

PART 1

THE WEST TODAY

Chapter Two

BRAVE NEW WORLD?

In *The Times*¹ of 6 November 2004, the Business section had a report by Nic Hopkins, 'Microsoft game set to break record':

Microsoft is set to make software history next week. On Tuesday Bill Gates's software group is scheduled to launch its futuristic *Halo 2* computer game, which involves an alien invasion of Earth and which is expected to generate \$75 million (£40.6 million) of sales on the first day. The figure easily eclipses Hollywood's \$45 million record first-day box office takings, set by *Shrek 2* earlier this year.

Michael Cassius, director of Xbox – Microsoft's games console – in Europe, the Middle East and Africa, said: "These figures show that computer games are now very firmly in the mainstream, they are as important as films in the economic and cultural sense."

Indeed, breaking records is becoming something of a habit for the games software industry. Only last weekend another game, *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, clocked up £27 million of sales, beating the UK record box office receipts generated by *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* on the first weekend of its launch. *San Andreas*, an ultra-violent computer game set in the ganglands of a fictional city modelled on Los Angeles, was created by Edinburgh's Rockstar Games. It sold more than 700,000 units last weekend, almost treble the previous record of 250,000 set by its predecessor, *Vice City*. More than three million units of *San Andreas*, worth \$150 million, are thought to have been sold around the world since it was released ...

In John's Gospel we read of God's great love for the world. The challenge is to relate this to the (post-Christendom) world we actually inhabit: a rapidly changing world, the world of computer games and so much more that's new. Even if it isn't

¹ i.e. *The London Times* (hereafter in the form: T 06 Nov 04)

easy to do so, we have to try. In this chapter I want to look at the social state of the world we Westerners inhabit.

Change

Perhaps, of all that characterises the present day, the most disconcerting factor is change. If it's true that life speeds up as you grow older, this happens in a world which is subject not just to change but to accelerating change. I'm considering change under three headings: 'time', 'future shock', and 'moving the boundary markers'. The first section, on time, deals a rather abstract concept – but one that's vital for understanding our world.

TIME Our Western way of seeing things (worldview) and experience of life are strongly rooted in the ancient Greek civilisation – of which more later. Through the influence of the philosopher Plato in particular, the Greeks came to value 'timeless eternity beyond all change', as Swiss theologian Emil Brunner termed it². This was like Indian thought on the matter³. For both Classical Greece, like India, what was timeless was the most real. Brunner, discussing how we experience time, says that our modern understanding of it is quite different. For us, it's measurable time that's real. Anything supposed to be eternal we find it hard to take seriously. And we've mastered time (or so we think). We can measure quantities of time. We break it down into smaller and smaller time-units, seconds and fractions of a second. In practice, it's the present moment that's most real to us Westerners – and the present moment is always here-and-then-gone. Time, for us, is always 'about to pass into zero', to collapse into nothing:

It is this conception – not the watch or the telephone or the aeroplane – which is the cause of man's not having time. Time was lost to him ... long before he had overcome it technologically. The exact time-signal on the radio, which every decent

² *Christianity and Civilisation* (1948); reproduced in part in ed. C.T. McIntire, *God, History, and Historians*; 1977; New York; OUP; pp82-95, as *The Problem of Time*.

³ My own suspicion is that there may have been a link between the two, the Greek and the Indian understandings deriving, ultimately, from a common 'Indo-European' source.

citizen notes in order to set his watch correct to the second, the wrist watch, which at any moment shows him the exact time – all these devices have been invented because man wants them, because time vanishes under his fingers, because he does not have time any longer.

How we relate to time, according to Brunner, governs the way we experience life – both as individuals and as civilisations. ‘Everyone knows that the haste and rush which characterise our life are something typically modern,’ he says, ‘and probably a symptom of a deep-seated disease.’ And – writing just after World War 2 – he points out the frequency with which people say: “I don’t have time.”

The Christian understanding of time and its relation to eternity stands midway between ... the opposing views of East and West. At first sight it seems much more similar to the Eastern than to the Western concept, its main thesis being that God is eternal, and that therefore true reality is eternity. Is not the Gospel the promise of eternal life? Is it not said that God is unchangeable?

But, he points out, the way the eternal God relates to time is totally different from Indian or Greek beliefs about this. God creates time, and he gives us time – so we can have the opportunity to become what we’re called to be. ‘ ... He has set a beginning to time and ... an end to time ... Between these two points, the start and the finish, something happens, which is significant even for God.’

