

The End of Civilization and the Possible Dawn of a new World Religion

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Alan Webster

I fear you will not like this message. That has never deterred me, but it can be painful.

This is a down-to-earth paper, guided by a view of spirituality utterly alien to supernaturalistic theism. My definition is: ***Spirituality is an elevated awareness of constructing-the-world possibilities, realised in choice, informed by an ethic of compassion and expressed in deliberative action.***

The global ecosystem is at a 'tipping point' and oil, the critical resource for our way of life, is already on an irretrievable downward trend. Cheap oil has gone for ever. Climate change threatens global weather and biosphere catastrophe. Population increase and unupportable consumption combine to make looming emergency the reality of the 21st Century. No-one knows what will prevent eco-disaster. Some speak of a planet of "the insects and the grasses." (Crossan and Reid). Inequity threatens stability everywhere.

On present facts, what Kunstler bluntly calls "the long emergency" is marshalling its forces. Social disruption, famine and mass death of humans are expected to result from further greed, folly, waste and denial. A greatly reduced human population is predicted. A real-world population of two billion after the Carbon Age is predicted. Conditions of existence are set to become simplified and focussed on food production and related technologies. The range of vocations will shrink and the hierarchies of occupations and rewards will be shaped by necessity and farming. Some say we are sleepwalking to oblivion.

We will continue in the shorter term to feed the illusion that if we just ease our foot on the gas pedal, it will be 'business as usual' - the oil or easy substitutes will somehow be found. Ignoring the fact that already we are not recovering anywhere as much as we are using. Ignoring also the fact that food production, food distribution, transportation, private travel, manufacture, employment, medical services, care of the elderly, sick and frail, delivery services, energy systems, heavy machinery, agricultural mechanisation, fertilisation - everything other than prayer! - are all largely or significantly dependent upon oil. What will eventuate is a poorer, simpler, more manual, more farm-based, society, desperately making do to deliver necessities and to undertake necessary travel.

Social relations will be shaped by people's contribution to common need. Movement will

be greatly restricted. The higher cadres of professionalism will shrink. People will be geographically confined. Materials for manufacture and manufacture itself will be localised, and tourism and private air travel will be vastly restricted. Most commercial airlines will vanish. So our lives will be confined to the traditional simplicities and hardships of pre-20th Century times. More serious, however, in the view of some, will be the threats to security and to civil order. Some foresee chaos and street gangs roaming in search of food and necessities.

I invite you to think with me about the question: *What does the global crisis say to the desire to create a religion or a faith for a different future?*

Why do we find ourselves, after 10,000 years of inventing civilisation, in such a parlous state? Some say it's not that we have failed to progress, but that we've progressed too much, or in mistaken ways.

This is what the brilliant BBC lecturer on progress in civilization, Ronald Wright, believes.

Wright's book *A Short History of Progress* provides a gloomy analysis and prognosis of the perilous experiment of civilisation. He is not alone in his gloomy analysis. Scientists are a major source of prophetic forecasts. It was a New Zealand geographer, a colleague of mine at Massey, who was a main leader in the research on the failure of Easter Island. Another New Zealand scientist put together the main report of the authoritative Millennium Ecosystem Report.

Scary up-dating research on climate change in Britain, reported this month in the journal *Nature* and in *Independent News UK*, shows that a 'vicious circle' of CO₂ emissions from the soil itself is speeding up climate change. The soil itself is emitting more CO₂ than 25 years ago because increasing earth temperature is speeding up the natural rate of organic decay.

To ameliorate the UK atmosphere problem, they would have to replace all the arable land in England with trees. In other words, it's an intractable reality. What it means, says Dr Guy Kirk is that we've got 25percent more carbon to think about than was entered into the Kyoto calculations. "It's a feedback loop, Kirk says. "The warmer it gets, the faster it is happening". The soil itself "will become a new source of the greenhouse gas" he says. In short, in Britain alone, an extra 13 million tons of CO₂ is being released per year. Further warming means only one thing - degradation of the biosphere.

Or, the planet becoming such that it would not have generated life as we know it.

Other recent projections see a slowing of the Gulf Stream and irreversible melting of the Arctic ice cap.

There is a human role in these developments.

- Western culture assumes progress, or a pattern of directional change.
- Science and industry gave rise to this unilateral progress.
- As myth and ideology, science and industry are unfortunately so abstracted from morality and tradition that they assume an engrossing role in our total relations with the world. This is science as myth and ideology. Whatever science can do and wants to do is self-directing and self-justifying. This myth of progress has been valuable, but it can become dangerous. We have become victims of our own success. Our success has endowed us with the power to make ourselves and to destroy ourselves.
- So it appears we must temper our admiration for *homo sapiens*.
- Our Stone Age origins as a species were doubtless based on genocide. *Homo sapiens* must have carried out genocide of the Neanderthals, who virtually disappeared. The most ruthless became the winners of history.

