

The Doomsday Debate

An Address to the Waterloo County Unitarian Fellowship

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Last October philosophy professor Jan Narveson presented his views on global population trends from this pulpit. Many of you are aware that I do not agree with his analysis and you may be expecting a detailed rebuttal.

If so, I am going to disappoint you. What I want to talk about instead is the ancient and fundamentally religious context of the controversy between us. Its surface arguments are secular, political, technical, and rather tiresome, but they are a dialogue of the deaf, for it is not actually about its purported issues. It is really a disagreement about prophesy. I call it the "Doomsday Debate".

Prophesy

The earliest prophet that I know of was a young woman named Cassandra, the daughter of King Priam of Troy. She caught the eye of the god Zeus, and against her better judgement agreed to be an object for his lechery – but only after extracting a hefty price. Her condition was that she be given the gift of prophesy – with payment, of course, in advance. Apparently she later had second thoughts, for in the end she had the temerity to wench, and Zeus, who had already made his payment, was furious; but all he could do was decree that nobody would listen to Cassandra's prognostications, regardless of any eloquence she might someday develop.

Troy, Cassandra warned, would fall. The Trojans, as Zeus had decreed, ignored her. And Troy fell.

Three years ago I told the story of Jeremiah to this fellowship, pointing out its relevance to the high tech prophets of the 1990s. By the austere standards of

the Hebrews, Baalism, the religion of Judah's majority, was utterly barbaric, with idols, fertility cults, and child sacrifice. Yet it had a seductive attraction.

Generations of prophets warned that the bleed to Baal was risking the great Yahweh's wrath. Yet Baalism inspired a certain hedonistic joy that prophetic railing did little to suppress, and the bleed continued.

Those Hebrew prophets were a kind of loyal opposition. Sometimes the kings listened to them, but mostly they didn't. Jeremiah was perhaps the greatest in the prophetic tradition and passionately preached truths the Hebrews did not want to hear. He saw Nebuchadnezzar's threatening armies as God's avenging angels, waiting to punish the Jews for their drift to Baal. He urged Judah's recklessly nationalistic kings to capitulate to the Babylonian, pay him his tribute, and get on with purifying their religion.

But like Priam of Troy, the kings of Judah did not listen; they defied Nebuchadnezzar and paid for their folly by two horrible defeats, after which the Hebrew minority of Judah was marched away in captivity to Babylon. For his warnings, Jeremiah paid a high price and was last heard of being dragged unwillingly to Egypt by a defeated rump of Hebrew guerrillas.

Most biblical prophets warned of military doom – an occurrence that was all too familiar at a time when genocide was a common, if messy, low tech, blood smeared form of human butchery. But the legend of Noah had a different twist. Noah foresaw ecological doom, but like Cassandra and Jeremiah, he was ignored by all but his near and dear. The bible does not tell us why his kinfolk joined him in the ark, but his patriarchal

authority may have had something to do with it. In any event it is, for us, a good thing that they did.

Although prophecy now lacks its ancient religious authority, its tradition is still very much alive. Fifty-five years ago, when Adolf Hitler was planning military adventures in Europe, reticent prophets in the German general staff warned that his proposed depredations were invitations to ultimate disaster. Like Priam, the kings of Judah, and Noah's unknown opponents, Hitler did not listen. Like them, he paid for his folly not only with his own life, but with the lives and fortunes of every German.

I am not sufficiently familiar with business history to name the modern economic prophets, but I know they exist for they have acquired a name in the popular economic literature. They are called "doom criers," and in case you misunderstand, that is an epithet to be uttered with a sneer. Yet it is well known that economic doom has happened, the most notorious occurrence being in 1929, when the New York stock market crash inundated the world in a decade of depression. In business, huge corporations do go broke (as the brothers Reichman will attest) so causing sorrow, anguish and dismay, if not actual bloodshed. It is a surmise, but I would be greatly surprised if there are no ridiculed boardroom prophets thundering warnings of dangerous "overexposure" to their imperiled corporations.

Prophecy occurs in a context rich with hubris. The situation begins with an innocent enterprise where a carefully calculated risk is rewarded by a satisfying gain. It is followed by more of the same and there is a thrill in being on the winning side. Presently the ventures become more risky, and a muted opposition emerges. However, that opposition is gleefully silenced by good luck and more successes. The ante rises. Opposition anxiety intensifies. But it is scorned by a grinning majority whose optimism knows no bounds. Consumed with overconfidence, that majority ascends to heady adventurism and finally into folly. They overshoot, and the enterprise suddenly collapses, indiscriminately carrying everyone into despair, adventurers and prophets alike.