If God gives time, it’s the Devil’s business to snatch it away again. He’s very good at it. ‘Frenetic’ might be a good term to describe our way of life in the West. We have too little time for the things that really matter, such as family life and friendship – and it’s doing dreadful things to us. We Christians, if church life makes significant demands on us, can be in a worse state, even, than unbelievers: often we do what they do, and more besides (for God!).

The combination of time pressure and high disposable incomes has led us to embrace the offer of an instant culture. McDonalds and the mobile phone are perhaps its most potent symbols: “I want to eat now – I mean, immediately; and I

want to talk to you now – yes, this moment.” The Italians and, following them, the French, have been trying to re-introduce the idea of ‘slow eating’ (eating meals the way traditional to their cultures). And there are still people like my wife who, having resisted the idea of having a mobile phone for years, uses it just as little as she can get away with. “What makes you think I’d *want* to be available to be talked to all the time?” she asked one puzzled telesalesman. Is it possible to discern something of a reaction developing against the pressurised, instant life?

Today, as I prepared to revise this chapter, I came across the following, about the popularity of words in the English language, in the copy of the *Daily Mail* (22 Jun 06) lying around in my hairdresser’s:

Time is something we can never have enough of – making it the commonest noun in the English language, according to researchers. Our speech shows us to be obsessed with time-keeping, as ‘year’ takes third position [after ‘person’], ‘day’ comes in fifth and ‘week’ is in 17th place. Although we may clock watch, we are also fond of the word ‘work’, which appears at number 16 in the list – while ‘play’ and ‘rest’ do not even make it into the top 100. The list, which appears in the revised eleventh edition of the Concise Oxford English Dictionary, gives an intriguing insight into our world.

Fascinating!

FUTURE SHOCK Alvin Toffler first published his book *Future Shock* in 1970, but he’d coined the term five years earlier. ‘Future shock’ happens when the world around us changes faster than we can properly adjust to it. It’s a special form of the phenomenon of ‘culture shock’. Of the latter, Toffler says: ‘Culture shock is when a traveller suddenly finds himself in a place where yes may mean no, where a “fixed price” is negotiable, where to be kept waiting in an outer office is no cause for insult, where laughter may signify anger. It is what happens when the familiar psychological cues that help an individual to function in society are suddenly withdrawn and replaced by new ones that are strange or

incomprehensible.’ Then he goes on to define the special case of culture shock he wants to consider⁴:

Future shock is a time phenomenon, a product of the greatly accelerated rate of change in society. It arises from the superimposition of a new culture on an old one. It is culture shock in one’s own society. But its impact is far worse. For ... most travellers have the comforting knowledge that the culture they left behind will be there to return to. The victim of future shock does not.

Take an individual out of his own culture and set him down suddenly in an environment sharply different from his own, with a different set of cues to react to – different conceptions of time, space, work, love, religion, sex, and everything else – then cut him off from any hope of retreat to a more familiar social landscape, and the dislocation he suffers is doubly severe. Moreover, if this new culture is itself in constant turmoil, and if – worse yet – its values are incessantly changing, the sense of disorientation will be still further intensified. Given few clues as to what kind of behaviour is rational under the radically new circumstances, the victim may well become a hazard to himself and others.

Now imagine not merely an individual but an entire society, an entire generation – including its weakest, least intelligent, and most irrational members – suddenly transported into this new world. The result is mass disorientation, future shock on a grand scale.

Writing almost forty years ago, he asserted: ‘This is the prospect that man now faces.’ And he asked: ‘Is all this exaggerated?’ It would be hard to find a more acute observation than his about life in the West today. Toffler wrote as a true – if secular – prophet.