Consider how we got here. Evolution of the species aside:

- "The humans perfected hunting, then escaped its limitations by developing farming; then finally developed world-wide civilization. The mighty machine of civilization perfected organization of people and resources. But it also carried out unprecedented horrors: the Roman Circus, the Aztec sacrifices, the decimation of the Middle Americas, the Inquisition bonfires, slavery across the earth, the world wars, the Nazi death camps, the Gulag, and recently the Rwanda genocide, the slow fouling of oceans and rivers, the extermination of species and the unceasing destruction of the forests. These things have been the work of highly civilized societies. About 100 million civilians have been slaughtered in 20th Century wars.

Progress proceeds in pragmatic phases.

Each phase succeeded in meeting, urgent necessity and in improving its lot, but thereby constituted its own trap:

1. The **hunting trap** was that of killing off the host.

2. **Farming** was an enduring success: it has been the salvation of the human species. But there was a **farming trap**: farming often exhausted the soil and in any case succeeded only when the climate was suitable, ie it did not develop until after the last Ice Age. Climate change has been its nemesis over the centuries. Ice-Age or climate change will no doubt see out our brief moment, but as a result of human actions.

Historically, farming has exploited the land beyond its natural capacity, failing to adapt in face of clear evidence. Thus, soil exhaustion, cash-cropping,

over-riding the primitive fallow principle, clear-felling of forests and thus spilling destructive floods upon the topsoils, draining of natural water sources and of wetlands, and ignorance of the Gala principle of the integrity of the forest.

The gross condition in the world is that of human disruption and chemical poisoning of the global climate, the biosphere and the ozone layer.

There is no documentation of the specific effects *of* **human disruption of the global climate**. Nor could there be. We do not know until it is too late.

Wright uses the term "The Fools' Paradise" to refer to certain famous experiments. Some have been irrecoverable.

Examples are, first, **Easter Island** - well-known for its total destruction of trees, the very foundation of the growing world - which exemplifies the consequences of being locked into an ecologically foolish belief;

Second, the rise and decline of Iraq, or Sumer, or Southern Mesopotamia. They adopted a massive method of controlling water which led to salinization such that a fertile plain of 4000 to 5000 years ago is now and has been for centuries, desert and scrub, fit only for goats. Had it not been for the discovery of oil, only yesterday, as it were, Iraq would be still today an economic backwater and may soon be again, with America's help. The oil bonanza has simply been drawing on nature's reserve, while depleting it. So Iraq and the rest of today's oil-guzzling world.

And then, less dramatic, their civilizations a shadow of former glory, the fall of Rome and of Egypt. Rome worshipped the god of war, imposed fealty to him and organised around conquest, taking from others; while Egypt practiced a culture of death, neglecting the principles of life. Only merciful Nile floods saved Egypt while migration and political/military diversification saved Rome. These former civilizations lost their identity and viability. Both failed to nurture their people and their ecologies.

The precedents of failure of civilizations are painfully similar:

- The Sumer civilization of Mesopotamia and others failed to reform their society to reduce the evident environmental impact of their way of life.
- They stuck to entrenched beliefs and practices

- "They spent reserves of natural capital on what Wright calls, in Iraq's case “reckless binges of glory and wealth” but disrupting waterways, ignoring the fallow principle in farm management, concentrating economic surplus in the great city and thereby enriching the rulers and impoverishing the peasants. Inequality and injustice were systemic.
- "Intelligence and community alike were overridden in the abolition of collective land-holding - a justice issue as well as a science issue. In Sumer as a whole, population overshoot accompanied by upward concentration of wealth led to economic and social failure. Failure of the soil, the trees and the waterways led to the collapse of a civilization. Wright argues that no country that removes its tree-cover has ever survived long as a civilization. Likewise neglect of the poor.
- More decay came from the arrogation of casual violence by the rulers

By 1000BC, however, civilizations ringed the world with India, China, Mexico, Peru, the Maya and parts of Europe.

Most surprising, perhaps, is the conclusion about the worldwide economic effect of the colonization of the Americas from the 1500s. The pre-colonial Americas, South, Middle and North, sustained over 20 million people through viable hunting, gathering, agriculture and horticulture. Had it not been for the resulting great wealth, appropriated by the European colonisers, their wealth would not have progressed so far or so quickly.

