

Countdown To Armageddon?

As you are possibly aware from other sources, there are now (1981) 4.5 billion people in the world. If present trends continue there will be 6 billion by the year 2000; 10 billion by the year 2020, less than 40 years from now, and 30 billion by the year 2100.

As awesome as these figures are, what is undoubtedly more awesome is that the percentage of people living in absolute poverty and dire need is expected to increase faster than the rate of population growth. By the year 2000 25% of the world's families will be living in utter poverty. Sobering statistics such as these don't, however, end here. Each year desert like conditions around the world claim an area considerably larger than Australia's island state, Tasmania. This is the result, amongst other things, of erosion, poor farming methods, drought, and excessive tree cutting. As much as 40% of the forests of the poorer nations will be gone by the year 2000.

Did you know that the years 1981-1990 have been declared by the United Nations, International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade? And no wonder. The World Health Organisation has estimated that more than 25,000 persons a day die from lack of clean drinking water and that 80% of all sickness and disease can be attributed at least in part to inadequate water and sanitation facilities. Incredible, isn't it? But there it is.

Still, these are not the only areas where our problems lie or where they end. In 1979 the world, collectively, spent 450 billion dollars on armaments. What, we wonder, will it be this year when the arms race has hotted up again? And think of what could be done with the money to finance development in the under developed world.

Earlier this year the American Secretary of State spoke of twenty "theatres of war" around the world at that time. Afghanistan and El Salvador and the Middle East are of course the better known of these. But there are all these others as well. And, speaking of the Middle East, it's scarcely two months ago when there was world wide alarm at Israel's bombing of Iraq's nuclear power plant. Everyone was, naturally enough, nervous that it might light the fuse in an already explosive situation, which in turn, would engulf the major nations. That these are, to say the least, challenging times, is universally acknowledged. Some, however, are going further than this. They speak as if the problems confronting the world are now out of hand and beyond man's

capacity to deal with them. They see all these things as being but 'signs of the times'. I mentioned at the end of my talk a week ago my astonishment that the 1980s are being spoken of in terms of a 'countdown to Armageddon'. Is this really so? Or is there another way of looking at things?

While in no way minimising the problems and difficulties we face today, it helps to put them into context, I suggest, to remember that possibly every age and generation has known a sense of despair, even hopelessness, about the problems facing it. We don't wave away our problems or pretend they don't exist. They do. And they have to be faced up to and dealt with to the very best of our ability. But we are in our day not alone. And the gloom and pessimism with which people are talking about them has been known before. We can't imagine that they had any problems of great significance 130 years ago. Clearly, it's not how it seemed at the time. In 1851 the dying Duke of Wellington said, "I thank God I shall be spared from seeing the consummation of ruin that is gathering around us". Incredibly, and years earlier, William Wilberforce had said, "I dare not marry, the future is so uncertain". As bleak as the future can seem to us to be at times, yet our sense of predicament is not new. Others have felt the same way about things in their day.

Another point which is usefully made here is this.

Whilst there are, indeed, many negative and discouraging factors in the world situation today, there is also much that is positive and encouraging. It's as well we keep a perspective. By no means is it all bad. And I would like to stop over some examples of what I mean here.

Happily we enjoy religious freedom; the right to vote and the right to a reasonable education. Happily, also, our government is accountable to the people. These are things we take in our stride, as it were. We take them for granted. All things considered though they are very recent developments. It's only in the last 200 years, for instance, that religious freedom has come to be guaranteed in the Constitutions of nations. Before that any deviation from the official line was punishable with persecution or death.

Unbelievable, isn't it? And yet that was so. How much better off we are today than then. Think how far the world has come since then. It's the same with those other things mentioned, such as our right to vote and our right to education. And these are not the only signs of progress or things which give us hope. Thankfully, the world no longer sits back and meekly accepts racism. The equality of peoples of all races and creeds and cultures is rightly being insisted upon. Here again, there is a growing awareness of our membership of the international community, of our international brotherhood and of our international responsibilities, which transcends the old, narrow, nationalistic barriers of the past.

It is an interpretation to speak of the present dilemma in which the world finds itself in terms of a 'countdown to Armageddon', or to talk of our problems as if they indicated that we are coming to the end. And, like all interpretations it is open to question and dispute.

Some of us, our thinking deeply influenced by the teaching given in the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg, indeed based on that teaching; see it in an altogether different light.

We are, according to Swedenborg, already in the early stages of a New Age. This is not to say that it isn't a time of chaos and upheaval. It is. But it is a chaos and upheaval caused, as much as anything else, by the questioning of the old and inadequate structures inherited from the past and the search for something better to take their place. It's worth noting for a moment something of what he wrote on this point: "Before anything is reduced into a state of order, it is most usual that things should be reduced into a confused mass or chaos, as it were, so that those which do not well cohere together may be separated, and, when they are separated, then the Lord disposes them into order. This process may be compared with what takes place in nature, where all things in general and singly are first reduced to a confused mass, before being disposed into order. Thus, for instance, unless there were storms in the atmosphere, to dissipate whatever is heterogeneous, the air would never become serene, but would become deadly by poisonous accumulations."

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We don't like storms. But how lovely it is to be out of doors when they are over. Even in the city, the streets have been washed and the air is so clean again.

Nothing in the universe happens suddenly or overnight, least of all the transition to a New Age. It's a drawn out process. People don't suddenly abandon the structures, the concepts, the traditions and beliefs which have previously held life together in favour of new and different ones. The old are shed gradually and the new taken on, likewise, gradually. And while this is happening there is bound to be confusion; the competition of alternative life-styles, the demands for rights and freedoms and, sometimes, the abuse of these after they are won. At the turn of the century it wasn't at all easy for society to let go its traditional assumptions about the nature of women and the place of women in the face of the suffragette movement.

But it happened, and more enlightened thinking has prevailed. We can, and if we so make up our minds, we will emerge from the present turmoil. A bright and inviting future lies ahead if we are prepared to make it so. But what, it might well be asked, of Scripture passages such as in Matthew, Chapter 24, the bit about war and rumours of war? And the promised return of Christ? His Second Coming? With regard to Matthew 24, let's be clear on this point, first of all. According to the Authorised Version, and in verse 3, the disciples came to Jesus and said, "Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of Thy coming, and of the end of the world?" In fact, they didn't say "end of the world". **Rather, and as is more accurately translated, they spoke about "the end" or "the consummation" of the age. The Lord was talking about the end of one age and the beginning of another.** When He spoke of wars and rumours of war He was foreshadowing the disputes and clashes, falsity against truth and good against evil, this life-style against that life-style, and the inevitable tensions at that level which would all be part of the process.

And, so far as the Second Coming is concerned, it is not a question of waiting for Him to return. He is already here, on hand now, at work with us, helping us to wrestle with the problems which confront us and the dilemma in which we are in; and bringing His Love and Wisdom to bear on the human situation to the extent that we will let Him.

For the statistics given in the early part of the talk, see
NATIONS TALK OF PEACE - "The Messenger", June, 1981.
CHILDREN OF APOCALYPSE - "The Messenger", December, 1980.

Transcript of The Swedenborg Programme – Number 8.

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