**“Exterminate all the brutes”:**

**A conversation on Christian mission complicity in the west’s grand quest to "civilize" the uncivilized and "develop" the underdeveloped.**

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I would like to thank Professor Hanyoung Lee Dean of the ACTS International Graduate School of the ACTS University, and Dr, Bright Myeong-Seok Lee and all of their colleagues here at ACTS for the privilege of offering this unusual lecture. It is in an interview format, wherein I try to answer eight questions. At the end of the lecture, there will be opportunity for discussion.

1. **The title of your conversation sounds a little gloomy. Can you elaborate on it a little more?**

**A:** It certainly is gloomy! Even taking into account that I am now an old man, and old men are notoriously pessimistic! The title that I had originally thought of was somewhat gentler, but still not exactly cheery: *"Missionaries and the Gospel of Never Enough."* My discussion will raise questions about western missionary embodiment of the gospel of "civilization," "development," and "consumerism" in Western civilization's quest for infinite economic growth on a finite and increasingly stricken planet.

But let me answer the question:

“Exterminate all the brutes!” is the final line in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness.* It is also the **title of a book** written by Sven Lindqvist and of a **recently released four-part documentary** produced by Raoul Peck. ***These words, Lindqvist argues, are at the heart of modern civilization.*** They summarize the means and the results, so far, of Europe’s “civilizing mission”, including its Christian missionary endeavors, compassing land and sea to make the rest of the world feed into our frantic wealth-swelling hamster wheel vision of life.

Raoul Peck relies heavily on Sven Lindqvist’s book by that title, *"Exterminate All the Brutes": One Man's Odyssey into the Heart of Darkness and the Origins of European Genocide* by Sven Lindqvist, published in 1992. I would urge anyone to read Lindqvist’s books. Of particular interest to those of us who live in the uncomfortable pacifist tradition, Lindqvist’s book, *A History of Bombing.*

In the **19th century scientific racism** was a part of the emerging evolutionary model of understanding how life came to be and where life was going. Intellectual giants such as Arthur de Gobineau (1816-1882 – *The Moral and Intellectual Diversity of  Races – 1856)* Charles Darwin (1809 – 1882 – On t*he Origin of Species - 1859*), William Winwood Reade (1838-1876 - *The Martyrdom of Man - 1872*) and Herbert Spencer (1820 – 1903 – *Social Statistics [social Darwinianism]*) began to break the stranglehold that religion had on Western thinking, suggesting that the great purpose of life was best explained by evolution and the survival of the fittest. The weak would die out and the strong would survive. These theories were applied as both evidence and justification of white supremacy. The extinction of weaker races was inevitable. The meaning of life was evolution itself.

Western civilization’s relentless mission to dominate the world has been characterized by genocides on an unprecedented scale, enslavement, bombs, wars, hyper consumption of nonrenewable resources, and the creation of environmentally disastrous products which—when harnessed to rapacious consumer appetites—have destroyed species, vast bodies of water, the soil, and the atmosphere.

Residential schools in Canada – an attempt to “destroy all the brutes” by transforming them into dusky European-type people … able to function productively on the relentlessly acquisitive hamster wheel culture of western societies. Missionaries could not be expected to be highly critical of the process, since they too were in the business of changing the world views, social organization and belief systems of non-European peoples all over the world … engaged in the difficult task of making everyone think and behave like us.

1. **How and to what extent were missionaries unique in their advocacy of western ways?**

They were not at all unique, except that their advocacy for change was couched in religious language and their motivation for change was essentially religious. And, I should add, many of them were trusted, men and women of proven integrity and commitment. They would never consciously mislead anyone.

Western missionaries were products of their culture, and they viewed their culture and its accomplishments as the highwater mark for human beings. And rightly or wrongly, they traced the roots of this progress to the Christian religion. An important part of the conversion package was the implicit promise of better things not just in the sweet by and by, but in the here and now.

