



The World to Come

A Keynote Speech by Sir Lloyd Geering

In 1997 I had the good fortune to spend some months in Oxford, England. My late wife Elaine was using the opportunity to do some research for her doctoral thesis. Assuming I was at a loose end, she said to me, "You had better write a book to fill in your time." So, since I also had access to the famous Bodleian Library. I spent some time there reading and pondering the questions posed by the approach of the year 2000 AD, for this was already beginning to stimulate heightened interest. Some looked forward to the new millennium with keen anticipation, expecting it to bring in a golden age of unprecedented prosperity made possible by our expanding knowledge and technology. Others approached it with foreboding, fearing that the third millennium - perhaps even the first century of it - would bring crises of colossal proportions for the human species. In 1997 the attitudes represented by both Micawber and Cassandra were already much in evidence.



That is how I came to write the book that was published in 1999 as *The World to Come*. I deliberately chose, as the title, the phrase that ends the Nicene Creed. There, of course, it refers to the life beyond the grave to which Christians have long looked forward. But during the 20th century we came increasingly to accept that this present life is the only one we shall ever live. That can be well illustrated by the radical change that became increasingly manifest during the century in the way we conduct funeral services; they used to be a send-off to the next world but they have become a celebration of the life that has ended in this world. So the phrase, "The world to come", has now come to mean 'the future of life on planet earth'.

In my research I soon realized, of course, that the reaching of the year 2000 had no significance in itself at all, since it derives from a convention imposed by our Christian forebears on the calculation of earthly time. The idea of numbering the years of our calendar from the birth of Jesus Christ. was first proposed only as late as the sixth Christian century and by the Christian monk, Dionysius Exiguus. Up until then, Christians were still using the Roman Calendar they inherited from the Roman Empire. This system dated the years from the legendary foundation of Rome. But Christians had come to regard the birth of Jesus, Son of God, as an event far more important than the founding of Rome. Indeed, for them it was an event of cosmic significance that cut human history in two. So Dionysius proposed that the Roman year 753 be changed into 1 AD and, by his reckoning, that made the year of his proposal 525 AD. So our year 2000, marking the end of a millennium, is no more than a human convention. This convention was never adopted outside the Christian world and so Jews, Muslims, Indians,

Chinese and others continued to use their own calendars. Moreover, the religious convictions on which the Christian calendar rested have now become outmoded, and to make matters worse, we find that Dionysius made a miscalculation of some four to six years in establishing the birth year of Jesus. Not surprisingly, therefore, nothing of any special significance happened when the year 2000 of the Christian Era finally arrived.

On the other hand, since the traditional Christian convictions suffered such erosion during the twentieth century (as I set out in Part I of the book), it was becoming clear to me that we were coming not only to the end of a millennium but more importantly to the end of the Christian Era. This conviction made me bold enough to follow the lead of Dionysius by suggesting that we should take the opportunity to replace the year 2001 AD with 1 GE, the first year of the Global Era. (See p.107) That would make this the year 15 GE. Alas, since I lacked for my proposal the papal authority that Dionysius had for his, it is hardly surprising that nothing came of it and this year we are still placing an unnecessary 20 before the 15. Global Era was my suggested title for the period of time we have now entered because, for the first time in human history, the human species is being forced to become one global community - one in which all nations, races, cultures and religions are becoming intermingled, with each influencing the others.

One of the first to foresee this phenomenon coming was Teilhard de Chardin and he called this process planetisation. He observed that before the 20th century there were always more places on earth for humans to explore and in which to spread. The most extensive expansion of humanity across the globe took place between 1600-1900 and is well exemplified by the establishment of the European Empires. During the 20th century both polar caps and the highest mountains were finally visited, and human expansion not only came to an end, but went into reverse, and folded back on to itself, as the empires disintegrated.

