Millennial reflections on an interdependent world: Managing the planet

by Douglas F. Ottati in the December 22, 1999 issue

Some months ago the New Yorker carried a "Millennium Travel Advisory"—a special advertising section concerning a "Global Party." "Talk about the mega super-event of our times," it said. "Where will you be on the ultimate New Year's Eve, when the big door swings open on a new era?" The ad touted destinations from Nantucket to Nepal, and it suggested that Bill Gates will be hosting a New Year's Eve bash on Fiji near the international date line.

All the hoopla surrounding January 1, 2000, is rather arbitrary, of course, especially given the vagaries of calendar-making. The practice of numbering years consecutively from the supposed year of Christ's birth didn't take hold in Western Christendom until the eighth century. And there were various ways of reckoning the start of the year in medieval Europe. In England, for example, the year began on December 25 and then, from the 14th century until the 18th, on March 25.

Pope Gregory in 1582 set January 1 as the beginning of the year. But European Protestants were slow to adopt the change, and Britain didn't adopt it until 1752. Eventually the Gregorian calendar gained nearly worldwide acceptance. But the Muslim calendar remains official in Saudi Arabia and principalities in the Persian Gulf, while some nations refer to both the Muslim and the Christian eras. For Muslims, whose lunar years consisting of 354 days each are numbered from Muhammad's flight to Medina, the year 1420 began on the first day of Muharram (April 16).

Although India has adopted the Gregorian calendar for secular purposes, Hindu observances are governed by the traditional Hindu calendar. In the traditional Chinese system, 2000 AD will be the 17th year in the 78th cycle—just another year of the dragon. The current Jewish calendar, counting solar years made up of lunar

months from a supposed date for the creation, reckons that the year 5761 began on Rosh Hashanah (September 11-12).

Cultural relativity isn't the only problem with emphasizing 2000. Scientists observe that time can be thought of geologically (the Earth having condensed from gases and dust about 4.6 billion years ago) or astronomically (the Big Bang having taken place some 18 billion years ago). The earliest known fossils of homo sapiens date from about 100,000 years ago, and paleontologists tell us that hominid species go back some 4.4 million years. To measure the ages with four paltry digits seems a tad provincial.

Reaching January 1, 2000, reminds me of reaching 100,000 on the odometer of my '73 VW Bug. At a little past 99,998, I parked it in front of the house until my kids got back from school. Then we went for a ride. We hit 99,999 near the corner of Brook and Claremont, turned right onto Laburnum, and right onto Hermitage. And then, almost precisely at the corner of Hermitage and Nottoway, the big event: 00000. It was as arbitrary a measure of distance as January 1, 2000, is a measure of time. No matter. We cheered. And as we drove home, Katherine asked where we had lived the last time this had happened. Albert asked where we were going tomorrow.

Turning the odometer on civilization is an occasion to ponder where we've been as well as where we're going. The last time all the numbers changed, the Song dynasty governed China, and Hindu kingdoms dotted the Indian peninsula. Islamic caliphates, linked by vigorous trade, various political relationships, a common language and a common religion, stretched from India to northern Africa and Spain. The Byzantine Empire occupied Turkey and parts of Greece. German kings ruled the Holy Roman Empire, while feudal precursors of modern nations had emerged in France, England, Scotland, Poland, Hungary and Russia. There were Viking kingdoms in Scandinavia. Kingdoms also flourished along the upper Nile and in west Africa. The Toltec empire had emerged in central Mexico, where Mayan city states were in decline. Huari and Tiahuanco empires collapsed along the central western coast of South America, and many other groups around the world, such as the herders and farmers of central Africa, the Yakut reindeer herders in Northern Asia and the Aborigines in Australia, had not become part of any larger political entity.

Trade routes extended from the Viking kingdoms and Ghana in the West to India, China and Japan in the East. With some 450,000 people, Córdoba in Moorish Spain may have been the world's largest and most prosperous city, although a number of

others, including Kyoto, Baghdad and Constantinople, were also prominent. Despite the emergence of some commercial centers, most people in Christian Europe were rural peasants who depended on their lords for work and protection. In fact, the overwhelming majority of people in the world were poor, with high infant mortality and short life expectancy.

When the sun rises on January 1, 2000, it will illumine a highly interdependent world. Financial markets in Tokyo, Hong Kong, London, Toronto, New York, Mexico City and elsewhere are intimately connected. Coca-Cola and Nike and a host of other brand names are internationally recognized—as are Western forms of popular music and certain sports stars. A thousand years ago sea routes linked empires in trade; during the 20th century markets and manufacturing have become truly global. Mass media, travel and electronic communications have changed the feel of life. The many faces of achievement, beauty, cruelty, care, tragedy, starvation and oppression are routinely accessible.

Political decisions made almost anywhere around the globe can have far-reaching consequences, and regional issues now often have worldwide significance. Economic interdependencies invest specific communities and locations with special importance—a prime example being the oil-producing lands of the Middle East. Intricate systems of commerce, travel and communications not only bring us closer together, they also seem particularly susceptible to disruptions—by terrorism and computer viruses, for example. Many nations now have access to technically sophisticated, highly destructive and comparatively inexpensive conventional, chemical and nuclear weapons. (There are now 44 nuclear-capable nations.)

