

Graduation Address GSC June 2017

Our Changing Environment

“Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;

The proper study of mankind is man.”

When Alexander Pope wrote this verse in 1733 in his *Essay on Man* he could not have guessed how prophetic it would be – but in a way he would never have dreamed. Our 2013 census told us that whereas 48.9% of New Zealanders identified themselves as Christians, 41.9% said they had no religious affiliation; most commentators believe that ‘no religion’ will be the leading candidate in our next census. On a less scientific level comes this true story. About fifteen years ago a party of schoolboys from St Bede’s College in Christchurch made a football cum culture trip to Italy. As part of this they visited St Peter’s in Rome. As they came out one of the boys, from a Catholic family, asked one of the priests, “Is this one of ours?”. I have no doubt that every boy in that group would have recognised the Apple or Windows logo without a second’s hesitation.

The main thrust of my presentation today will be the claim that religion has not died; it has been worked over on a philosophers’ stone that has transformed it into the cult of humanism. This humanism, however, is in severe danger of losing its Christian roots and turning into something much darker and more sinister. My final thrust will be that for theology to have any chance to engage coming generations it will not only need to be aware of this new context but also to confront it with powerful demonstrations of the enduring relevance of religious belief.

The Role of Science

Almost twenty years before Pope composed the famous lines that I quoted he penned this couplet as an epitaph for Isaac Newton:

“Nature and nature’s way lay hid in night;

God said, let Newton be and all was light.”

It is clear that it has been the spectacular successes of science and its handmaid technology that have provided the foundations on which humanism has been built. Highly vocal atheists such as Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett and Christopher Hitchens argue that open warfare is the only appropriate image of the relationship between faith and science. In this way they continue the tradition of works such as William Draper’s *History of the Conflict Between Religion and Science* in 1874 and Andrew White’s *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* in 1896. However, an edition of the highly regarded *New Scientist* in March 2012 entitled ‘The God Issue’ presented a number of thoughtful reflections on the relationship between faith and the positive sciences. A number were relatively positive accepting that religious belief had been a fertile bed for the growth of rational scientific enquiry. Yet the general tenor was that the age of faith was gradually ebbing away as scientific breakthroughs provided answers to the riddle of existence.

The Waning of Faith

Sociologists of religion have pointed out that from the dawn of human history religion has served three purposes; it has claimed to explain the origins of the world, how humans can be saved from evil and suffering, and what happens to the human spirit after death. Christianity also offers solutions for these questions. It sees creation as the gift of a good and loving God who sustains all things in being. Christ, the very Son of God, is the divine answer to suffering and evil. He has shared these afflictions, healed many of sickness and infirmity, and helped millions to find hope and meaning in the face of suffering and persecution. Finally, his resurrection shows that human life will continue in a glorious and bodily way even after death.

Those who proclaim that religion is dying a natural death base part of their conclusions when reflecting on the three great afflictions that have burdened humankind and for which religion seemed to offer some comfort. They are famine, plague and death. In the Bible it is famine that providentially brings Joseph's brothers to Egypt. Much nearer to our time in the years 1692-94 about 28 million French, about 15% of the population, died of hunger while Louis XIV dined luxuriously at Versailles. When we speak of plague we often think of the Black Death that first ravaged Europe in the second half of the fourteenth century killing between 75-200 million, including four out every ten in England. My own father told me of his memory of the Spanish flu that arrived in New Zealand in 1919. Every morning a large cart would trundle through the streets of Newtown, attendants calling out "Bring out your dead... bring out your dead." In less than a year, between 50-100 million people died globally; in contrast the five terrible years of the First World War killed forty million.

Over the last century advances in science and technology have pushed back the human nemesis of famine, plague and death. Though millions still go to sleep every night very hungry there are few famines. Those which do occur are mostly a by-product of sectarian wars or political corruption. In 1974 the first World Food Conference in Rome was told that China was heading towards catastrophe and would be incapable of feeding its billion people. For the first time in its history China is now free of famine. Plagues are also a thing of the past. Vaccinations, antibiotics, improved hygiene and better medical infrastructure have so transformed human health that only 5% of children die before they reach adulthood, the lowest figure in world history. Even death itself has been rolled back. Those living to a hundred become more and more common. Google Ventures Investment fund is now placing two billion dollars of its budget into its science portfolio which includes several major life-extending projects.

It is these gains in human security and comfort that are having a major impact on the way in which those, especially in affluent nations, now view the three great questions about origins, suffering and death. Advances in astrophysics and computers have enabled scientists to plot a continuous path from the Big Bang that initiated our universe to human life today. Despite some significant gaps around the advent of life and consciousness modern evolutionary theory is highly confident of its ultimate success in explaining the rise of human life. Traces of amino acids brought by comets to earth and complex hydrocarbons found around volcanic vents in the ocean floor are currently hot topics of this research.