Teilhard compared the spread of humanity round the globe to the lines of longitude ever diverging from their origin at the pole until they reach the equator, at which point they begin to converge ever more closely as they move towards the other pole. In the spread of the human species round the globe (or what Teilhard called the 'humanisation' of the planet) we have now reached a turning point - a symbolic equator - in which our rapidly increasing numbers are now causing us to converge upon one another and forcing us to learn how to become a global community or crush one another.

This process of planetization (or what I prefer to call globalisation) is proceeding without anyone directing it and there is now no possibility of reversing it. People representing the Micawber role are fully confident that, with creative human enterprise, coupled with a bit of muddling, we shall reach a form of human existence more wonderful and exciting than anything we can imagine - a veritable heaven on earth. But those who share the attitude of Cassandra see ahead only storm clouds, that convey a message of ultimate doom. That is the dilemma we are attempting to explore in this conference.

The storm clouds on the horizon are certainly very real. Make no mistake about that! They are found on two main fronts. In *The World to Come* I discussed them under the headings, "Humanity at war with itself" and "Humanity at war with the planet".

The first of these manifested itself in the 20th century in two world wars, followed by the cold war. Almost as soon as the 21st century arrived hostilities broke out in a much more complex form. Martin Luther King summed up our situation very succinctly when he said, "We must learn to live together or we will not live at all".

The second area of concern - our destruction of planet earth - was first brought to our attention in 1966 with Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. But only from the last two decades of the 20th century have we become increasingly aware of the way in which the human species is now endangering all life on this planet. This is due to two major causes: the exponential growth of human population, coupled with our rapid expansion of technology. To appreciate the significance of exponential growth (as illustrated by Dennis Meadows of MIT) imagine this. Take a piece of paper and keep folding it over. How thick will it be after you have folded it over 40 times? It will fill the space from here to the moon!

We had been indirectly warned about population growth more than two hundred years ago by Thomas Malthus (1766-1834). He was a clergyman, political economist and Enlightenment thinker who wrote a famous essay at the end of the 18th century entitled *An Essay on the Principle of Population*. In good Enlightenment fashion, Malthus tried to find "natural laws", similar to the laws of gravity, to explain the perpetuation of poverty in the world. He believed he had found the answer to his quest when he observed that the population increases by geometric progression whereas the food supply can only increase by arithmetic progression. (Geometric progression is a particular example of exponential growth.) This means that the population will always increase faster than the supply of food available for its needs and, as a consequence, there will always be a section of the population suffering from poverty. (One is strangely reminded of the words of Jesus, found in three Gospels, "The poor you will always have with you". (Matt. 26:11, Mark 14:7, John 12:8).) But Malthus discovered a natural reason for it. No living species, including *homo sapiens*, can ever expand beyond the limits provided by its habitat and food supply.

Of course Malthus could foresee neither the introduction of contraceptives that would help to slow down population expansion, nor the industrial revolution that would enable humankind to magnify food production immensely. So his theory fell out of favour for quite some time. But it is now returning to favour! On the one hand the population has increased sevenfold in 200 years. On the other hand we face increasing problems with feeding 7 billion people because we are running short of arable land and, worse still, the deserts are increasing. We have come up against the finiteness of the earth. Moreover we face problems of the distribution of food particularly because of the gross inequality of wealth.

So the problem that worried Malthus led to the formation in 1968 of a group of high-level politicians, government officials, diplomats, scientists, economists and business leaders from around the globe. They described themselves as "world citizens, sharing a common concern for the future of humanity." There were about 100 of them and they came to be known as the Club of Rome. In 1972 it published its report, [*The Limits to Growth*](#), which sold 30 million copies in more than 30 languages.

This report concluded that "in a basically closed system like the Earth it is impossible for the population, food production, industrialization, the exploitation of natural resources and pollution of the environment to continue to experience exponential growth without sooner or later collapsing." It forecast that this collapse would occur around the second half of the twenty-first century unless steps were immediately taken.