In order for this to happen, folks had to learn reading, writing, and proper behavior, all founded on proper belief. Of course they were not stupid people, and to some extent their formula was correct. It was in fact thoroughly documented by James Dennis and others of his ilk.[[1]](#footnote-1) Western society is in the end a direct descendent of Christendom mutating into the renaissance and all of the decidedly materialist ideologies that were forthcoming—capitalism, Marxism, socialism, and various secular alternatives to religion.

1. **Do you think that we today are similarly uncritical of our own consumer culture?**

Not exactly. We might know better now. But our way of life is like an ocean wave carrying along bits of flotsam which cannot resist its force. We cannot resist the force of the culture that creates, defines, shapes, and provides for us. Although we are vocal and sometimes even active in our criticism of the consumer world in which we live and move and have our being, *as a matter of observed fact we do almost nothing to change our ways.*

We still drive gasoline powered vehicles; we still send our children to expensive enculturation factories that we call schools; we still live in comfortable, oversized homes; we still travel by air, land and sea for business and for sheer pleasure. It is not that we are being hypocrites. The sad fact of the matter is that we cannot escape. It is our world. We did not create it, and we cannot escape it, although there have been scattered attempts to do so—sometime religiously inspired.

In his compelling book *On Time and Water,* Andi Snaer Magnason writes:

“Scientists have shown us that the foundations of life, earth itself, are failing. The principal ideologies of the twentieth century considered earth and nature as sources of inexpensive, infinite raw material. Humans assumed that the atmosphere could continually absorb emissions, that the oceans could endlessly absorb waste, that the soil could constantly renew itself if given more fertilizer, that animal species would keep moving aside as humans colonized more and more space.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

1. **What do you think about proselytizing?**

Do you enjoy being proselytized? Do you enjoy high pressure sales promotions? Do you enjoy being challenged to change your mind about COVID? Do you enjoy with an open mind listening to JWs when they come to your door? **We are part of a proselytizing civilization**. Christians and Muslims certainly have no monopoly on trying to persuade consumers to change their minds about one thing or another. This is the world of commerce, politics, medicine, science, environmental science, feminism, medicine, etc.

Within societies, likewise, there are people who espouse and advocate for change—justice, liberation, for downtrodden groups and the marginalized. We think nothing of this. It is normal. But it is also proselytizing. **So we should not be alarmed or surprised that men and women who are deeply satisfied by their religious experience or enhanced enlightenment on certain issues should wish to share this with others**, or even compel them to believe, as in the case of COVID vaccine in our time.

Missionaries (as a generalization whose exceptions prove the rule) **believed that if people played the game of life by certain rules, certain predictable outcomes would accrue.** Their living standards would be more like our own—medicine, safety, mobility, communications, education, choice, gender equity, gender role diversity, etc.

1. **In what ways was Christianity embedded in the political and military and economic processes that have contributed substantially to the world as we know it?**

In almost all ways. We are, after all, the most recent social/political projection of what was for the better part of two millennia known as “Christendom”.[[3]](#footnote-3) We are now referred to as “the West.” Sasha Abamsky’s superb essay, “Defining the Indefinable West,” explores the term “the West,” and concludes that while in contrast to the “isms” that defined the savage conflicts of the last century, it is a “vague and spectacularly imprecise intellectual organizing tool,” the cognitive equivalent of trying to touch the image of a hologram. “[It] means” in her words, “a state of mind more than a distinct plot of land.” In the end, she concludes, “perhaps the only three constants in Western history are the totemic power of the phrase ‘the West’; the flexibility of the definition and boundaries as it morphs to meet changing intellectual and geopolitical realities; and an assertive self-confidence, a haughty sense of its own infallibility and righteousness. In truth, because we *think* there is a West, as a result there *is* a West; and it *does* somehow encompass both the Inquisition and the Enlightenment; it *does* have room for both Marx and Dante; it *does*, in the information age, even have room to expand into lands formerly considered the heart of the East.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (March 23, 2007), pp. B6, B7, B9.