The key word in the quotation, for our purposes, is ‘disorientation’. When I go into any new culture, even in my home town, the spiritual forces at work in this other culture are different from those operating in the environment I inhabit. But spiritual dynamics also change when I move to other geographical locations – not

⁴ Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock*; 1971; New York; Bantam / Random House; pp11-12.

something a secular prophet is likely to understand or point out. So, if I go to another culture in another place, there will be at least two spiritual changes and a psychological challenge I have to cope with. (It would be interesting to analyse the rise of Islamism – ‘fundamentalist Islam’ – on a culture-shock basis). Future shock doesn’t involve me in moving to another place. But it still confronts me with spiritual as well as psychological challenges. The future culture invading the present has different spiritual forces at work in it – by virtue of its being a different culture. (One of the most pernicious of these I want to look at under the next heading, about moving the boundary markers). Besides, disorientation itself involves spiritual attack as well as psychological disturbance. Toffler is surely right that future shock is more drastic than simple culture shock, but what he says needs to be translated into spiritual terms to be better understood. When it is, future shock, like culture shock, can be seen to involve two spiritual shifts as well as psychological disorientation and spiritual attack – only with future shock they’re more fundamental.

MOVING THE BOUNDARY MARKERS ‘Do not move your neighbour’s boundary stone set up by your predecessors in the inheritance you receive in the land the Lord your God is giving you to possess’, said the Law in the Old Testament (Deut 19:14)⁵. By Hosea’s time, the Lord was passing the following judgement on his people through the prophet: “Judah’s leaders are like those who move boundary stones. I will pour out my wrath on them like a flood of water” (Hos 5:10). We live in an age when moral and legal boundaries which have been recognised as God-given standards and principles for centuries are simply being moved to where folk want them to be. An example would be the embracing of the new idea of ‘gay marriage’ – unknown in history until now. One expects such a thing from the world, when unrestrained; we’re in real trouble when the Church starts behaving similarly.

⁵ The reference was to physical markers showing the boundaries of land that people owned.

In recent times, the Church in the West has rightly revised some of its moral and ethical thinking, and the guidelines that flow from it. For instance, an absolute hard line on divorce, imposed on a whole nation, isn't something the Church now believes it should demand – divorce, after all, was permitted by Moses. Again, the Sermon on the Mount has come to be recognised for what it is: a challenge to Kingdom living issued by Christ to his disciples, not a blueprint for national legislation. Nor would the Church today want to encourage unquestioning obedience to authority, as was often the case in the past. When read carefully, the Bible won't support such a position.

For bishops to ask the clergy and congregations under their charge to 'reconsider' what they believe about homosexual practice, though – as is currently happening in parts of the Church of England – when the true intention is simply to engineer a change of mind on the issue, is a very different matter. So too is the tendency for leaders in historic denominations in the West these days to press for a multi-faith agenda to be adopted: Jesus is *not*, they want us to believe, the *only* way to the Father⁶. In such ways, an agenda is being pushed in parts of the Church which, however much it's ready to quote Scripture, won't actually place itself under its authority⁷.

The first three examples – a softening of the line on divorce, the retreat from seeking laws based on the Sermon on the Mount, and the more cautious line on authority – show the Church reforming its thinking against the standard of Scripture: beneficial change. The last two – church leaders wanting homosexual practice seen in a new light, and promoting a multi-faith agenda – constitute the effective rejection of that standard: destructive change. Our call, as Church, is to be salt and light to society (Matt 5:13-16): to flavour and preserve, and to show

⁶ There are some cunning variations on this theme – such as that it is Christ who saves in all religions, even where this isn't understood.

⁷ As I revise this (June '06), the worldwide Anglican Communion is looking schism in the face because of intransigent, radically-liberal behaviour within some of its constituent parts – especially the Episcopal Church of the United States (which, amongst other things, has recently consecrated an openly-practising homosexual as bishop).

the way. When the Church turns against the standard it's been entrusted with, it can no longer adequately fulfil its salt-and-light function. Itself compromised, it watches helpless as ungodliness is multiplied in society beyond the Church – which, in turn, serves to drag down the Church's own life yet further (the Church always being affected by the surrounding society). What hope is there for the prodigal son if his father gives up and adopts the young man's standards? Don't they both end up 'in a far country'? "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil", warns Isaiah (5:20), "who put darkness for light and light for darkness ..."

Maybe all this is a sign that the Lord has been 'giving this generation over to the sinful desires of their hearts' (Rom 1:24, 28); with the fearful consequences which flow from that. Maybe a sign, also, that he's decided the time has come when the faithful part of the Church has to be separated from the faithless. But this season of rapid change, with its giving up of standards long believed to be right, isn't a happy one. Whatever spiritual forces are at work in the ungodly moving of boundary markers, they're certainly powerful, devious, and mighty effective in achieving their aims.