Actually it was European diseases that were the first weapon of genocide of the Americas: disease killed off the vast majority of the several populations. The pathetic weakness of ravaged lands made for easy pickings for invaders. Old-world shipping moved wealth of foodstuffs, rich goods, mineral wealth and gold and treasure to the Old World, making accumulation and trade possible among the rich and the ruling families of Europe.,

Thus, with progress defined in Western capital accumulative terms, came the end of the great Inca and Maya civilizations and similarly that of the North American native nations. It was an unstoppable force, justified and encouraged by the victorious gods of the West.

How then did progress bring us to ruin? The answer, oddly, seems to be optimism - usually seen as the key to progress. It is a huge irony: the very optimism which generates progress is its own trap. So this was **the Civilization Trap**: Wright argues that we are doomed by hope! Hope, he says, drives us to believe empty promises, whether in the public or political domain or in private life - to accept slim hope over prudence and reasoned probability.

It is **hope, or greed**, states Wright, **that is the engine of capitalism** - thus

referring to the two-edged weapon of progress. Capitalists hate socialists, _ because the true socialist insists on a full, value-embedded account of how the vision will be made to serve justice and sufficiency for all. It's the intrusion of human values that enrages the capitalist.

Perhaps, in the light of election fever and the much-lamented divisions of our society, we should expand on this a little.

To **socialism**, the heart of progress is a deeply felt empathy for the struggling of the world - and for the world in its struggle, its scarcity. **Capitalists**, however, are not responding to scarcity and thus have a different sense of justice. The justice of the capitalist is a fundamentalist sense of entitlement, a simple belief in the sovereign right of the individual to exploit opportunity. At the core of it is an ideology of Exceptionality - whether of the individual or the nation. To them, the most profound philosophical truth is that you can't have welfare without a strong economy. This will always justify putting profit first. The people as such are not legitimate participants. They must be satisfied with as little as possible. Nothing should limit the priority of the capitalist deity, profit. The justice of the **socialist collective**, by contrast, is the people's equal right to a sufficiency.

To **the greedy** of the world, their individual desire is a sacred right. This is the core of the Protestant ethic. The individual is the sacred entity, gifted with plenty by God.

Socialism denies that the individual is the true political entity: the true political entity is the body of the people. The people's voice.

It is the **voice of capitalism** which has led to destruction of civilization in the name of free enterprise. Raw capitalism is a contradiction of life's own ecology.

Conclusion

We can reach a conclusion on this initial question of the world resource bust. Wright's warning salvo is to say that there is now, in this time of no room for mistakes, "only one big civilization" (p125) Many experts agree with this - we face a closing door of opportunity.

We now need, says Wright, "sufficient communal wealth and political cohesion to steer us toward caution, conservation and social justice. If we don't now attain a real interdependence, future world interdependence will disintegrate."

Who is in any doubt about this? A recent hushed up Pentagon Report predicts

worldwide famine, anarchy and warfare within a generation as an effect of continued injustice and violence. Hushed up, just as the right-wing parties here want to shut up Jeanette Fitzsimons on the realities of future transportation.

The incisive logic of Wright's analysis is that it is the forces of progress as myth and ideology which have led historically to non-viable human civilizations. And only a communally-minded world can do what's required to solve the causes of violence, defined as injustice, poverty and inequality. The most stark indicator of incipient violence is unsustainable consumption. Wright notes that humans are consuming 125% of nature's yearly output.

In ideological terms, the home-base of violence is market extremism. Its new form is the morphing of market ideology with traditional religion. As Wright puts it, in the USA, "the market has crossbred with evangelical messianism to fight intelligent policy on metaphysical grounds.

He goes on to conclude:

"The most compelling reason for reforming our system is that the system is in no-one's interest." (p131)

"If we don't share resources, clean up pollution, dispense basic health and birth control and set Iii-nits in line with natural ones ... this planet will not grow very old before we enter an age of chaos and collapse that will dwarf all the dark ages in our past." (p 132).

After a minute or two for questions, we will turn to rampant consumption.

THE CURRENT GREED-CONSUMPTION PATHOLOGY

Our question has to be, Are we living sustainably? One way to look at this is to ask, Is it our consumption pathology that is destroying the earth? Or, are we fit to try to restore the world?

The best-seller on this theme is Clive Hamilton, an Australian, and Director of the Australia Institute, in his book *Affluenza*, written with Richard Dennis. This institute is Australia's foremost public interest think tank. I will briefly outline their problem statement, and the succeeding themes and solutions to their illness. I think this report has much to say to New Zealand, even though it actually addresses Australia, and to a degree the USA and Britain.

