

# Crisis as Opportunity: Seizing the Moment for a New Renaissance

## A MANIFESTO FOR CHANGE

*Oliver Robinson, John Clarke, David Lorimer*

*This manifesto formed the basis of discussions held at the House of Lords dinner hosted by Lord Stone of Blackheath on May 13<sup>th</sup>.*

### Background: The Scientific and Medical Network

**T**he Scientific & Medical Network was founded in 1973 by a group of scientists, doctors and professionals as a response to an almost exclusively materialistic outlook in science and medicine and a marginalisation of a spiritual perspective. Over the course of thirty five years we have organised conferences, courses and lectures, published written and online materials, and formed on-going discussion groups to explore alternatives to a purely materialist worldview, while maintaining the highest scientific and ethical standards.

However, the context in which we have been active as an organisation over the three and a half decades has radically changed, creating an even greater imperative to pursue our aims. Many other organisations across the world are now also exploring new roles for spirituality, values, contemplative insight and consciousness in relation to science, medicine and philosophy, thus creating a wider movement exploring the frontiers of conventional orthodoxies.

There is also now a growing and wide-reaching socio-economic-ecological crisis which is widely seen to have its roots in a predominantly materialistic outlook as a philosophy and as a value system. This assessment is not confined to 'alternative' commentators, but has in recent years been expressed by many who would be considered as part of the socio-economic establishment. Given the pressing urgency of the crisis and the need for a progressive voice, we feel compelled to take up the challenge and make creative use of the opportunities with which the current crisis presents us. Our intention, outlined in this manifesto, is therefore to expand the SMN's traditional remit of open-ended discussion into an active consideration of appropriate responses to the crisis and the promotion of a worldview that enhances much needed wisdom and balance.

### The Presence of an All-embracing and Growing Crisis

The current global financial crisis and its associated frantic media coverage represent the visible tip of a deeply rooted socio-cultural crisis, the many filaments of which reach out into all corners of our society and knowledge systems. The ecological destruction caused by industrialised economies is now evident for all to see, with the imminent possibility of major climate change and rise in sea levels, continued deforestation and extinction of many species. There is a crisis in the social fabric, shown by the gradually decreasing level of trust and cohesion in the UK over the past 50 years. The uneven distribution of income across society is worse than at any time in history, with Britain being one of the most extreme cases in the developed world. There is also a psychological crisis, as rates of depression and anxiety continue to rise, while reported levels of well-being are in decline. Despite advances in recuperative medicine, physical health is declining as levels of obesity, diabetes, liver disease, alcohol abuse, heart disease, stroke, cancer and other lifestyle-related disorders increase, leading to intolerable demands on the NHS and other health systems.

### The Roots of the Crisis

A crisis that manifests itself in so many domains simultaneously emerges from deep-seated beliefs and values in the affected cultures. There is strong evidence that a fundamental paradigm has been a major contributor to the current impasse. Questionable assumptions underlying this paradigm are:

1. The *separation* of the individual from the social nexus and from nature, and the corresponding affirmation of individualism, individual success and self-interest (by contrast with the ideals of community, co-operation and social responsibility).
2. The *separation* of knowledge specialism in the sciences, philosophy and humanities, leading to the fragmentation of knowledge (as opposed to a more interdisciplinary, co-operative and integrated approach).

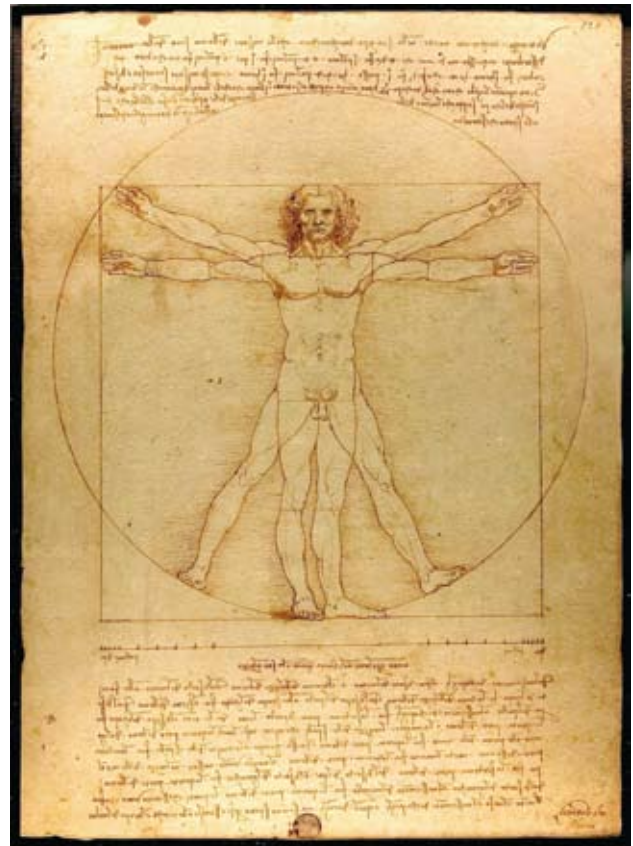
3. The adversarial *separation* of reason from feeling and practical living, leading to the belief that science is a process devoid of feeling and intuition (which cries out for a new approach to knowledge which takes account of the full range of human experience).
4. The prioritising of economic *growth*, material *gain* and quantitative *profit* as ultimate ends in themselves, linked to a narrow model of laissez-faire capitalism (by contrast with an economics enlightened by a moral commitment to compassion and social justice).
5. The deterministic and reductionist view of living beings as *machines* leading to the view that consciousness is an illusion (by contrast with the recognition of the distinctive nature of life and mind and their central place in our world).
6. Nature and living beings as *resources* to be treated as objects for exploitation and consumption (rather than as a spiritual community of all beings).
7. Science as the only path to reality, and empirical evidence as the sole criterion of truth (by contrast with a more embracing epistemology which recognises that there are many paths to truth).
8. Matters of value, goodness, love, quality and beauty as merely subjective, and therefore subordinate to the physical sciences (rather than as embedded in the fabric of life and the cosmos).
9. Science and scientific evidence as requiring or implying a world devoid of spiritual depth and spiritual knowledge (by contrast with a science which is seen once again as a part of the perennial search for wisdom).

