

# Change is real, but problems linger

## THE RABBI'S TURN RABBI ARTHUR GREEN

We are living through extraordinary times. History is being made around us, day after day. The only world order most of us have known — that of fiercely competing capitalism and communism, the United States versus the Soviet Union — is nearing its end. The great change few of us ever dared to think we would live to see is now happening before our eyes.

The immediate news is almost all good. Millions of people are being liberated from the shackles of totalitarian government. False leaders of "people's democracies" are being revealed as the thieves and thugs they really were. They are soon to be replaced by freely elected governments, where the freedoms we Westerners so cherish will hopefully be given due

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may be nearly over. It may turn out that neither a crazy Russian nor a crazy American will "push the button." It may be that we will not be destroyed by the direly predicted "nuclear winter" after all. What a relief! And yet, our world may not be saved after all.

If our best dreams of peace come true, we should be able to look forward to an era of great international cooperation. United Europe should be a model for regional associations elsewhere, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the Warsaw Pact should provide an example of enemies turned to friends.

What, then, will be the issues that confront and threaten our world? What are the challenges that will still keep us from the unity and prosperity that we would like to see all of humanity enjoy?

- Nationalist tensions: Even as the world's division into competing economic systems subsides, nationalism seems nowhere near under control. If anything, there is reason to fear that the lifting of the totalitarian heavy hand will bring more simmering nationalist rivalries to the surface.

Will Yugoslavia split into six warring statelets? Will Azerbaijanis and Armenians slaughter one another? Will there be a bloodbath against Hungarians in Transylvania, against Russians in Estonia, against Kurds in Iraq, against Jews almost anywhere?

We will do well to remember that this century's pains were ushered in by ethnic tensions and that the century draws to an end with most of those tensions unresolved. It seems that such superstates as the Ottoman Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Soviet Union can keep ethnic violence at bay while they are strong and autocratic, but that those

tensions bubble right to the surface once the empire weakens.

- Religious fundamentalism: The demands of life in the modern world, and especially in the nuclear age, have taken their toll. Among the victims of modernity are many millions who found life in the contemporary world simply unlivable and who chose to return to the relative comforts of a previous century.

Some of this flight from modernity is the result of fear or despair regarding mankind's prospects for the future. Living in "the valley of death's shadow" is not easy, and the reassurances of traditional religion provide some of our safest answers.

Others are driven to the edge of madness by the very freedoms we enjoy, and they seek actively to escape them. The freedom of modernity vastly increases our choices, and the burden of choice is more than many people can bear.

How should I live my life? Does morality matter? Are there any limits? Is there any value to doing good or refraining from evil? Neither secular Western society (with its "value-free" liberal education) nor liberal religion (burdened by its inability to take clear stands) has been able to answer the anxiety caused by this burden of excessive choice. Hence, the retreat of vast populations into types of religious self-assurance that do not bode well for the common human future.

Fundamentalism, when threatened, will too easily turn fanatical — to the hatred of those who do not share the truth — and religious fanaticism is a great breeding ground of human conflict.

- Overpopulation and resource abuse: Now that East and West may be setting aside their differences, we should turn together to solve the *real*

protection.

The collapse of totalitarian communism should also mean a tremendous reduction in the stockpiling of arms, both nuclear and conventional, throughout the world. With the great confrontation of our age set aside, what need is there for these vast and dangerous stores of arms, with their power to destroy the world so many times over?

Arms reduction should, in turn, release vast sums of money to nations throughout the world to spend on domestic improvement. Funds should become available now for the feeding, healing and educating of humanity as never before in history.

All right, so where's the messiah? It sure sounds as though somebody's prince of peace is about to show up.

But not quite so fast. Though it's hard to imagine, the conflict we had all feared so much for nearly half a century

problem facing our world: how to save it from ecological disaster.

What we should all care most about is having a safe and livable world to hand over to future generations. Yet scientists warn us that we are courting disaster and that we must act to save resources of air, water and soil before present destructive trends become irreversible.

We will have a chance at doing this only if we are able to limit earth's human population. Our world simply does not have the power to sustain unchecked human growth, no matter how equitably we redistribute our resources or how quickly we develop technologies of food production and distribution.

There soon will be just too many of us for earth to bear — and even more so if each of us will have the right (and who are we to deny it?) to such "basics" as automobiles, refrigeration and air conditioning? The struggle to limit and even reduce the earth's population will be a terrible one, undoubtedly raising both religious conflict and ethnic tensions. Yet without such efforts, there may be no future for our descendants at all.

No, the times before us are hardly those of the messiah. Ours remains a struggling world, one not given to easy solutions or quick fixes. As we witness the eclipse of one "god that failed" in totalitarian communism, let us be humble enough to remember that we capitalist nations are also far from having created the ideal society and that there remains plenty to concern us as we look toward our human future.

Our messianic faith remains there to guide us and give us hope — but also to remind us how much there is for us to do before we can proclaim the age of peace. ■