

Introduction

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The close of the twentieth century is an appropriate time for reflection. Like the forces of nature, human history may appear to be governed by grand patterns over which we have no control. Processes of change apparently march inexorably on. Sometimes they are celebrated as progressive improvements: medical researchers boast of the rapid decrease during this century of deaths from infectious diseases, while technologists point to increasing automation and revolutionary communications networks. Other transformations are denigrated as disastrous deteriorations: environmentalists utter doom-laden warnings about pollution and global warming, while society's moral guardians complain, like every parental generation before them, about the decline in standards of public morality and private behaviour.

During the last few years, we have witnessed some particularly dramatic instances of changes that were both unexpected and far-reaching. Within an unbelievably short period of time, the pattern of international relationships was entirely transformed as the Communist bloc disintegrated. Even more recently, the ending of apartheid in South Africa brought renewed hope for a more peaceful and egalitarian future throughout the world. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu points out in this volume, the initiatives of individual participants contributed vitally to effecting such fundamental changes.

Other changes, more gradual but less susceptible to individual influence, have also resulted in the distinctive nature of this final decade of the twentieth century. In 1980, no one suspected that a virus was about to sweep across the world, not only causing widespread illness, misery and death, but also deeply affecting the economic welfare of developing countries, the direction of medical research and cultural attitudes towards sexuality. On a more positive note, the AIDS

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epidemic coincided with an increased awareness of the rights of minorities and of women. As we approach the end of the millennium, the social dominance of males is being increasingly challenged; the efforts of thousands of activists have indelibly altered social structures and norms. But, perhaps appropriately for those who favour apocalyptic predictions, the millennial celebrations will also be overshadowed by forecasts of ecological catastrophe. Some of the scientific and technological achievements that seek to improve the human condition seem also to be wreaking less desirable changes.

Darwin College invited eight experts to discuss how their various fields relate to the general theme of 'The changing world'. Each of these eminent writers is intimately involved in particular affairs of the moment, seeking to alleviate a variety of conditions, and to ensure that future changes will be genuine improvements. Yet, while these essays are embedded in specific events, they address longer-term concerns. They inherently demonstrate both the need for change and the possibility of achieving it. The very fact that four of these specialists are women at the head of their professions illustrates the speed at which our own society is changing.

These writers neither aim for nor reach consensus. Expressing a communal sentiment of urgency and commitment, their styles range from impassioned oratory to detached objectivity, as they select their personal way of communicating heartfelt involvement to a wider audience. They relate differing depressing tales of political repression, scientific bafflement, violence, self-interest and discrimination. They cover an enormous range of political, scientific, religious, economic, philosophical and legal topics, analysing the issues involved and recommending solutions.

Yet, at the same time, despite this surface disparity, some common utopian themes emerge – the goal of reducing social inequalities both within and between nations, the search for more effective ways of coping with disease, the necessity of ensuring that local interests are not swamped by larger concerns, the aim of establishing more harmonious relationships with other people as well as with our natural environment. Amidst their diversity, these speakers voice a shared message of optimism, a firm belief that oppressive regimes can be

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ended, that research will bring solutions and that opponents will heed lessons of collaboration for their mutual benefit.

The titles reflect the topicality of this collection. One of the most exciting aspects of *Archbishop Tutu's* moving account of South Africa is that fundamental changes were taking place almost literally as he was writing. Composed after the ending of apartheid and the release of Nelson Mandela, but before the first elections of April 1994, this emotive statement provides a unique personal testament. We should value it not only because it reflects the rapid processes of transformation in South Africa, but also because it will contribute to altering English perceptions of those political events. This is partly because Archbishop Tutu chose to discuss Western involvement, particularly through the imposition of sanctions. More unexpectedly, by persuading outsiders to acknowledge the role of F. W. de Klerk in implementing such dramatic changes, he obliges us to reappraise our own hostile attitudes towards the former South African political regime.