This is the story of every empire in every age, but the present. The present is excepted because it is an unfinished age and what the future holds for it we do not know. We may indeed have been charmed into immortality, but the prophets are warning otherwise.

In ages past they had God to inform them, but modern secular prophets are limited to unreliable statistics, scientific laws, and controversial computer models.

Religious Issues

Fundamental religious issues are still present in the modern prophetic process, although they have been buried in technical jargon. Let me explain. Religion has three main components: faith – what we believe about the unknowable; cosmology – what we believe about humanity's relationship with the universe; and ethics – the rules that constrain our antisocial behaviour. Within our Unitarian denomination there are four positions on its spectrum of belief. The weakest is rationalism, which believes in the omnipotence of science and does not accept that the unknowable could exist.

Next is humanism, in which supreme power is entrenched in the collective human mind, its omnipotence being expressed in the brilliance of technology. Third is deep ecology, where the omnipotent is a rich and meaningful nature. Finally there is theism with its mysterious communication between the faithful and their powerful, omniscient spirits.

Three of these positions are reflected in the Unitarian Universalistic principles¹: rationalism is implicit in our fourth principle, humanism appears in principles 1, 2, 3, and 5; and deep ecology is the basis of principle 7. (Although many of us may be closet theists, that position remains only a hint, bundled up with rationalism in principle 4.) These theological positions are not mutually exclusive. I, for instance, am a deep ecologist with rationalistic tendencies, yearning for a way to fit the comfortable theism of my childhood into mainly agnostic beliefs. Also, although I do not share the theology of radical humanism, I have no difficulty with its influence on the Unitarian Universalistic principles.

So what is the Doomsday Debate and what has it to do with religion?

¹ *The seven principles are:*

- *The inherent worth and dignity of every person*
- *Justice, equity and compassion in human relations*
- *Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations*
- *A free and responsible search for truth and meaning*
- *The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large*
- *The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all*
- *Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part*

The Doomsday Debate

You heard one side from professor Narveson last October. He is a disciple of the conservative American economist Julian Simon, a much cited business guru. For over a decade Dr Simon has been publishing scholarly articles that heap derision on the environmental movement. I am uncertain how big or how much influence his following actually has, but the economic policies of Canadian, American, and many other governments are highly consistent with their thesis. As for Dr Narveson, I could fault his understanding of technology and I did detect quite a number of errors in the facts he gave us. But the historical picture he painted was essentially correct. Also, he rightly pointed out that horrific predictions made by certain distinguished environmentalists a decade or so ago have been confounded by events.

Arguing from an impressive array of economic, social, environmental, and technological indicators, and from the fact that the high profile doom criers of the 1980s were demonstrably wrong, Dr Narveson concluded that the population explosion poses no risk whatever to anybody's future. Hence the United Nations agendas on population and environment worked out in Cairo in 1994 and in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 are based on hysterical environmental propaganda.

I represent the other side of the Doomsday Debate, and although I am not a disciple of anyone, Paul Ehrlich, a distinguished population ecologist has influenced me. In 1977 he was the lead author of the text book that launched my environmental career. Dr Ehrlich is cited by the Simon camp as the principal environmental guru and a classic false prophet. In an earlier book called *The Population Bomb* Dr Ehrlich predicted that overpopulation would cause a catastrophic global famine before the year 2000. Obviously, Dr Ehrlich got his sum's wrong. Although there have been devastating regional famines, the global cataclysm he predicted shows no immediate sign of materializing.

Jan Narveson might have reminded us of a classic precedent for Paul Ehrlich's error. In 1798 the reverend Thomas Malthus published an essay on the intrinsic risks of uncontrolled population growth. He observed that, when a population grows exponentially while its food supply only grows linearly, an ugly day of reckoning lies awaiting. Malthus predicted the swelling population of Britain

would be reduced to poverty during the 19th century. What happened instead was two hundred years of unprecedented prosperity. However, as a one-time scientist, I know how easy it is to get your sums wrong, but doing so doesn't necessarily mean that you are on the wrong track. If your algebra is right, it may only mean that, while your answer wasn't dead on, it could still be in the right ball park. Since Malthus's model would seem reasonable if technological development were somehow factored into it, an important question arises: how much can our children depend on future technology? This question contains a significant moral issue. I will come back to it.