I could have settled for a report based on our New Zealand Study of Values. Let me say in advance that there is a major development of 'the World Values Survey, of which our New Zealand reports are partners, which provides an unprecedented demonstration of how modernization and cultural change play out across more than 60 countries. I believe Sea of Faith could undertake to study the implications of this work for a relevant religion for the future.

The relevance of this consumption theme is that it exposes the pathology which threatens modern civilization. It is the disease of rampant progress. It warns us that our relationship with nature and wealth is sick and suicidal.

Their title, *Affluenza*, says it all. They see Australians' greed and consumption as a disease, a pathological addiction. Affluence has undermined judgement and denied responsibility for either community or ecology. The book starts with the shock description: It is *A society going nowhere*, where *affluenza* is defined as "an unsustainable addiction to economic growth" - also as a bloated, unfulfilled feeling and an epidemic of stress, overwork and waste. You can see why I thought it could be New Zealand it's talking about!

Australians' perception of themselves as "experiencing hard times" is perpetual, detached from reality - the delusion of the "Aussie Battler". This rumbling complaint of hardship belies the prediction of 1960s-1970s economists that abundance would result in "post-materialist humans - people living on a higher plane".

The actuality is unhealthy preoccupation with possessions and the concerns of acquisition and security. The need for more, and the feeling of comparing unfavourably with neighbours makes happiness impossible. This "collective psychological disorder" is a perverse anorexia - to have grown fat as a nation but to believe we are thin and must eat more.

As cultural pathology it is a deep confusion about "what it takes to live a worthwhile life." Neoliberal economics (supported by the advertising industry) preaches increased consumption as the way to the good life. But the result has been a "luxury fever"; a

consumer market for wasteful purchase. Luxury purchasing has grown faster than the growth of the economy.

Consumption as display has become a reflection of emotional deficit. Symbols of status reflect a pathological need to be loved and admired. Identity is purchasable - and necessary for reasons of 'self-completion'. People are urged to acquire things to fill the perceived gap between actual self and ideal self. Through advertising, our society bends its most creative energies to arousing new needs and new ways to satiate them. And to thus recruit 3-year-olds. A systemic construction of unsustainable values has become normative.

Let's look at some of the symptoms:

1. **Consumption neurosis** Economic growth is seen as the cure to all their ills. It is eaten up with the need for more.
2. **Display as therapy**: there is an aching imbalance, a disequilibrium without constant new evidences of luxury.
3. **Compensatory self-indulgence**: there is a gap between ideal and actuality which drives unceasing buying.
4. **Hysterical anxiety at not being 'better and bigger'**: Luxury spending and consumption are at all all-time high. E.g. from 1985 to 2000, floor area of new houses has increased by 31 %. Australians "spent over \$1.5 billion on pet food and pet-care products". The outstanding cost of rearing children has led to them being regarded as a burden for which parents deserve compensation.
5. **Ego-boosting necessities**: perceived psychological deficits demand admiration-attracting symbols to boost ego; (research shows that ``people who buy large 4WDs... tend to be `insecure and vain').
6. **Income-based Self-Esteem Deficit**: There is rampant dissatisfaction with incomes among both Australians and Britons.

(Note 1: Crucially, it is established that "once income levels reach a particular threshold further increases (do not increase national happiness').

*Note 2: I note that in our **New Zealand Study of Values**, annual income is unrelated to happiness, while over half think less emphasis on money in our society would be a good thing. A further 36% are easy about it. So only 6% are dead against de-emphasising money. This goes with the result in the recent Herald Morality survey, where greed was one of the worst sins.*

There are consumption-based world-views. Affluenza constructs your worldview.

Examples:

1. As spending is the major pursuit of life, **debt is seen as what we do while spending**. We `save' by spending. Spending on discounted items is the first step toward saving. Indebtedness is our normal state. So it's a world of spending.
2. **Ownership of our own home-space is also normal. Thus possession** and spending are

natural. In line with this, major recent debt increases have been: borrowing for housing (up ten times what it was 15 years ago); personal bankruptcies (in 2003-04, 21000 filed); expenditure on imported consumer goods (rose 60% between 2000 and 2004). Normality as borrowing; credit card debts growing 20% annually). **3. Borrowing to pay off debt.** Out of the \$27.8 billion outstanding on credit cards in August 2004, three quarters was interest payments.

The final question of these researchers is "What can we do?"
What is the Politics of Affluenza?

The politics of affluenza revolves around four unnecessary stresses:

1. the belief that you're a battler;
2. the mortgage stress;
3. self-centred preoccupation with a market ideology and with houseprices, debt and tax-cuts.
4. the ulcer of entitlement. With the entitlement ideology there is the belief that you deserve a break.