Archbishop Tutu emphasises how the difficulties besetting South Africa are common to many other societies. Racial, religious and sexual oppression have, of course, always been prevalent. Many contemporary examples spring only too readily to mind: the emergence of neo-Nazi sects, the paucity of women at high levels in all the professions or the low pay of part-time immigrant workers. During the past twenty years, due substantially to the energetic activities of campaigners on behalf of numerous groups misleadingly parcelled together as 'minorities' – that strange label which embraces women, over half the population – we have become far more sensitive to the inequalities endemic within Western cultures. Yet, for a long period, apartheid represented the most extreme example of human injustice, and many activists devoted more effort to protesting about South Africa's racist policies than to combating those practised within their own countries. For many people, the ending of apartheid powerfully symbolised the possibility of establishing a better world.

Although she tackles these issues from a very different perspective, *Helena Kennedy* also stresses that problems raised by people's diversity are global ones that transcend national boundaries. Pointing to numerous examples of oppression and discrimination throughout the

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world, Kennedy bravely tackles the problem of establishing universal protection of individual rights in the face of authoritarian regimes. Even those governments who agree in principle do not necessarily ensure that their ideals are matched by their practices. Enforcing human rights at an international level is hard to achieve: Archbishop Tutu urges the efficacy of economic sanctions, but they are not always sufficiently powerful agents of persuasion.

Kennedy is particularly critical of Britain's record, tracing the country's lack of legally protected individual rights back to the Restoration Bill of Rights, 1688, bitterly denounced a century later by Thomas Paine as the country's 'Bill of Wrongs'. Depicting a nation obsessed with secrecy, controlled by an anachronistic governmental system, and the worst transgressor of European legislation on rights, she suggests that British reformers could benefit by regarding the constitution of the USA as a source of inspiration.

Perturbed by critiques based on cultural relativism, Kennedy cogently argues that the tolerant acceptance of other societies' beliefs runs the risk of permitting inhumane practices that most people feel should be eradicated. She favours a new concept of rights currently developing in the international legal community, one grounded in the daily realities of people's experience, which recognises inequality but condemns discrimination on the basis of personal characteristics such as ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation.

Similarly, in his absorbing paper on fundamentalism, *Fred Halliday's* insistence on the variety of movements labelled as 'fundamentalist' highlights the universal relevance of his analysis. Although for many of us the term refers primarily to Islamic forces, it originated with the 1920s American evangelical reaction against Darwinian evolution, and nowadays all the world's major religions include fundamentalist sects. We need to recognise how widespread fundamentalist activity is, yet at the same time, be sensitive to the local demands of particular situations.

Modern fundamentalism is intimately involved with political affairs. When reporting a newsworthy event, journalists are tempted to fall back on simplified stereotypes, and give space to alarmist warnings of fundamentalist activity. Whereas the Western Christian countries are quick to condemn aggressive Islamic policies, the oppression of the

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Bosnian Muslims practised by both the Serbs and the Croats exemplifies the widespread nature and complexity of the phenomenon. By discussing the concept of fundamentalism itself, Halliday is able to unpick some of the characteristics which these movements share, but without losing sight of their individuality. As he points out, our ignorance has contributed to our confused reactions, compounding our inability to determine an appropriate response.

In Halliday's view, fundamentalists all call for doctrines that have been derived from a literal interpretation of holy texts to be applied to social and political matters, thus combining religious intolerance with an anti-democratic urge for power. He argues that although fundamentalist movements are indelibly tied to scriptural writings, their prevalence in developing countries stems from contemporary reactions against governments perceived to be inept and authoritarian. They have formulated ideologies steeped in religious terminology in order to promote political change, often to further the cause of threatened social groups facing economic deprivation or foreign domination.

The two chapters on medical subjects – the genetic revolution and the AIDS pandemic – address issues that will remain at the forefront of public interest for several decades. Thanks to enormous medical advances made earlier in this century, longevity has increased dramatically, and the questions that engage the dedication of modern medical researchers are very different from those of even ten years ago. By highlighting the scientific and the moral difficulties engendered by current work, *Kay Davies* and *Roy Anderson* illuminate some of the urgent ethical questions we should all be addressing.