Ehrlich's followers do not dispute the Simon camp's data; they only differ on how it is to be interpreted. Simon's followers emphasize economic statistics and reject Ehrlich's scientific approach. The Ehrlich people do the opposite. The Ehrlich camp concentrates on future prospects, while the Simon camp concentrates on past achievements. However, the key issue that dominates the Simon case is the historical performance of technology.

Simon's followers stress how persistently technology has broken through every constraint, and from that record, they conclude that technology's sparkling performance will continue far beyond the foreseeable future.

Ehrlich's followers use the laws of nature to argue that while technology's past performance is indeed beyond challenge, the constraints of nature are absolutely immutable. Inevitably technology must stumble. Since only a minority in the Simon camp will argue that humanism can repeal the laws of nature, much of the difference between the two sides is reduced to an unspoken disagreement on the time horizons of their respective vision. For the Simon group the foreseeable horizon is near; for the followers of Ehrlich it is far away. This difference raises another moral issue to which I will also return.

There are subtle but profound differences in the two camp's beliefs about the future. It may be an oversimplification, but the Simon group is primarily deterministic. Although they emphasize that the future is unknowable, they nevertheless believe it is preordained by economic forces. The Ehrlich group, on the other hand, believes in free will. They insist that the future can be chosen by the wise and adroit use of public policy. Nevertheless, both sides do accept the need for government involvement in the future; the Simonists want less of it as the Ehrlicists want more. They differ more profoundly on what that involvement should be.

On my part, however, I am not so sure about public policy. I sense a flaw in the structure my Ehrlichist colleagues would like to build. I don't think they realize it, but they are invoking politics to play God. I don't believe they can succeed, for politics' record is not the least bit reassuring. Also, I wish the market structures my Simonist opponents offer as an alternative were not equally but differently flawed.

There is a lot more to the Doomsday Debate, but what I have told you is its essence. The Simonists – the technological optimists – believe that if left unchecked present trends of population and technology will bring a millennium of economic growth, prosperity and joy. The Ehrlichists – the ecological pessimists – believe those same trends are the road to human ruin.

Between the two camps there is no common ground.

Religious Significance

The significance of this stand-off lies in the opposing religious beliefs that underlie it. The two sides differ profoundly in both faith and cosmology. As a result they come up with vastly different perceptions of the human situation and very different ethics. This brings us back to prophecy, and to a quote whose source I can't remember: The function of a prophet is not to predict destruction, but to promote redemption! In other words, the prophetic oracles that so offend the Simonists, are not predictions, but warnings; if those warnings were to serve their purpose Paul Ehrlich, Thomas Malthus, Jeremiah, Cassandra, and all the others would find fulfilment in being dead wrong.

The Ethics Of High Risk

The prophetic issue concerns the ethics of hubris – an unbecoming arrogance created by intoxicating success. Hubris censors inner voices that counsel caution when ambition soars too high. It also dulls perception of the obvious. Hubris is thus a short cut to recklessness. For the young, a little hubris is part of growing up, but in maturity, when the context is a global business, a large religious denomination, or a major government, leaders can have responsibility for the lives, fortunes, and well-being of hundreds of thousands of people. They are therefore invested with the obligation to be sometimes cautious and sometimes bold. When risks have to be taken, leaders must choose advisors wisely, and calculate carefully.

The risks subsumed by the Doomsday debate are enormous, but the concomitant uncertainty and the high cost of caution numbs decisive action. Julian Simon may, after all, be right – but so may Paul Ehrlich. Until events run their course there is no way of knowing how the deck has been cut. Leaders are thus beset by questions without answers. Is it prudent to put all the eggs in one basket? If it is prudent, should they go in Simon's basket where the reward is said to be greatest, or in Ehrlich's basket where the risk is presumed lowest? The ethic in this situation is about prudence in the face of catastrophic possibilities – possibilities that are denied by one side and guaranteed by the other.

The Simon Vision

The ethic requires leaders to look carefully at the prize for which they are being asked to gamble. Is the prize worth the risk? Jan Narveson gave us Simon's image of the future. It is a high consumption society of unimagined wealth, where Disneyland images and surrealist fantasy are substituted for the host of natural treasures that have been sacrificed for the consumers' glittering nirvana. It would be a society where every value is set by a calculus of greed, and where all shrines are temples to human narcissism. It would be a society where the built, the ordered, the manicured and the domesticated take the place of the wild, the chaotic, the green, the beautiful and the free.