What to do in times such as these? No one has put it better than David: ' "When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?" The Lord is in his holy temple; the Lord is on his heavenly throne (Ps 11:3-4).' We can rest in knowing, as we work to turn the tide, that God retains ultimate control of things – even while boundaries seem to get shifted endlessly.

Symptoms of sickness

All the evidence suggests we're in trouble across a broad front. Even if not all the news is bad, what's going wrong considerably outweighs what's going right. The following examples are prompted by what I've come across recently in the media.

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIFE The family unit is the basic building block God has chosen for both his world and his Church. Since most of the Church – at least in the West – seems to think that the individual and the congregation, rather than the family and the individual, are its basic constituents, perhaps it isn't surprising that the world is also confused about the place of the family in the scheme of things.

Healthy family life is founded on the traditional concept of marriage: in its simplest form, one man to one woman, for life. There never was, of course, some golden age in the past when everyone, even in the most strictly religious societies, lived up to the official ideal. But there's a lawlessness today relating to marriage and family life which contrasts with much saner ways of living in previous generations.

Divorce, banned for so long, was always going to have to be permitted. What didn't have to happen was making it so easy to come by. Censorship, enforced for so long, was always going to have to go. In a free society, a few privileged people in authority can't be allowed to prescribe for the rest what they may or may not view and read. But what removing the restraints did was to reveal the sheer moral bankruptcy of life as it used to be behind the repressive 'Christian' veneer of the old Christendom that collapsed after World War 2. The established boundaries – which to a large extent had been imposed on society – were taken away, and we had nothing sufficiently sensible or credible to put in their place. The ending of censorship, the introduction of the contraceptive pill – which helped break any link between sex and marriage – and the easy availability of divorce opened the floodgates. If, for more people in the past than had been realised, sex wasn't always confined to marriage, at least the idea prevailed that it ought to be. This was the standard that folk either adhered to or failed to adhere to – but it was the standard society accepted. Today, however, sexual abstinence is seen by many as almost deviant behaviour – or, at least, eccentric

(and, frankly, almost incomprehensible) – and faithfulness to one partner for life a hopelessly unrealistic standard.

As the age of puberty decreases, children become sexually active at an increasingly early age. When what might be an appropriate age of consent is debated, sex between children of similar age is of rather less concern than sex between children and older adults – as one would expect. In the latter case, the perceived danger is of adults taking advantage of children, and causing them psychological damage. In the case of sex between children of similar age, though, the concern has become almost solely the avoidance of pregnancy or sexually-transmitted diseases. They're bombarded with propaganda telling them to use condoms – but, in Britain, at least, they're disinclined to; so, often, they don't. Consequently infection and pregnancy rates amongst the young here have become serious problems. It's increasingly being pointed out that children are having their childhood stolen from them⁸. Whole swathes of our commercial culture – not least in the entertainment sector – have become vested interests exerting intolerable pressure on kids to turn prematurely into insecure, sexually-promiscuous, high-spending, adults. In effect, we're allowing our younger generation to be subjected to is intentional future shock of a particularly subversive kind. What is this doing to them and to society in the long run?

The revolution in expectations and behaviour has come to affect people of all ages. In an article for *SAGA Magazine* for October 2004, *Living in sin at 60*, David Lovibond says: 'Since the social revolution of the Sixties, many couples have chosen to live together rather than marry ... there's now little stigma attached to mature couples sharing loving relationships out of wedlock ...' One couple he talked to – contented cohabitees for whom companionship was the key issue – asked why they didn't tie the knot, told him: 'Marriage isn't an issue. We're two lonely people keeping each other company. Why change things?'

⁸ See Rowan Williams, *Lost Icons*; 2000; London and New York; Continuum (T&T Clark); ISBN 0-8264-6799-7; ch 1, 'Childhood and Choice' pp27-38.

A while back, the appliance manufacturer Miele (slogan: 'Anything else is a compromise') proclaimed in one of their ads: 'Statistically, people change their partner before they change their Miele washing machine', explaining, 'Today the average marriage lasts 10 years. A Miele washing machine is built to last 20. It'll cherish your clothes till death do you part. Faithful to the end, it's quiet, it's energy efficient and it's updateable. So, should you tie the knot, make sure you have a pre-nuptial agreement as to who gets the washing machine.' Such have become the values of our materialistic society that we happily treat marriage breakdown as a joke. Recent surveys have shown up one fact that serves as an interesting commentary on our age: as a rule, the more people spend on their wedding, in relation to their income and their families' wealth, the sooner their marriage is likely to fail.