### Promoting New Opportunities: towards a 'New Renaissance'

According to the historian Arnold Toynbee, new cultures and worldviews emerge as a response to the challenge of wide-reaching crises that require unprecedented solutions. The new direction that we are promoting is one which has the potential to transcend many of the divisions and false assumptions outlined above. In pursuit of this we believe that a reconceptualised, more realistic view of science is essential, one which sees science as a lived human activity in which the first person 'I' and second person 'you' positions are as important as the third person 'it'. The practising scientist knows that inspiration, intuition, imaginative insight, dialogue, politics and conflict are as much part of science as experimentation and data-collection. All these aspects of being can be seen as operating in the scientist without loss of rigour or validity of findings.

Alongside a broader view of science, we need an emerging spiritual ethos, which is free from the straightjacket of outdated religious dogma, one in which we do not hark back to a lost age of truth and perfection, a proverbial Garden of Eden, but accept the optimistic and humbling Enlightenment axiom that human progress is possible but not certain, and that the ever greater realisation of human potentiality lies open for us.

We believe that it is of utmost importance to move towards a greater sense of equilibrium and harmony in our approach to nature outside of us, to the spiritual world within us, and to the relation between these two. Our world is saturated with antagonistic polarities and either-or disputes, which



need to be embraced in a new synthesis that honours both sides and seeks a higher level of understanding and toleration. A new worldview will therefore grasp the need for a balance between dialectical opposites such as matter and spirit, head and heart, reason and feeling, individual and collective, and local and global. In this pursuit of balance and healing, both allopathic and complementary forms of medicine have a role to play.

This approach has implications for social and political practice. The modern emphasis on nationalism and on partisan and parochial human identities, along with the pervasive development and employment of military force, has proved increasingly unsustainable and a threat to our very existence. Any worldview which is adequate for our survival and future flourishing must give a central place to the ideal of global community and co-operation, and must involve a commitment to the ideals of universal human respect and equality, to global justice, and to the attainment of a world without war.

The goal of human survival and flourishing also depends on wise and sustainable attitudes towards our relationship with the natural world. Thinking globally, we need a philosophy of life which integrates the human within the natural, seeing our individual spiritual aims as integrated into the spiritual qualities of the world and the cosmos at large. At the same time we must recognise the importance of the local where, for example, low-impact technologies and locally co-ordinated actions are appropriate responses.

### A Growing Worldwide Movement

The research of Paul Ray has found that up to a quarter of the population already holds elements of the emerging

worldview outlined briefly above. He refers to this group as the 'Cultural Creatives'. The emergence of the Cultural Creatives can be seen as an important development in world historical terms because it is the first time in recorded history that a value shift has emerged at a global level simultaneously. It is a bottom-up rather than a top-down movement which has arisen spontaneously in many contexts of human experience and endeavour.

This emphasises the fact that the Scientific and Medical Network is one manifestation of a much larger movement, and that a shift in worldview can only occur through the combined action of many groups and individuals.

This is a challenge to our future, and it is also an opportunity for us to seize and embrace. It is our intention, therefore, to create close links with organisations that are similarly aligned towards a transformed worldview and towards bringing about positive change. We envisage building partnerships with associates in order to enhance co-operation in regard to practical action and education, in order more effectively to cross-fertilise ideas, and more explicitly to embed our activities in this wider movement of change. With our uniquely interdisciplinary emphasis, our wide-ranging and high-calibre membership, our history of frontier thinking our pedigree of cutting-edge conferences, the SMN has a unique contribution to make to this movement.

## A Programme of Action

It is important that this vision of a New Renaissance should move boldly from theory to practice, and with this in mind the Network will develop a programme of action which will reach to our members, to other like-minded organisations and to the community at large. We envisage that the campaign will initially comprise four elements: publications, online resources, outreach (in schools, universities and business) and conferences/events relevant to the contemporary situation. The fruitful development and detailed working-out of these and other activities will require the participation of our worldwide SMN membership. As we develop and concretise our programme of action, we will keep members informed by way of updates in the Network Review and on our website.

This campaign rests on the belief that the world needs a new integration of modern science, philosophy and ancient spiritual wisdom, a 'New Renaissance', inspired by the 'Old Renaissance', the latter with its sense of renewal and synthesis, but created anew to confront the needs of our own time. We believe that the Network has a unique role in formulating and realising this vision of the future, and we hope for your support in achieving these aims.

*If you would like to contribute a chapter towards a 'Crisis as Opportunity' book, see inside front cover or page 37 for more details.*



*Images from the 35th Anniversary Dinner at the Cholmondeley Room, House of Lords, on 13th May*