Hunger and disease have been major causes of human suffering. Once these are conquered, violence and psychological disturbances account for much human misery. Emerging therapies to fight against such evils are the use of psychopharmacology, genetic engineering and nanotechnology. As we learn more and more about the brain our ability to intervene in human reasoning and emotions also increases. Tiny chemical adjustments to hormone levels are now commonplace. Now that we have mapped the entire human genome we have also uncovered some of the genetic misreadings that cause organic and physical deformities. Nanotechnology can import into the blood stream tiny engines just the size of large molecules to alter or destroy such malignant cells.

Though most physicians are sceptical about the ability to avoid death there are brilliant minds and wealthy foundations committed to this battle. Ray Kurzweil is well known in this area. When I was doing my doctoral research I came across his 1990 work, *The Age of Spiritual Machines*. This work frightened me more than any science fiction or horror novel I had ever read. In 1999 he was the winner of the US National Medal of Technology and Innovation. It is his belief that by 2050 anybody with a healthy body and bank account will be able to walk into a genetic clinic to receive a makeover treatment that will rejuvenate failing tissues and cells for the next decade and they will be able to do so indefinitely, so cheating death. Other scientists, less optimistic than Kurzweil, do not accept that we will be able to evade death totally. However, given much longer and secure lives we will be able to create societies that will guarantee rich, rewarding and complex lives for long, long years.

This is the climate of thought in which we are now living, one that increasingly believes that everything that religion once promised is now under human control and is being delivered by human ingenuity. It is the milieu in which more and more, humanism is the dominant religion.

Humanism as Religion

Over the last five centuries an enormous change has come over humanity. It might be summed up saying that humans are now the ultimate source of meaning and authority. Education is designed to maximise such convictions and the autonomy of each individual. What is right for each person will emerge from following their deep-seated feelings. It is wonderfully summed up in this passage from John Jacque Rousseau's *Emile* where he describes how he found rules for conduct in life, "... in the depth of my heart, traced in characters which nothing can efface. I need only consult myself with regard to what I need to do; what I feel to be good is good, what I feel to be bad is bad."

As more and more people accept that life has no in-built or God-given meaning and purpose, but only what they inject into it, the place of personal achievements and possessions grows inexorably. One result of this is the dominance of economics and production in every realm of life. Capitalism has brought huge material and social benefits for vast numbers but at a cost. That is the incessant demand to produce new products and markets. Commerce is the heartbeat of this new faith and malls and supermarkets its new temples. Virtually all cultures and ideologies bow down before it. The once dominant

Communist creeds of the Soviet Union and China have now morphed into heavily socialised forms of capitalism

The Coming of Post-Humanism

In his book, *Homo Deus, A Brief History of Tomorrow*, Yuval Noah Harari examines these trends and makes bold assertions about the future; but he also points to seeds of destruction within this humanism. First, he notes the swelling numbers of those in geriatric homes and hospitals in advanced economies, many of whom will never have the means to pay for the genetic treatments which may become available. Then there is the massive disappearance of jobs that is already happening as robots take over more and more mechanical and production labour. Driverless cars are already appearing and the number of once secure jobs like bank tellers and travel agents is shrinking.

Harari sees three directions in which humanity may move in the face of such changes. The first is biological engineering, where genetic enhancement will eventually be highly selective. So we may see a re-appearance of a new eugenics in which many elderly and those considered handicapped are culled. People with Down syndrome in parts of Europe already see themselves as a threatened species as more and more at risk fetuses are aborted. Then comes the possibility of cyborg engineering in which bodies are enhanced by artificial intelligence and mechanical limbs. The final step could come when all organic processes are taken over by super smart robots and computers. As Harari acknowledges, much of this change will be driven by powerful and wealthy elites and the gap between rich and poor will grow immensely. Life for the poor will become more and more degraded as individual identity and rights become submerged as unhindered free flow of data dominates whatever remains of humanity.

A Theological Response to a Data Driven World

It is not too difficult to detect flaws in the processes seen as inevitable by authors such as Harari and Kurzweil. The first is how notoriously incorrect the prediction of future trends has turned out to be as witnessed by events such as the 2008-09 bank collapse or the recent dramatic victories of the Brexit campaign and Donald Trump. Human hubris is also clear in the belief we now control nature: major earthquakes, volcanic eruptions or collision with a wandering comet could spell an end to all such dreams of control overnight

Surely though theology must find within its own resources insights and values that are impervious to such human diminishment. Many scientists believe that we know much about the human brain and intelligence but that consciousness itself is still very mysterious. Theology and spirituality can light up whole areas of human awareness of realms of existence not accessible to physical control or testing. This is especially true as we explore the realm of intersubjectivity, the unique human ability to share insights, experiences and beliefs and which has given us domination over this planet and all that dwells on it. Where else do we find a more perfect paradigm for this interdependence and uniqueness of relationship if not in the Christian understanding of the Trinitarian God. Beauty, which also

transcends ages, cultures and purely utilitarian calculations should likewise be a field where theology delights to play.

There is a danger today that theology is speaking into the void, addressing issues that are not the battlefields on which modern men and women are fighting. It is not the role of theologians to give scientific answers; but there is a pressing urgency for theologians to connect mentally and spiritually with the world that is emerging to show that faith and religion are vitally needed to soften and humanise the dark drivenness of science and technology.