Having children was regarded by potential parents in previous generations in a range of different ways. For many families before the rise of the welfare state, children were an economic necessity – to help on the farm, to look after their parents in old age, or whatever. In the case of the well-to-do in most societies, at least one son was needed to carry on the family line and inherit his father's estate; and the son would need a wife. For poor families, though, pregnancy could simply become a hazard implicit in the marriage relationship – potentially one more mouth to feed. Today, kids are often seen just as 'accessory items'.

Ps 127:3-5 gives us the Kingdom's view of how having children is meant to be valued by parents: '... children are a reward from [the Lord] ... blessed is the man who has his quiver full of them ...' These verses need to be transposed out of the Middle Eastern culture of 2,500 years ago, and into our own, of course. The principle remains, though, even after the details have been changed: children are a God-given blessing. One commentator on these verses⁹ warns that the sons mentioned are likely to be a handful before they're a quiverfull!

⁹ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150 Commentary*; 1975; London; IVP; ISBN 0 85111 629 9; p442.

That's reality, and may be one reason why in a high-pressure, materialistic world, kids, when not desirable accessory items, are frequently reckoned a bane rather than a blessing. Frequently the media update us on the overall cost to (middle-class) parents of having a child – and it's (needlessly) astronomical.

For most of our generation, the child in the womb has been reduced in status to a mere thing, 'a foetus'. In a recent debate in Britain's House of Lords (the revising chamber in our Parliament), one member, who doesn't hold a high view of the sanctity of life, felt led to say: "When I was supporting the 1967 Abortion Act I did not dream that we would reach a figure of 155,000 abortions every single year ... We have now reached a new and alarming situation where viable foetuses which could live a good and useful life – perhaps even be geniuses – are killed unnecessarily. I believe that it is now time to revisit the whole issue of abortion."¹⁰ How has it come about that we slaughter our little ones in such numbers for convenience' sake (because mostly this is for convenience)? Is this the price we pay for worshipping at the altars of Eros and Aphrodite¹¹? Across the Western world, how many of our children are we sacrificing in this way?

In an article, *The sorry side of a single life*, for the *Sunday Times* of 24 October 2004¹², David Willetts reckons that 'Just about the most important social change going on around us is simply that more and more of us are living on our own. In 1950 just 3% of British people lived alone. That figure has increased,' he says, 'to 10% and all the indications are that the trend will continue.'

In the old days we believed in the nuclear family. But in family life, as in physics, we have been breaking up into smaller and smaller particles. Taken to extremes this process could result in all of us living in a completely atomised society. On this view the shifts from large families to small families, from marriage to cohabitation, from

¹⁰ Quoted in a newsletter from CARE, an organisation which campaigns for Christian values. Indeed, people generally here in Britain, and our parliament, seem to want the issue discussed again – even if the government, as such, doesn't (as of June 2006).

¹¹ The pagan Greek goddesses of 'love' and sex, respectively.

¹² Hereafter ST 24 Oct 04

shared parenthood to lone parenthood are all merely transitional steps to a world in which we all live on our own.

One single woman of 45 Willetts spoke to, who never wanted children, said: “A lot of my friends have made a similar choice to eschew long-term relationships – only about half of them are married. I love the freedom of coming home and having the place to myself, not being answerable to anyone.” Willetts sees the attractions of this kind of lifestyle well enough, but he still makes the comment: “This is bad news; ultimately no man, or woman, is an island.” And he takes a look back:

This is just the sort of world that was predicted by some of the most interesting thinkers of the mid-20th century. Joseph Schumpeter, an Austrian economist, thought that capitalism’s problems would not be poverty, as Marxists claimed. Instead he forecast a future in which capitalism was so successful that consumerism triumphed and we all lived for the present, not the future. As a result, he predicted, we would have fewer children and we would save less. Similarly the sociologist Karl Mannheim predicted that we would have fewer ties across the generations and would instead live in a world where our most important bonds were with friends or lovers of our own generation. And who could forget Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, in which having sex for the purpose of having children is considered rather disgusting.

For a while, until the mid-90s, I led an inner-urban Church of England congregation in the North of England. Being a pastor in the English state church involved – in more than just theory – being chaplain to any in the community who wanted that. Among many important questions this threw up for me, I’ve been unable to lay down those relating to marriage. If individuals hadn’t been ‘married’ before – hadn’t gone through a wedding ceremony, that is – and one of them lived in my parish, I was obliged to take a marriage service for them if asked, whatever their religious or other views.