Today we also are aware that the web of interdependency in which we deploy our powers includes a delicate and shared natural environment. Human development has consequences for birds, animals, fishes and plants—and for the ecosystems that support life. Medicine and biology alter the boundaries and genetic constitutions of life, thereby injecting new urgency into debates about the integrity of nature and human nature. Physics, astronomy and evolutionary biology make us more aware of continuities between humans and other life forms as well as of our common dependence on vast cosmic forces and developments.

During the past millennium, many of humanity's compelling challenges had to do with the building of modern cultures, economies and nations. Now we live in the midst of a single interdependent social and natural ecology, a circumstance that

puts pressure on many of our organizations and identities.

Consider the nation-state. For much of the modern period, the international system has assumed the sovereignty of nations within their borders, as if each were an entirely independent individual. Since the end of World War II, however, we have seen nations configured into superpower blocs, the emergence of international concerns about political crimes and human rights, and the willingness of multinational forces to intervene in other nations' internal affairs. Part of the significance of the International Monetary Fund, the European Community and the North America Free Trade Association is that capital, markets and manufacturers are no respecters of political boundaries. Neither are ecosystems, as is apparent from the threat of global warming, and our common dependence on what's left of the world's forests for oxygen. Add to these factors current patterns of immigration, and we begin to sense a trend toward the relativization of state sovereignty.

In a booklet I picked up at the supermarket titled "All New Prophecies for the Millennium," Ernesto Montgomery predicts that the next 1,000 years will be an era of peace, happiness and prosperity, when nations abolish war and new medicines enhance longevity. He also says that the existence of the Abominable Snowman, the Loch Ness Monster and the Chesapeake Bay Monster will be confirmed on the same day; that advances in atomic and solar power will eliminate energy shortages; that clothing will be close-fitting and self-cleaning; and that the family car will be replaced by an Astro Craft with a top speed of 600 m.p.h.

My own hunches are neither as long-range nor as specific. During the next century, the Earth will, I think, become an increasingly managed planet. We will see important, sometimes dramatic changes in governments, the use of military power, and understandings of "national interest." Earth's population, which recently topped 6 billion, will probably level off at 9 to 10 billion in about 50 years. Much of the population growth will take place among the 80 percent of Earth's peoples who currently consume only 20 percent of Earth's resources.

It seems unlikely that Earth can sustain 9 to 10 billion people living the way that the richest 1.2 billion do now. We shall therefore face some extraordinarily difficult questions. How can the specters of poverty, repression and untimely death be eliminated? How can the rights of persons and the integrity of minority cultures and groups be maintained? Can we devise patterns of economic development, distribution and consumption that are both sustainable and tolerably equitable? How

can we protect and enhance the health of our planetary system? Whether or not one envisions a "no growth" world, it seems clear that important decisions will need to be made about how many people are born and where and how they live.

Given the dismal track record of centralized powers, this challenge calls for extending democracy. Within nations, the 21st century will call for participatory forms of government that disperse and balance political and economic powers, protect fundamental rights and enfranchise distinct cultural and ethnic communities. Among nations, the new century will call for representative assemblies and alliances that can mount cooperative efforts to protect the environment, enhance developing economies and ensure freedom from genocide and oppression.

It would be foolish to anticipate smooth sailing. Confronted by injustice, conflicting claims and threats, many will be tempted to lose themselves in pursuit of power and possessions. More than a few persons and societies may intensify narrow devotions to tribe, race, nation and species. Some will trust technology and production to solve every conflict and surmount every limit. Even if we do not succumb to disordered desires, narrow devotions and optimistic delusions, it remains to be seen whether democracies will recognize their international responsibilities and whether they will be able effectively to regulate capitalist economies and markets for the protection of nonmarket values.

Theologically speaking, then, the 21st century seems likely to underscore three aspects of the perennial struggle to understand the world and our place in it. 1) It will demand that we recognize our own interconnectedness, that we understand ourselves as distinct persons and particular communities embedded in an interdependent social and natural world. 2) It will compel us to recognize that, to an unprecedented degree, we determine habitat, and it will therefore demand a heightened sense of human responsibility, an ethic of care for persons and the world. And 3) it will require a deeper sense of purpose than is found in competition, production and acquisition. In short, the 21st century will demand that we attend to what it means to be creatures, to be faithful, and to pursue the true vocation and chief end of human beings.

It is difficult to ponder January 1, 2000, without remembering Deuteronomy 30:19: "Today . . . I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore; choose life, that you and your descendants may live." We might also remember that there is hope precisely in the language of requirement and demand. For we rarely

choose life, we rarely change our cherished ways, until we are firmly convinced of their destructive consequences.

During the next century, the consequences of refusing to change will be dire indeed. We will find that we inhabit a world whose meanings and values we neither construct nor control. We will become acutely aware that the world "pushes back." Call it judgment or call it grace. To the eyes of faith it suggests that, like past and present, the future belongs to God.