But against this, 80% of Australians agree they buy and consume far more than they need. But most seem unable to introduce more balance into their lives. On the whole, those most wedded to materialism were less satisfied with their life as a whole.

But there's a real questioning of the equation of money and happiness. These are the downshifters: - those who have made a conscious decision to accept a lower income and a lower level of consumption in order to pursue other goals. They are more likely to be in their 40s and some in their 50s. Being either white-collar or blue-collar class is not found to affect downshifting. Major changes, taking considerable time, accompany these shifts. Quality of work-life is a major influence, as also the desire for greater quality of family life.

The problem of how to get more happiness is addressed in different ways: Some, the gratifiers, try to ensure gratification by spending and borrowing *now*, in the expectation of restoring later; others are the deferrers, who choose to defer gratification, working at big savings now, so as to enjoy life more later. Gratifiers and deferrers have the same value: they want maximum enjoyment of optimum wealth - either now or later. There is a perceived link between income and life-satisfaction.

The 'true' **downshifters** are different from the gratifiers and the deferrers: they have chosen to break the imagined link between money and happiness. Happiness is not dependent on possession of wealth or expenditure of money.

On the positive side, it is important that growing numbers of our Australian cousins are refusing to become part of earth's disaster or to allow their wellbeing to be depressed by consumer values that are laroely taken for granted.

A New Politics is clearly called for. A spiral Of unsustainable indebtedness, overwork

and over-consumption is producing pressures of psychological disorders, alienation and distress. The medication demanded to alleviate these illnesses creates a pharmaceutical industry which simultaneously alleviates the effects of affluenza and adds to GNP. A profit gained by the sheer fact of majority national illness.

The new political philosophy needed must involve **changing values**, understood as having purposes in life; **political downshifting**, or choice of different symbols of success; **conscious consumption**, or awareness of why we buy and consume; finding a **'positive poverty antidote'** to imagined deprivation; and a **politics of wellbeing**, where wellbeing is defined as policies which improve national wellbeing policies which

1. **Measure what matters**, by developing a set of national wellbeing accounts
2. **Providing fulfilling work**, ie work which challenges, develops capacities, meets potential and meets social needs
3. **Reclaiming our time**, by ensuring that our working lives contribute to our wellbeing, especially by measuring productivity gains in the form of a shorter working week
4. **Re-thinking education**, by providing rich lives rather than rat-race training for our children and by making universities places where students flourish as human beings and academics feel free to question powerful institutions without fear of victimisation
5. **Investing in early childhood**, by individual attention, especially by their parents
6. **Discouraging materialism and promoting responsible advertising**
7. **Protecting the environment**, by tackling climate change, loss of biodiversity, pollution and waste. Measures such as taxes on environmentally damaging activities rather than on socially beneficial activities.
8. **Build communities and relationships**, by sustainable communities, supporting those such as single parents who need more supportive community, and by both rewarding reduced consumption and recycling materials and taxing waste-generating activities

The conclusion is that rather than asking how we can become richer we need to ask how to create a flourishing society, built on mutual respect, self-restraint and generosity of spirit

The reference for this talk is: Clive Hamilton and Richard Denniss, *Affluenza: when too much is never enough*. Allen and Unwin, 2005.

The concluding item, "A political manifesto for wellbeing", is adapted by the authors from The New Economics Foundation, London.

THE LEVELS OF EVOLUTIONARY DEVELOPMENT OF CIVILIZATION:

The Spiral Dynamics Model

1. SURVIVAL SENSE (Archaic reaction)	INSTINCTUAL NEEDS
2. KINSPIRITS (Animism)	FAMILY RITUALS, SPIRITS
3. POWERGODS (Egocentric conquest)	ACTION, CONQUEST
4. TRUTHFORCE (Cultic Authority)	AUTHORITY, MEANING, RULES
5. STRIVEDRIVE (Achievement rituals)	STRATEGIC SUCCESS
6. HUMANBOND (Bonding rituals)	EGALITARIAN COMMUNITY
7. FLEXFLOW (Deep ecology)	WISDOM RITUALS
8. GLOBALVIEW (Emergent world)	AND UNIFICATION, OMNISPIRITUALITY, THEOLOGY WITH PHYSICS

Adapted from Alan Webster, *Spiral of Values*, Distributor, David Bateman, Auckland, 2001. Original Spiral Dynamics model found in Beck, D. and C. Cowan, *Spiral Dynamics*, London, Blackwell, 1998.