

# Will Religions Guide Us on Our Dangerous Journey?

*Martin S. Kaplan*

We have been living in an era of selfishness dominated by short-term thinking—two- and four-year electoral cycles, quarterly and annual financial results, and values that reflect material consumption and immediate gratification. With little regard for the future, current generations are using up more than our share of the Earth’s resources, as prosperous people throughout the world express their values by purchasing as many things as possible, whether needed or not.

The long term—a future beyond our own lives and those of our family—is almost beyond our comprehension. Analysts of population growth generally conclude their estimates around the year 2100, as if we either cannot project further or have no responsibility beyond then. But 2100 is within the lives of many of our children and grandchildren. What will their lives be like at the end of this century? And what will their expectations be in 2100 for their own children and grandchildren?

Public discourse at the beginning of the twentieth century was marked by an unshakable belief in progress toward the rational solution of all problems—now simply a disconcerting and charming

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notion. No one at that time could have had even a glimmer of awareness of what the world would be like now, a hundred years later.

And here we are, at the start of the new millennium, still thinking about the future as if that means ten or twenty years forward. But as we are aware of the remarkable history of humanity, are we capable of looking further down the road? Can we ensure that human life will survive another millennium? Can we contemplate the state of the world five hundred years in the future? Two hundred years? Are we not morally required to do so?

We live in a world we did not create and must not destroy. Environmental issues respect no borders. Human life on our planet is interdependent with other living organisms. Global warming can destroy the world as we know it, accelerating the ongoing crash of biodiversity that can lead to a crash of all life. Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen of Denmark, speaking at the 2008 United Nations General Assembly, called this the “grinding catastrophe of global warming.” John Holdren, the science adviser to the president, has made the frightful statement that “the human response to climate change will be threefold: mitigation, adaptation, and suffering, and we will have a great deal of all three.”

Scientists, policymakers, and economists all agree that the dangers can be abated. But the missing ingredient has been the willpower of governments and leaders to recognize the gravity of the risks, to understand the applicable science, and to address the problems—all of which are necessary to implement possible solutions.

However, world leaders are finally waking up to the dangers of climate change and to the ongoing destruction of the intricately balanced biosphere that we share with other species. With a deep awareness of the requirements of human life and indeed all life on Earth, thoughtful institutions have begun to address issues that relate to climate and the environment. The hope that humanity can, and indeed will, sustain life on this planet rests with those individuals and institutions that will marshal the intellect and resources to study and address the central environmental challenges that will determine the human future.

Throughout history, people have turned to their ancient religious faiths for guidance and support when confronted with crises. But the

responses of organized religions to great cultural and social movements and shifts have not always been positive. Witness the Christian churches' divided approach to the civil rights movement in America in the 1950s and 1960s, and the tensions within all religions as societies try to respond to demands for women's rights and gay rights, movements that face stone walls of resistance from many religious leaders and people of faith. People hear confusing, contradictory, or hostile responses from their religious leaders to the challenges of change.

The response to global warming surely will bring immense change to life as we know it. How will religious faith communities react? All faiths should share a desire to preserve the lives of all living organisms, humans included, and the Earth as a biosphere. As the crisis grows, will people find sources of moral guidance in their religious institutions?

Aside from those who believe that the ultimate catastrophe of climate change may be the promised apocalypse, will any religious traditions find reason to argue *against* saving human life, all species, and the biosphere? Will religious institutions be concerned only when it affects their own faithful? Will people look to religion solely for their own individual salvation, support, or comfort? This is the individualistic or selfish aspect of connection to a religion: the human habit of using religion only for themselves. Will people seek guidance and support only for their own communities, whether defined by faith, ethnicity, or geography? Or for all peoples? And all species? Will this vary according to the worldview of each religion?

To put it starkly, if and when 120 million people are endangered, even more than at present, by the rising waters in Bangladesh, and refugees seek welcome elsewhere, will religious leaders worldwide rise to the challenge and provide moral leadership for supportive action? Will the ministering classes of all faiths respond with a recognition of the importance of their role, just as scientists have done in warning us all of the impending and, indeed, present threats? Will religious leaders respond to such disasters better than they have in Bosnia? Rwanda? Darfur? New Orleans? Or will they disregard the plight of others as not their concern, or as not caused by human activity? Will the reaction by religious leaders in America to rising waters in Bangladesh be different from their reaction to rising waters in Florida?

These are the challenges facing the human species. We hope that our religious faiths will provide the needed leadership so that societies and nations will respond with willpower and vision to reduce the suffering that Holdren warned of, empower efforts to mitigate the effects of climate change, and help people to adapt to potentially disastrous change.

Religions are the most ancient formulators of culture and values in the world. They are the primary source of ethics for humans around the planet. In spite of worries (or hopes) that religions would someday disappear with increased secularization, their power and influence in all societies throughout the world has in fact grown over the last half century. Faith communities have immense potential to provide the value structures to change consciousness and behavior as we face existential threats to the very survival of the biosphere and human life.

Just as no one in 1500 could foresee the shape of human destiny five hundred years hence, we at least now know that five hundred years is a measurable time frame in the human existence. If life is to continue as we know it until the year 2500, the necessary changes will be monumental. Will religions guide us on our dangerous journey?