The Club of Rome called for 'a Copernican revolution of the mind', which abandoned the commitment to endless economic growth and set instead, as its goals, zero population growth, a levelling-off of industrial production, increased pollution control, and a shift from consumerism to a more service-based economy. The Club of Rome believed this to be possible but their recommendations were heavily criticised by business

interests who had most to lose. Yet their claims served only to illustrate how much political and economic ideology is driven by short-term self-interest that shuts its eyes to the long-term effects. The collective mind of the human race, so long accustomed to thinking of the earth as limitless in size, finds it difficult to come to terms with the idea of the earth's finiteness.

Twenty years after the *Limits to Growth* was published the Club tested its earlier claims and published *Beyond the Limits*. Here they asserted we have now exceeded the limits within which it is possible to change our ways and avoid future disaster. In 2002 it established a think tank, called *tt30*, comprising around 30 men and women ages 25–35, which aimed to identify and solve problems in the world, from a younger perspective.

In 1999 I outlined ten possible scenarios of the 21st century. They are not alternatives for each can exacerbate the others and the cumulative effect of several could be utterly disastrous. What do they look like nearly twenty years later?

Scenario 1: A Thermonuclear Holocaust.

Alas, even though the tension of the cold war had long eased even by 2000 the arsenals of nuclear weapons not only remain but and the nuclear armed nations have increased in number. Although there is wide agreement that the use of nuclear weapons would be utter madness (**M**utually **A**ssured **D**estruction) the argument for not destroying them is the value they possess as a deterrent. So this scenario not only still remains a threat but now has added to it the fear that these weapons may fall into the hands of terrorists.

Scenario 2: World War III

The invasion of Afghanistan and then Iraq, following the Twin Towers disaster of 9/11, has greatly increased tension and armed conflict in the Islamic world.. Many of you were with me in the tours through the Middle East in the 90's. One such person said to me only a week ago, "Syria was such a peaceful country as we went around it". But it is far from that now. We shall soon be welcoming refugees from Syria. The great Western powers face a dilemma - how can they assist the peace process from the outside without being themselves dragged into the conflict, thus initiating a Third World War. If this situation had arisen 100 years ago we would almost certainly be involved in a World War today. The reluctance of the Western Powers to check Isis by military means reflects a healthy increase in the devaluing of war and the revaluing of peace, but it has allowed an unstable situation to develop.

Scenario 3: The Rise of Authoritarian Dictatorships

When there is increased tension and inequality of wealth, democracies find it difficult to take the drastic steps needed to restore harmony and equality. Such situations call for strong leadership but these in turn so easily slide into dictatorships. Look at this array of recent dictators which include Assad of Syria and perhaps even Putin of Russia.

Scenario 4: Mass Starvation

We are no nearer to feeding the world's hungry, first because those with abundance of food are unwilling to share it without being paid for it. As the rich get richer and the poor get poorer we face an

unstable situation every time there is a harvest failure. These are becoming more common because of climate change.

Scenario 5: Pandemics

Medical science is engaged in a touch-and-go struggle in keeping up with fast-evolving micro-organisms, such as Aids, Avian flu and other new strains. The Spanish flu of 1918-20 killed 50 to 100 million.

Scenario 6: Destruction of the Ecological Balance

In the intervening 20 years we have become increasingly aware of this problem. Global warming has made its reality felt in more ferocious storms and in the melting of glaciers and the ice-shelf. Fourteen of the fifteen hottest known years have been in the 21st century. We are polluting air and water, the two most basic necessities of life. Although we are now becoming ecologically conscious we have a long way to go.

Scenario 7: Collapse of the Global Economy

George Soros, an Hungarian Jew who became a student of Karl Popper and is now among the 9 richest men in the world, has written three books warning us of the imminent collapse of the global economy, based as it is on a capitalist monetary system.

- *The Alchemy of Finance*, 1987
- *The Crisis of Global Capitalism*, 1998
- *The New Paradigm for Financial Markets*, 2008

On the publication of this third, and after being accused of 'crying wolf', he wryly remarked, "Remember that it was after the boy cried 'wolf' three times that the wolf actually came."