1. **In many church and mission circles, we are rather proud of the “development” work that we undertake through MCC, MEDA, World Food Grains Bank, and so on. Yet you seem to be suggesting that we’re either wasting our time or sending the persons and societies on which we expend our energies on a fool’s errand to nowhere. Is that correct?**

Not exactly. What else can we do, given that our charter as followers of Jesus is to do to others as we would have them do to us, to help the poor and the needy; to practice and advocate for justice; etc. My questions—for which I have no answers, really—have to do with the system of life that we model … as though this way of life is open for all if they only do things as we tell them.

There is some truth to this, of course, but essentially the western way of life would be inconceivable had some really rough ancestors not committee racial and cultural and actual genocides for hundreds of years in taking over the western hemisphere, Australia, New Zealand, and big chunks of South Africa. If one were to take the populations of these continents and tell them to go back where they came from—do we really think that Europe would be “developed” and ultra-comfortable … if its population were to be swelled by more than a billion extra people? -- the entire population of North America (596 million) and South America (427 million) and other European expansionist pockets? I doubt it.

Perhaps at the ripe old age of 77 I can be expected to have a somewhat gloomy outlook on the future, but my sense is that our way of life is not sustainable. The planet cannot long survive our destructive invasive species if everyone decides it would be a good thing to consume as avidly as western civilization does, and for Christians to promulgate that way of life raises questions.

I don’t know whether any of you have had a change to read that strange book *Cuckoo Cloud Land* by Anthony Doer (Scribner, September 2021)? Listen to one of the characters—Seymour (a young environmental terrorist who plants a bomb in the public library)—giving a report on his teacher’s summer assignment:

You said write something “fun” we did over summer to get our “grammer mussels flexing” again, so ok, Mrs Tweedy, this summer scientists announced that in the last 40 yrs humans have killed 60 percent of the wild mammals and fishes and birds on earth. Is that fun? Also in the past 30 yrs, we melted 95 percent of the oldest thickest ice in the arctic. When we have melted all the ice in Greenland, just the ice in Greenland, not the north pole, not Alaska, just Greenland, Mrs Tweedy, know what happens? The oceans rise 23 feet. That drowns Miami, New York, London, and Shanghai, that’s like hop on the boat with your grandkids, Mrs Tweedy, and you’re like, do you want some snacks, and they’re like, Grandma, look underwater, there’s the statute of liberty, there’s Big Ben, there’s the dead people. Is that fun, are my grammer mussels flexing?[[4]](#footnote-4)

“Movies make you think civilization will end fast, like with aliens and explosions, but really it’ll end slow. Ours is already ending, it’s just ending too slow for people to notice. We’ve already killed most of the animals, and heated up the oceans, and brought carbon levels in the atmosphere to the highest point in eight hundred thousand years. Even if we stopped everything right now, like we all die today at lunch—no more cars, no more militaries, no more burgers—it’ll keep getting hotter for centuries. By the time we’re twenty-five? The amount of carbon in the air will have doubled again, which means hotter fires, bigger storms, worse floods. Corn, for example, won’t grow as well ten years from now. Ninety-five percent of what cows and chickens eat is guess what? Corn. So meat will be more expensive. Also when there’s more carbon in the air? Humans can’t think as clearly. So when we’re twenty-five, there will be way more hungry, scared, confused people stuck in traffic fleeing flooded or burning cities. Do you think we’re gonna sit in our cars solving climate problems then? Or are we gonna fist-fight and rape and eat each other?”[[5]](#footnote-5)

What I am saying, then, is that *“development”* might not be development after all, and that perhaps it is our Western civilization that needs to learn about “development.”

1. **It sounds as though you’re somewhat skeptical of the idea of “progress” … is that a fair accusation?**

You’re right. I am. One thousand years from now, the living might well describe the achievements of western civilization as astoundingly, inexplicable regress … after all, how could an entire civilization be so hell bent on the destruction of the planet? The poisoning of its water? The suffocating of its atmosphere? The melting of its glaciers, thus destroying the sources of fresh water for vast portions of the human population? The obliteration of millions by nuclear bombs and missiles? The creation and use of plastics that when broken down compromise all life forms on which we rely for our own living?