Important discoveries of the early 1980s revolutionised the patterns of medical research. Changes in genetic medicine have been particularly rapid. The ground work was laid half a century ago with the discovery of the importance of deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA), followed by the elucidation of the molecule's internal structure. But it is only recently that newly developed techniques have enabled scientists to relate many disorders at the genetic level to their physical manifestations. Doctors now use antenatal tests to analyse a fetus's genetic structure and are contemplating the possibilities of using this new type of knowledge for therapy as well as diagnosis.

Another fundamental change concerned the control of infectious

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diseases. Scientists and politicians had formerly viewed this issue not so much as a challenge to medical knowledge, but more as one of allocating and distributing resources effectively. Before the first reports started trickling in of a hitherto unknown deficiency of the human immune system affecting young men in America, it seemed as though the medical arsenal of antibiotics and preventive vaccines could, at last, eradicate the threat of fatal microbial diseases. Since then, of course, deaths from AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) have multiplied at an alarming rate, and the two strains of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) have proved resistant to the sustained efforts of scientists to develop any adequate preventive or curative treatment.

Scientific, technological and medical research projects are inevitably enmeshed in broader cultural issues. Relatively straightforward decisions include ones about the allocation of funds to competing groups, or determining who shall have the rights to control – and benefit from – a particular product. But scientific developments also demand that society debate more complex questions. For instance, the development of nuclear energy forced people to confront the destructive potentialities of modern discoveries, and to consider more carefully where responsibility should lie for directing the path of research and the application of results. As Anderson and Davies both discuss, AIDS and modern genetic research have generated further dilemmas demanding our immediate close consideration.

Scientific research and moral beliefs have become deeply entangled in new ways. For instance, the early reports of AIDS cases seemed to indicate that the disease was linked with homosexuality and Haitians, and probably originated in Africa, thus fuelling massive public reactions in metaphor-laden campaigns of discrimination. Extensive epidemiological work has subsequently clarified the transmission patterns of HIV, but the ethical problems remain largely unresolved. While one benefit has been a greater acknowledgement of the need to accept varieties of personal sexual preference, other prejudices hamper what continues to be our major protection against HIV – avoidance of the practices that facilitate transfer. There is still insufficient international commitment – particularly at a financial level – to educational programmes that could help to control the spread of the virus and alleviate its economic toll on the countries of the developing world. Screening

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programmes are also problematic, since the rights of the individual to refuse testing, and to keep any results secret, must be balanced against the advantages to society of tracing the spread of the virus.

Research into medical genetics has opened up additional ethical debates. Medical advances have already forced many would-be parents into making tough decisions about fetuses diagnosed as suffering particularly severe genetic disorders. It seems that future progress will add a further dimension of complexity, since as the genetic picture becomes more subtly painted, hard edges of certainty will dissolve. While scientists may be able to tell more about people's susceptibility to particular types of disorder, some individuals may prefer to live in ignorance. Like those who are found to be HIV positive, many people fear the effects of such information being divulged to employers or insurance companies. As the reliability of genetic techniques improves, vital decisions have to be made not only about their diagnostic value in medical and legal cases, but also about the implications of their therapeutic use.

AIDS and the genetic revolution, therefore, provide excellent examples demonstrating how great scientific and medical changes have also transformed cultural debates. Environmental pollution further illustrates how scientific issues are entrenched within political, economic and social interests. In her innovative essay, *Sara Parkin* cites politicians' failure of vision as the major barrier to changing our relationship with our environment. She has compiled a dismal catalogue of ecological dangers that governments are choosing to marginalise, including rising sea levels, stratospheric ozone depletion and accumulating waste products. As political leaders continue to place priority on national interests, she calls for these problems to be recognised as more threatening to European security than the possibility of military invasion.

Apocalyptic predictions of ecological catastrophe have become depressingly familiar, but Parkin carries her analysis much further. She wishes not only to render environmental degradation the leading spur for political and economic changes but also to cast the environment itself into the role of peacemonger, the diplomat to effect the changes. Whereas science has sought to simplify and control the forces of nature, she urges us to recognise the complexity of the natural world,

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and profit by using it as an intellectual and a spiritual guide. A rainforest survives robustly because its multiple linkages enable it to combine that normally incompatible pair of virtues, strength and flexibility; but although a few large industrial companies have used this 'rainforest strategy', governmental institutions have resisted such remodelling. Some economists recommend incorporating biological information into accounting procedures, arguing that broader sets of indicators – such as water quality, crime rates and asthma incidence – would enable personal well-being to be factored into appraisals of economic success.