That vision is a Baalist abomination. Nevertheless, it is Dr Simon's dream and if we are to be persuaded he must answer some important questions: Where will he find the huge flux of energy needed to feed its gaping maw? If he finds the energy, what noxious flatulence would all its engines emit? What ruin would it cause? What monstrous problems would it create? Will there really be technologies to solve those problems? All Dr Simon offers is the vague promise that something is sure to turn up. But is that good enough? If something does turn up, will it turn up in time? The questions are endless and his answers are unconvincing. The Simon policy is to do nothing – just to relax and surf Alvin Toffler's Third Wave onward into immortality.

Maybe for some – but not for me!

Foresight, Dreams and Visions

The problem with the Simon camp is that it doesn't look very far ahead and it doesn't see why it should. Even if a long view is desirable, it argues, all that will be achieved is idle speculation. When economists can't predict a five-year business cycle how are they supposed to predict 50, 100 or more years into the future? And even if they could

so predict, what good would it do? The Simonists don't understand. We are not talking about prediction; we are talking about choosing. Whenever we have to make a choice we create a little vision – a mental model of reality; we run it in our imagination and see how we like the outcome.

"How would that sweater look on me? Hmm! It's not my colour." "What would it be like in Israel next spring. It might be fun! Perhaps Spain would be better." When we do this we are making scenarios, not prophecies. If I am broke and can't afford a sweater I am not a false prophet when I day-dream about travel. When a leader comes up with a vision of where to take his followers he isn't making an oracle. He just has an idea and thinks he knows how to make it happen. Some things take a long time and if we want them we have to think ahead. Medieval cathedrals took generations to build but this didn't keep their architects from making plans they would never see implemented.

Forests take 80 or more years to grow, but that doesn't paralyze the foresters. They just take a moral position and do for their unknown successors what they would like their predecessors to have done for them. Their ethic applies the golden rule to time as well as to space.

Yet the Ehrlichist vision would be a world vastly different from what we take for granted and its challenges would be immense. The discipline of long-term stability would dominate all social values. Religion would return to become the moral force proscribing all behaviours that threaten sustainability. Economic development would be paced to keep cultural processes aligned to change. The force driving science would be a compelling need to search for technologies that harmonize the economy with nature. Because of the limitations of sustainable energy people would not live as well as they do now. Lack of energy would restrict mobility, trade, and migration; it would lead to more manual labour, and allow far fewer baubles. Life expectancy might drop. Settlements and population size would be politically managed. The service economy would shrink and agriculture would grow. Cities would decline, leaving behind vast tracts of decaying suburban ruins. Political and economic structures would become interlinked networks, with extensive power devolved to the grass roots. Political institutions would develop built-in capacities to survive extended episodes of political

or economic chaos. Although democracy might be transformed it would be even more important than it is now; the consensus needed to maintain the required social regimentation would be impossible without it.

Although our Unitarian principles would still fit, we would have to stop singing every Sunday about freedom! No wonder governments drag their feet over an ecological agenda!

Conclusion

What does the Doomsday Debate mean to a small, liberal religious denomination? It is a debate deeply rooted in belief. To understand the connection we must realize that religion is a combination of faith, cosmology, and a code of ethics. Unitarianism is no exception. Our denomination expresses its beliefs in a spectrum ranging from rationalism, through humanism and deep ecology, to theism. When set in that context the Doomsday Debate becomes a controversy about prophesy. It occurs in a setting rich with hubris, where a leader, consumed with overconfidence, embroils his supporters in an ultimate folly.

In his address to us last October, Dr Narveson presented the Julian Simon thesis, in which the population explosion poses no risk. With differing religious beliefs and siding with Simon's opponent, Paul Ehrlich, I use the same data to show that Simon's laissez faire strategy is dangerously reckless. The beliefs that generate the differences between me and Jan Narveson in this pulpit concern free will, and whether the golden rule about doing unto others as you would have them do unto you should subsume time, as well as the three dimensions of space. In essence, Jan Narveson's theology proves technology will save us, while mine fears that technology might ultimately destroy us.

In the end you must make a choice. As responsible voters you would be guided by the ethics of taking risks on other people's behalf. If you believe Jan Narveson and he turns out to be wrong the cost you incur for society could be utterly catastrophic. If you believe me and I turn out to be wrong you could commit society to a static economy dominated by religious taboos, where incomes are low and amenities few, and where all human activity is tightly regimented – that being all for nought.

I have only the haziest notion of the timing, but I do know that the lead time for change is exceeding long. I won't be here to see the outcome, but to those of you who are, I hope you will think carefully, and make your choice wisely. Good luck!