

# The “God” Choice

An essay by Graham Nicholson

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It has almost become a cliché to say of this early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that we, as a human race, are living in troubled times. These troubles can be conveniently categorized in a twofold manner, those that are of an external nature and those that are internal to each person. The external aspect describes the many pressing problems now facing humanity as a single race trying to find an appropriate modus operandi so that the many members of that race can live together and cohabit on the surface of this one small and rather fragile planet. The internal aspect describes the perspectival, psychological and spiritual concerns arising within the minds and the hearts of many human beings as they try to cope with the stresses caused by these external factors and the pace of change generally.

These many external problems facing the future of the human race as a global society are clearly of a great magnitude. But at a time when most of the indicators of change in society are pointing to increasing levels of global interdependence, it seems incredible that the prospects of achieving some measure of genuine global peace and security sufficient to facilitate the resolution of these external problems seem to have receded dramatically. It

was not so long ago that the fall of the Berlin Wall, the retreat of ruling communist ideologies in the Soviet bloc and elsewhere, the cooling of the bi-polar USA/USSR confrontation and its associated waning in the nuclear arms race, were generally taken as incredible world events portentous of a much improved human future. They seemed to suggest, on a superficial level at least, that a new and more peaceful global era was unfolding. Many people thought that a much more promising era of multilateralism, peace and prosperity was emerging through the United Nations Organisation and other world institutions, supported by the great powers.

But this view was rather quickly displaced by the second invasion of Iraq by a Western coalition, by the serious “Twin Towers” incident in New York, by the persistence of troubles in the eastern Mediterranean and Middle East, by the spread of terrorist tactics to many parts of the world and by the perception of a growing division between “East” and “West”. Once again the world has descended into a period of disquiet, uncertainty and considerable confusion about the future. Multilateralism seems to be in retreat. The specter of a global divide between the “Christian” West and the “Islamic” East has begun to take shape. The confrontation of the Cold War between Western liberal democracy and Eastern communist autocracy has been replaced by a new division, to a large extent concentrated along

more religious lines. The solutions generally preferred by the participating protagonists have not, however, changed greatly. They have continued to be seen primarily in violent, military terms. At this point in time, it seems difficult to see an end in sight to the divisions that plague this planet in a manner that would be acceptable to all the protagonists.

When added to the many other pressing global issues, from that of threats to the global environment, mass poverty and economic disparities, world health concerns, drug abuse, family breakdowns, corruption, human rights abuses, certain negative aspects of globalization, to the spread of weapons of mass destruction and renewed arms races, etc., there is much for the ordinary person to be concerned about when looking to the future. The great thinker Ervin Laszlo, states that the prospects of a global breakdown are already on the radar screen, and that a new kind of global thinking is required to give birth to a new civilization if such a breakdown is to be avoided<sup>1</sup>. He is not alone in this view.

The view that the divisions now facing humanity increasingly have a religious basis and orientation needs some qualification. In the West at least, there has been an ongoing drift away from organized religion since the

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<sup>1</sup> Laszlo, The Chaos Point: The World at the Crossroads, (Piatkus, 2006), Chapter 1.

19<sup>th</sup> century. The roots of this drift are various, but in large part have been due to the scientific revolution. There are now large numbers of people that would accept a designation of being an agnostic or atheist, or simply as not having an allegiance to any specific religion. In some cases such perspectives have tended to be manifested in a way that constitutes a new form of prejudice, not that unlike that exhibited by many religionists.

There are now signs that this drift away from organized religion may be accelerating under the influence of this new religious division between East and West, already mentioned. It is not surprising that the tendency towards violent excesses now being exhibited by many persons in the name of religion appear to be having a deleterious effect on the standing and fortunes of organized religion. New attacks on the worth of religion in human affairs are appearing daily. There appears to be a developing view, in the West at least, that religion is part of the current world problems, and not part of the solution to them. If this is so, then the very assertion and belief that there is a “God” from which religion is derived must also be part of the problem.

The debate about the existence of “God” may be moving from the sidelines and entering centre stage in normal conversation. The response from many religionists may therefore be taking a more defensive and intolerant posture. Prejudice appears to be on the rise from many quarters.

This suggests a very dangerous situation for the future. Just at a time when the world needs to draw closer together to face the many global challenges before humanity and to co-operate in their resolution, the component parts of humanity may in fact be pulling further apart. It suggests very much that a new and much more united global perspective is required to heal the divide. But where is this to come from? It is most unlikely that it will come from the non-religious elements of society. Marxism and its associated philosophies have failed to provide a solution acceptable to many. The materialistic philosophy behind unrestrained global capitalism is under attack and seems incapable by itself of providing the kind of united and fair global society sufficient to provide the required solutions. There is no other single, man-made philosophy on the horizon that is capable of attracting the wide degree of support required.

And in any event most commentators agree that religion is simply not going to disappear from the human landscape. Some would say that there is a spiritual element to human nature that cannot effectively be sidelined or ignored. So for those who cannot see any benefit in religion, do they simply descend into hopelessness and despair, and otherwise adopt a hedonistic approach to life in the meantime? Many are already doing just this. But it is an attitude that simply magnifies the many problems facing humanity.

May it be that too many people have too quickly dispensed with a possible religious solution that is genuinely free of destructive prejudices. Let it simply be assumed for present purpose that there does exist some kind of beneficial Deity. Would such a Deity support the divisions and prejudices, religious or otherwise, that are now plaguing the human race? Surely such a beneficial Deity would be above such attitudes. If one goes back to the original writings of the major religions, there are plenty of references to love, peace and goodwill between all human beings and the need for a moral approach to life. Could it be that teachings of this nature represent the real intentions of such a Deity, and that the many divisions and prejudices are in fact caused by human beings as part of their freewill choices? Could it be that these original religious writings have been frequently misinterpreted by later followers in a manner that does not really accord with the intentions of that Deity as originally disclosed at all? Could it be that humanity is being pointed in the direction of a united and harmonious future on this one small planet, but that the human resistance to the achievement of such unity on a fair and equitable basis for all peoples is the real cause of the problems we are now all facing? Could not the denial of the possibility of the existence of a such a beneficial “God” be capable of being a part of the problem?

The point is that in the haste to discredit past approaches and attitudes in dealing with contemporary problems, one has to be careful not to throw the “*baby out with the bath water*”. Most of us feel disgust with the violent expressions of prejudice in the world, particularly those that are claimed to be based on some religious belief. Many also find to be unacceptable the many expressions of religious faith that are of an intolerant and divisive nature. The challenge is to look beyond the prejudices that we have all observed and which, in varying degrees, have affected our own attitudes, and to openly search for a new, more holistic approach that does not necessarily reject the spiritual element of human nature. Almost certainly this will, if the search is conducted with sincerity and a genuine concern for all humanity, lead us to the conclusion that there is an urgent need for a truly global perspective that transcends all the limitations and divisions of the past. It may well open to our eyes the possibilities that exist should there in fact be a Deity who or which proclaims the need for global unity, peace and justice in human affairs. I may well be that there is a worthwhile future for religion in so far as it is firmly directed at the achievement of global unity, peace and justice and the abandonment of past divisions and prejudices.

The search has, for most people, yet to begin.

