



Time to Raise our Game

A personal view from the Chair

John Clarke

Exploring beyond the materialist paradigm and reflecting on the frontiers between science and spirituality have always been central aims of the Network. These aims have been pursued by open-minded discussion and in a spirit of respect and toleration of many different viewpoints. We have sought to be receptive towards new observations and insights, and to avoid association with any dogma or creed.

The current sense of crisis and confusion, engendered by many different social, economic, environmental and religious factors, has added a sharp sense of urgency to these aims, and I believe the time is right to raise our game. The Network needs to take on with renewed urgency the task of a fundamental questioning of the basic values of our civilisation, and to confront the need for a new world view, one that is able to give us a new vision for the future of the human race and planet Earth. This is the ambitious project we are now embarking on.

We are not alone in this ambition. Over the past year the economic crisis has encouraged many commentators, from a variety of fields, to raise this very issue, and many have argued that it is not enough simply to get beyond the present crisis and back to normal; we must examine the fundamental attitudes which have caused the problem in the first place. It is our civilisation that is in question, not just a set of economic theories, and hence nothing less than a fundamental reassessment of our values and core beliefs is needed.

Of course, we are not single-handedly going to change the world, even with the help of like-minded individuals and organisations. And I am sure we would all recognise that a campaign to propagate a single, absolute ideology, and to arrogate to ourselves the sole custodianship of Truth, would be pointless or worse. Nor should we seek to become a politically activist organisation or engage in factional propaganda, which would be contrary to the spirit of the SMN.

Nevertheless I believe we have an important role to play. There are several good reasons for making this claim: the SMN is in many ways a unique organisation in that it attempts to build a bridge between the objectives of science and spirituality, and to integrate these into the broad cultural and moral concerns of society; our history and our stated vision and aims give us a broad philosophical perspective which enables us to grapple with fundamental issues; we maintain high professional standards of inquiry and output; and we are not afraid to address tough and often unpopular issues that challenge orthodoxy and conventional wisdom.

This means that the project, so far as the SMN is concerned, does not commit us to launching out into radically new direction, or wandering off our well established paths. I believe that the quest for a new world-view is a natural outcome of the thinking and speculation that we have long been engaged in, out of issues relating to holism, health, consciousness, alternative traditions, spiritual insight, scientific speculation. All these are relevant, and the project will not alter our normal programme of events and publications.

In brief: working towards a better world by addressing the need for a better world-view is something we have been doing since the Network was founded. We now need to capitalise on this past, and to use our experience to face the demands of the future.

The issues we face are complex, to say the least, and it will take time and the contributions from our members and from many other sources to give shape to this project. The following benchmarks might serve as a tentative framework:

A tolerant approach, which implies a spirit of understanding and openness, a recognition of the plurality of beliefs, and an attempt to understand beliefs that are different from our own.

A balanced approach, which both accepts the need for the rigorous methods of the natural sciences and at the same time acknowledges the importance of imagination and intuition.

A sense of community, namely the celebration of the oneness of all humanity, accompanied by a robust commitment to justice, peace and human rights.

An ecological approach, involving the recognition of the close relationship between the human and the natural world, and our ethical commitment to the latter.

An integrated approach, which upholds the central place of mind and values in human life.

A spiritual approach, which affirms the universal desire for a meaningful life, for self-transformation, and for an expansion of human consciousness.

I put these forward as no more than a sketch of the sort of basic ideals which might inform and motivate us in our attempt to rethink the values of our civilisation. They are offered as part of our ongoing discussion, and as an invitation to all our members to participate in this project.

Following the 'Manifesto for Change' by Oliver Robinson which featured in the previous issue of the Review, a working party has been formed, with Claudia Nielsen as chair, to carry this project forward, and as a first stage we are working on a collection of essays on the subject of a 'New Renaissance', with contributions from members and others. It was advertised in the same issue, and will be published in 2010. The next stage will be to invite other organisations we think will be sympathetic to this project to join with us in some kind of associative arrangement. We will of course be keeping you in touch with developments.