What kind of “progress” was that? Simply engaging in all of these destructive practices faster and faster and on ever larger and more massive scales by means of scientific and technical knowhow is hardly “progress”! That is regress! That is not to say that I doubt whether improvements can be made to laws, social arrangements, cars, homes, farming, medicine, etc.

1. **Where does the notion that history is going somewhere, and that there is such a thing as “progress” come from?**

That is a fundamentally monotheistic idea. Let me quote from one of the more challenging authors that I read recently, John Gray.[[6]](#footnote-6)

“Humanism is not science, but religion. The post-Christian faith that humans can make a world better than any in which they have so far lived. In pre-Christian Europe it was taken for granted that the future would be like the past. Knowledge and invention might advance, but ethics would remain much the same. History was a series of cycles with no overall meaning. Against this pagan view, Christians understood history as a story of sin and redemption. Humanism is the transformation of this Christian doctrine of salvation into a project of universal human emancipation. The idea of progress is a secular version of the Christian belief in providence.” This is from his book *Straw Dogs.* He goes on:

“Belief in progress has another source. In science, the growth of knowledge is cumulative. But human life as a whole is not a cumulative activity; what is gained in one generation may be lost in the next. In science, knowledge is an unmixed good; in ethics and politics it is bad as well as good. Science increases human power – and magnified the flaws in human nature. It enables us to live longer and have higher living standards than in the past. At the same time it allows us to wreak destruction – on each other and the Earth – on a larger scale than every before.

“The idea of progress – the belief that the growth of knowledge and the advance of the species go together – is false in the long run. The biblical myth of the Fall of Man contains the forbidden truth. Knowledge does not make us free. It leaves us as we have always been, prey to every kind of folly. The same trust is found in Greek myth. The punishment of Prometheus, chained toa rock for stealing fire from the gods, was not unjust.

“If the hope of progress is an illusion, how – it will be asked – are we to live? This question assumes that humans can live well only if they believe they have the power to remake the world. Yet most humans who have ever lived have not believed this – and a great many have had happy lives.” (pp. xiii – xiv)

It is obvious that as North Americans, missionaries are affected by the press and pull of a social ethos which, if examined closely, is shaped, inspired and animated by the deep assumption that life—in consonance with the economic logic of any consumer economy—consists in the abundance of possessions, especially more, better, up-to-date, possessions. In a more innocent age, it was possible for missionaries to believe that their comfortable way of life was the inevitable outcome of national life organized in a Christian way, and that, given enough time and sufficient conversions, the poorer peoples of the world would enjoy the good life.

Not only were Christianity and civilization inseparable, but, in the sober judgment of some of the best of the West’s nineteenth century Christian minds, no one could “become a Christian in the true sense of the term, however savage [they] may have been before, without becoming … civilised.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Well after the dawn of the twentieth century, with the “civilised” nations in the throes of one of the most bloody and pointless struggles in the pathetically war-strewn record of humankind, it was still bravely asserted that:

… The civilisation which is called Western is the slowly developed product of religion … [and has] surged forward to its present high water by means of the internal pressure of its inner Christian elan, … an impulse which is but the expression of a Christian principle of life moving within.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The West may well have been demystified, but perhaps it is too late, since its principal ideas about irresponsible consumption and pollution now permeate the globe’s population.[[9]](#footnote-9) We know with terrifying certainty that for 9 out of 10 of our fellow human beings, there is no possible road to our way of life in the foreseeable future. The stark and brutal truth is that the natural resources of our planet are sufficient to support “civilized” life for only a tiny fraction of its human population. As Tim Flannery noted in an essay appearing in *The New York Review of Books*, given the sorry condition of our environment, consumerism as a model of development is a dead-end model. Referring to a table in 2004 edition of the World Wildlife Fund’s *Living Planet Report* charting human impacts on our planet from 1961 to 2001,[[10]](#footnote-10) Flannery, whose publications on the global environment are well known and respected,[[11]](#footnote-11) continues: provides a stark answer.

