already the most fragile of continents in human terms, will be worse hit. Even now the forests of Africa continue to be cut down mercilessly. Erosion and aridity will increase quite apart from the wider effect of global warming. The continent as a whole will become even drier and hotter, leading to prolonged collapses in the rural economy and even more

frequent famines. Economic misery and political anarchy will go hand in hand, each fuelling the other.

As all this happens in Africa and elsewhere in the southern hemisphere, the anxiety to get out and find refuge in the more temperate North will become overpowering. The North, on the other hand, already at the millennium's start determined to keep "economic refugees" out and to build up walls of human protectionism, will become paranoid about the need to defend itself against the vast human invasion from the South. We see that paranoia functioning already in the extensive defences along the border of the United States and Mexico. The European Union will be spending its resources not only in the fight for its maritime provinces against the sea, but also in constructing across its eastern and southern frontiers ever more complex barricades to keep out the rest of the world.

The best places to live will be hilly areas in the temperate zone like Scotland. But will Scotland be willing to make room for two million Dutchmen bringing with them the contents of Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum, a few other memorabilia and

immeasurable angst?

The global population will continue to grow, even though at a diminishing rate of growth, yet most European countries will experience a decline in the total native population due to a very low birth-rate. At the same time, these same populations will be notably aged, with a high proportion over 70, yet scared of incomers. In the poorest countries of the world, however, the population will continue to increase except when cut down by Aids, famine and genocide. Population growth will accentuate their economic collapse and the pressure to move elsewhere. Just as the Western Roman Empire collapsed because it was overwhelmed by the invasion of people from the east in too large numbers to be assimilated within the existing political and cultural order, so will the pressure of migratory populations everywhere stimulate political instability and increase genocidal reactions.

Almost all the major problems of the twenty-first century will be basically global and only able to be handled effectively by strong global government, yet the world is entering this century with a United Nations organisation which has been steadily weakened for decades and whose structures are riddled with corruption and inefficiency. The UN could not conceivably cope with any of the problems ahead without radical reform, a reform which none of the major powers is interested in supporting and on lines which no-one has seriously thought about. But at lower levels, too, any effective political ability to cope is likely to go on declining under

intense, mostly hidden, pressure from the multinational corporations preoccupied with short-term profit while in practice accountable to no-one but themselves, and with resources greater than those of the majority of states. The multinationals of the twenty-first century will endeavour to force their will on the world by a ruthless policy of takeovers, by controlling the media, by corruption of politicians, by the paying of scientists to serve their ends through the commercial funding of academe whereby unhelpful scientific research can quietly be deprived of finance to continue, and by the development of private armies. What is already developing is the takeover of democratic society by a form of bastard feudalism.

In many parts of Africa, society is being quickly transformed by the building of security walls and the employment of armed guards around every more affluent home and institution – a new type of apartheid. This pattern is spreading elsewhere. Security is the great new industry. Whilst resistance to the dominance of the multinationals will certainly grow in many countries and will be both fierce and well-informed, it will be weakened by disunity as well as by the power of the very rich to buy control of newspapers, lawyers, members of Parliament and private armies. It will be weakened also by a general decline in the effectiveness of parliamentary procedures. The very severity of the problems to be faced will appear to justify abandonment of the democratic process.

The inability of the human community to cope with the crisis will be greatly enhanced by a huge failure on the part of the United States to shape its policies in terms of anything beyond the short-term protection of its standard of living, as also by intense mutual distrust between Islam and the West. Furthermore, the challenge to American hegemony from China will fuel a new race for power and add to the difficulty of shaping instruments of world government or plotting global policies which can be generally seen as fair. Europe, which, possibly alone, could perform the role of global mediator and provide imaginative leadership that is not just self-seeking, is likely to remain hamstrung by its own internal divisions and its relationship with a highly unstable Russia.

By the middle of the century people will be cursing Tony Blair and his entire political generation worldwide for doing so little to diminish the advance of global warming when something was still possible. They will recognise that the beginning of the century was the last moment at which humanity could actually have worked out a coherent counter-strategy. They will mourn the blindness of their parents who played the fool so spectacularly with millennium domes while the world's forests were cut down and motor cars proliferated.

For those of us who see what is happening, there is a double obligation. First, to do all in our power to bring the world's leadership to its senses while something can still be done to limit the scale of the disaster.

Secondly, to recognise that global catastrophe is in the judgement of hard realism very likely to come upon us and, therefore, to prepare ourselves and small communities of faith to live undesperingly within it. Even inside a concentration camp or on the deck of the Titanic there is a Gospel to preach and a pattern of behaviour reflective of that Gospel. There is little time to lose in preparing ourselves mentally for Christian life in the very hardest of times.