Unlike the other contributors to this volume, Parkin concludes on a note of despair, articulating an urgent plea that time is running out. She insists that human survival strategies that used to be effective are inappropriate in the face of rising populations and a damaged natural world. As the environment sends us increasingly desperate signals of its plight, she offers us a stark choice. We must choose whether the environment should continue to be the cause of conflict rooted in local interests, or whether we can deploy it positively as an active agent for peace, security and justice.

Peace, security and justice: these fine ideals are central to the articles by *Crispin Tickell* and *Shirley Williams*. From his vantage point as the former British Permanent Representative at the United Nations, Tickell provides an illuminating insider's account. He describes how the various UN institutions responded to larger global changes during the late 1980s. Some of these transformations were rapid and unexpected, such as the precipitate ending of the Cold War, but others were more gradual – a new willingness to intervene militarily in local disputes, the welcome replacement of confrontation by a desire for collaboration and a shared concern to formulate a coherent agenda for protecting our threatened natural environment.

Nevertheless, as Tickell emphasises, although member states may pay lip service to the mutual benefits of co-operation, the UN is hampered by excessive responsibilities. While individual governments entertain high expectations of the UN's capabilities, they themselves are often unclear about how to cope with problems they anticipate the UN will resolve. More seriously, they fail to provide the necessary administrative and financial resources essential for making any serious headway in resolving international problems. Too many unanswered

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questions cloud the UN's role and prevent it from operating effectively. Too many nations fail to pay their subscriptions, so that UN budgets are constantly in severe arrears.

Nevertheless, realism about current achievements need not preclude optimism about the future. Like many large organisations, the UN has grown unevenly, but severe pruning could help it move towards the aspiration of balancing national and global interests. Just as Tickell perceives the UN's ultimate strength to lie in the common dream of a unified world, so too, Williams endorses the visionary aims of the European Union (EU) to combine economic growth and prosperity with a greater sensitivity to moral issues.

Similarly to the UN, the EU has evolved in response to changing external conditions, rather than being rationally directed from above. Whereas Tickell describes how the disintegration of the Soviet Union inspired a new measure of common understanding and purpose in negotiations, Williams focuses on how this dramatic change affected the nature of Europe. The EU's economic development has been far more rapid and successful than progress towards political unity, so that national differences still figure prominently in debates about the future directions Europe should take. The disastrous events in the former Yugoslavia illustrate profound differences of opinion about foreign policies. The economic and social problems posed by the unification of the two parts of Germany have been compounded by the worldwide recession, and policy-makers are finding it increasingly hard to accommodate swelling unease about unemployment.

Williams emphasises the need to provide financial and administrative aid to the newly independent countries of eastern Europe, and bitterly condemns the ways in which much Western aid has been cunningly diverted into the pockets of cynical Western professionals. She puts forward concrete suggestions for altering taxation and compensation schemes, so that business and political interests will combine to build a larger, stronger and wealthier Europe. While disillusioned about the tawdry nature of modern politics, she forecasts exciting decades to come as European countries convert the challenges confronting them into opportunities for growth and improvement.

The authors' energy and commitment palpably resonate throughout their contributions to this timely and stimulating volume. Writing as

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dedicated agents of change in diverse areas of conflict, they bring a wealth of perceptive analyses to a multitude of interrelated and pressing problems that affect us all. As privileged citizens, we should appreciate the outstanding efforts they are making towards improving human lives in so many ways. Reading their powerful essays helps us to acquire a deeper understanding of the outstanding challenges confronting modern society, and can guide us towards effecting change ourselves. These eight authors all recognise that mistakes have been made in the past, but they hold out varied messages of optimism for the future. One vital component of human strategies for survival in hostile surroundings has always been to benefit from experience. The major transformations that have taken place during the last few years encourage the hope that we will learn how to change the world and ourselves so that we can thrive together.