We human beings—most particularly those of us who think of ourselves as “developed” because we cool or warm ourselves, we eat as much as we like, we travel far and fast, we live insulated from the vagaries of weather and climate extremes, are the most invasive species on the planet.

We alone are capable of bringing our planet to a shuddering end, given our capacity to amplify our consumption and spread the good news of consumption around the world so that others can join us in sliding down the deck of the sinking Titanic into the icy waters of reality.

The inevitable conclusion is that our species has entered a crisis that will last for much of the twenty-first century.[[12]](#footnote-12)

1. **Do you have any more positive final words?**

The final word for all of us is God. *“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth… and God saw all that he had made, and it was very good…”* (Genesis 1:1, 31).

In Jesus we are re-created (2 Cor. 5:17).

Our mandate is to do God’s will in God’s way on God’s earth. That means being the people that God has recreated us to be and doing the things that God wants us to do as communities of his people. And we look forward to *“a new heaven and a new earth”* (Rev. 21:1-5a). *“Creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed … [when] creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God*” (Romans 8:18*ff).*

1. James S. Dennis, *Christian Missions and Social Progress: A Sociological Study of Foreign Missions.* In Three Volumes (Fleming Revell, 1987, 1899, 1906). He summarized the massive 2000-pages of documentation in a single volume published in 1902*: Centennial Survey of Foreign Missions: A Statistical Supplement to “Christian Mission and Social Progress,” being a Conspectus of the Achievements and Results of Evangelical Missions in all Lands at the Close of the Nineteenth Century* (Fleming Revell, 1902). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Andri Snaer Magnason, *On Time and Water* (Biblioasis International Translation Series) (p. 8). Biblioasis. Kindle for PC Edition.. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “Christendom” simply referred to the political entities that self-identified as “Christian” as distinct from “Pagan” or “Muslim”. Latin Christendom was centered in Rome; Eastern Christendom was centered in Constantinople. he history of the Christian world spans about 1,700 years and includes a variety of socio-political developments, as well as advances in the [arts](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_art), architecture, literature, science, philosophy, and technology. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Doerr, Anthony. *Cloud Cuckoo Land: A Novel* (pp. 348-349). Scribner 2021. Kindle Edition. **Finalist for the 2021 National Book Award.** [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Doerr, Anthony. *Cloud Cuckoo Land: A Novel* (pp. 350-351). Scribner 2021. Kindle Edition [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. John Nicholas Gray (born 17 April 1948) is an **English political philosopher** and author with interests in analytic philosophy and the history of ideas. He retired in 2008 as School Professor of European Thought at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He is a prolific author, but the two books that have most influenced me are *Seven Types of Atheism* (2017), and *Straw dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* (2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. David Jonathon East, *Western Africa: Its Condition, and Christianity the Means of its Recovery* (London: Houlston & Stoneman, 1844), p. 243. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Allan John Macdonald, *Trade, Politics and Christianity in Africa and the East* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1916), p. 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Cf. chapter two above. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Living Planet Report 2004, WWF* (World Wide Fund for Nature), <http://assets.panda.org/downloads/lpr2004.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Tim Flannery, *The Weather Makers: How Man is Changing the Climate and What it Means for Life on Earth* (New York: Grove/Atlantic, 2006). See also his earlier book, *The Eternal Frontier: An Ecological History of North America and Its Peoples* (Melbourne, Australia: Text Publishing, 2001). No North American should fail to see the compelling feature film documentary by Al Gore, “An Inconvenient Truth,” based on his book by the same title, published by Rodale in 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Tim Flannery, “Endgame,” in *The New York Review of Books,* Vol. LII, No. 13 (August 11, 2005), pp. 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)