It is a very serious matter that, in regard to both individuals and nations, the rich have become richer and the poor have become poorer. The gap has now become dangerously unstable. This has the effect of nurturing the next scenario.

Scenario 8: The Global Spread of Terrorism

The 21st century had hardly begun when terrorists destroyed the twin Towers in New York on 9/11 and triggered an accumulating string of hostilities. The invasions of Afghanistan and the Iraq suited the interests of Al Qaida and led directly to the rise of Isis. Terrorism is now spreading on a global front. We are reminded of this new threat every time we board a plane. Can you remember the time when one simply walked on to the plane without any examination of one's body or luggage?

Thus, in skipping running through the first eight scenarios I outlined in 1997, we must conclude that none of these have disappeared while the three marked in bold have actually become more prominent and intense.

Scenarios of the Future

Scenario 1: A Thermonuclear Holocaust.

Scenario 3: The Rise of Authoritarian Dictatorships

Scenario 4: Mass Starvation

Scenario 5: Pandemics

Scenario 6: Destruction of the Ecological Balance

Scenario 7: Collapse of the Global Economy

Scenario 8: The Global Spread of Terrorism

Scenario 9: Sliding into Social Chaos

Scenario 10: Saving Ourselves and the Planet

Despite the warnings of the Club of Rome the majority of the human population show few signs of even being aware of these dangers voiced by Cassandra. The vast majority, particularly in Africa and India, have not even heard her warning because their attention is completely focused on where the next meal will come from. And most of the people in the Western world tend to adopt an optimistic and Micawber-like attitude towards the future of life on this planet with such phrases as "She'll be right, mate!" "Something will turn up". Is this easy-going and hopeful optimism supported by any evidence?

In *The World to Come* I discussed this scenario as **No 10: Saving Ourselves and the Planet**. The first thing to be acknowledged is that only we humans can solve the threatening problems described in the Eight scenarios above. For all people in the Christian world of the past, and for the more conservative Christians of the present, this was not so. They believed that their ultimate destiny and that of the world was not in their hands but in those of an all-powerful, benevolent God to whom they could appeal to be delivered from any imminent calamity. This is because there was a widespread expectation of an imminent end of the world when Christianity came to birth! The New Testament is permeated by what scholars refer to as the eschatological theme. Eschatological is the adjective from the Greek *eschata*, that means 'the last times'. Read the New Testament and see how often it speaks of 'the last days' or 'the last times'. It was expected to be a time when God would break into history and replace the old heaven and earth with "a new heaven and a new earth".

Today we have a very different mental picture of the universe and the hopes of deliverance imagined by the first Christians have become obsolete. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer so well put it, "Humanity has now come of age!" In our long and slow cultural evolution humanity has reached a point of growth that may be likened to that of young adults, who, free from parental control, learn that they must take full responsibility for their actions and suffer the consequences.

Like the young adult leaving the protection of home and parental control, we humans now find we are on our own on planet earth. There are no divine forces to which we can appeal. Our destiny, as individuals and as a species, is in our hands. Moreover we find to our alarm that we now also carry some responsibility for the future of all other earthly species as well. Indeed, we have already, inadvertently, caused the extinction of a great many.

But before proceeding to discuss how we are to shoulder this responsibility let me point to one more thing about the world we live in.. I first learned this from Teilhard de Chardin. Devout Catholic though he remained to the day of his death, he made this surprising statement:

"If, as the result of some interior revolution, I were to lose in succession my faith in Christ, my faith in a personal God, and my faith in spirit, I feel that I should continue to believe invincibly in the world. The world (its value, its infallibility and its goodness) – that, when all is said and done, is the first, the last and the only thing in which I believe. It is by this faith that I live. And it is to this faith, that at the moment of death, rising above all doubts, I shall surrender myself."

Teilhard's study of the evolution of life on this planet filled him with awe and hope as he observed the quite extraordinary capacity of matter - the basic stuff of the universe - to organize itself into every more complex entities. Atoms coalesce to form molecules of new substances. Mega-molecules coalesce to form living cells. Cells multiply to form organisms. Organisms join in relationships to form communities. Observing this awe-inspiring process, Teilhard's imagination projected it into the future and suggested that humanity is now suffering the birth-pangs involved in the next stage of evolution. It is one in which a super community will arise. In this coming global community individual persons will work together in love for the common good in the same way as the billions of cells in our flesh all contribute to the health or wholeness of our bodies.

A coming global community is a genuinely realisable hope for the future if we allow for the goodwill present in human hearts and the inventive character of the human mind. But there are no grounds for any easy optimism. Just as it took World War I to create the League of Nations and World War II to create the united Nations so it may require a third and perhaps even more serious calamity before the human species acknowledges that its future depends on building a common global community and creates a supranational institution for the governing of the planet.

This is the message of Dennis Meadows who has become the chief spokesman for the Club of Rome. Only in his 20's when he first became a member of the Club of Rome, he is now a grey-headed man who travels the earth giving lectures, warning that the political management of such a complex system as Planet Earth can no longer be entrusted to traditional States. He observes two important factors why national governments are currently prevented from dealing adequately with the dangers now looming before us:

1. They are wedded to the notion of measuring their success by the criterion of economic growth.
2. Because democratic governments face re-election every three or four years, they cannot plan far ahead and suffer from "short-termism".

Meadows finds that the nation-state is too large to tackle small, local problems and too small to tackle global ones. A much better coordinated system is needed, incorporating international and supranational institutions to ensure the governance of the planet. Similarly Al Gore, the one-time Vice-President of USA, like Meadows, now spends his time lecturing around the world explaining the massive climate change we are caught up in and warning of its impending dangers. He has illustrated this in his cinema presentation "An Inconvenient Truth".

If our future is now in our hands as individuals, what must we do to save ourselves and the planet? A passive laissez-faire attitude will not help. We must acknowledge the need to change our ways. “Think globally, act locally” has become the motto. We must be active and take positive steps to nurture the growth of the global community. If we do not do so, and within sufficient time, we humans too may become extinct, even as early as the current century.

To respond to the above Eight Scenarios, voiced by Cassandra I suggest **Ten Guiding Principles** for all humans to put into practice, to support Micawber's confidence.

Ten Guiding Principles

- 1. Acknowledge our common humanity, irrespective of race, culture, gender or age.**
- 2. Abandon violence and war.**
- 3 Solve our differences by peaceful negotiation.**
- 4. Acknowledge that we are earth creatures who continue to depend on it for life.**
- 5. Co-operate with nature instead of trying to master it.**
- 6. Replace the political goal of economic growth with that of sustainability.**
- 7. Move from a carbon based source of energy to the use of solar energy.**
- 8. Reduce waste by recycling (something nature does so well).**
- 9. Overcome pollution of air and water.**
- 10. Aim for zero population growth.**

Some of these things we have already started to do.

But there is an urgency built into them all and only time will tell if we have started too late.

Lloyd Geering

Professor Sir Lloyd Geering was born in Canterbury in 1918 and educated in Otago. He holds Honours degrees in Mathematics and Old Testament Language and Literature. Ordained as a Presbyterian minister, he served in Kurow, Dunedin and Wellington. He held Chairs of Old Testament Studies at theological colleges in Brisbane and Dunedin before being appointed as the foundation Professor of Religious Studies at Victoria University of Wellington. From this he retired in 1984. The University of Otago awarded him an Honorary D.D. in 1976 and he received a C.B.E. in the 1987 New Year Honours, PCNZM in 2001 and ONZ in 2007.

His major publications include “God in the New World” (1968), “Resurrection - a Symbol of Hope” (1971), “Faith’s New Age” (1980), “In the World Today” (1988), “Tomorrow’s God” (1994), “The World to Come” (1999), ‘Christianity without God’ (2002), ‘Wrestling with God’ (2006), ‘Coming back to Earth’ (2009), ‘Such is Life!’ (2010), ‘From the Big Bang to God’ (2013), ‘Reimagining God’ (2014).