Sometimes couples who’d been together for years came asking for a wedding service, and their kids would act as page boys and bridesmaids for them. My

question to myself in such cases took the form: In what sense are these two not *already* married? Am I not just helping them to make what has been an implicit covenant so far an explicit one (by being made in public, and before witnesses)? If so, I was only too pleased to be helping. Other – ‘unmarried’ – couples came who were now ‘an item’ and wanted a white wedding, but must have had a good number of partners each before pairing off with one another (there was little point in asking). It was good that they were now settling down, but I used to wonder, concerning either of them, whether it was really their first marriage.

In 1Cor 6:16, Paul asks: “Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, ‘The two will become one flesh’.” This quote from Genesis (2:24) relates to the Lord’s ordaining of marriage. What is being implied in the 1Corinthians passage is that ‘sex *is* marriage!’¹³ In the light of this, it was hard when those who’d been divorced, but had either been ‘the innocent parties’ or had mended their ways (usually through becoming Christians), wanted a new start but were not supposed to be married again in church – when church rules obliged clergy to accommodate those who had never repented, but could comply with the detail of the rule-book. In fact, although the church authorities disapproved, the state, as another competent authority (!), was content that the clergy use their discretion with respect to re-marriage in church; which I did.

The other day I caught the end of a radio interview with someone who must have been an Anglican pastoral theologian. He was making the point that although the Church of England has had a theology of the marriage service from the beginning, it’s never had a theology of marriage, as such. If true – and I suspect it is – it’s a serious matter. But I’m aware that most of the books I’ve ever seen on the subject of marriage by evangelical Christian authors contain no adequate theology of marriage either. Certainly the Catholic Church has a theology of

¹³ If so, this renders the slogan ‘No sex before marriage!’ somewhat problematical ... (the problem being with the wording, of course, not the idea itself)

marriage; or, perhaps, several competing theologies of marriage. But although the Catholics have profound insights on the matter, there seems an amount of confusion in their thinking on the subject; certainly against a straightforward biblical standard.

My point is this. If the Church is confused about both marriage (generally) and the role of the family in the Church (if not in the world), can we be surprised that the world is confused? Certainly the spiritual forces of 'the world, the flesh and the devil' are primarily responsible for the present lawlessness in the area of marriage and family, but hasn't the Church been helping them do their work by its failure to articulate simply and clearly what the Bible teaches on these matters?

NO-COMMITMENT RELATIONSHIPS Emblazoned across the chest of the girl who took the money for my newspaper recently were the words:

MEN ARE FOR PLEASURE
NOT FOR LIFE

Increasingly, it seems, people want to relate sexually to other individuals without emotional involvement, let alone attachment. These other individuals are regarded as of little value other than for the purposes of physical interaction. Men have commonly used women on this basis, down the ages. Now women are increasingly using men in similar fashion; whereas, before, only a tiny minority did. What does this mean for our humanity, and for the future of our society?

DESIGNER FAMILIES Having kids, for those who want them, is going hi-tech; and ethical considerations don't seem to hold back for long moves in this direction. Alexandra Frean, in an article entitled *Couples may get the chance to design the 'ideal' baby*¹⁴ writes:

¹⁴ T 12 Nov 04. As I revise this in mid-'06, the process is well under way in the UK.

Couples will be able to choose donated sperm or eggs to create their designer child, under proposals published by the fertility watchdog. Characteristics such as height, eye colour and intelligence could be selected if women undergoing fertility treatment are given more freedom to pick the donated sperm, egg or embryo.

The controversial proposals are part of a public consultation launched yesterday by the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA). But critics were concerned last night that the proposal could lead to more couples demanding 'designer' babies and to parents having unrealistic expectations of the resulting children – a point accepted by the authority in its consultation document.

The practice of screening donors for desirable characteristics is widespread in the US, where couples can pay up to \$25,000 to secure the right type of donor. In America, donors are routinely screened accordingly for high intelligence, family medical history and physical traits such as height, weight, and eye, skin and hair colours.

Futurologists in previous generations warned us of such things. Perhaps we didn't take them seriously for the same reason we don't take seriously people today who are predicting future trends with some accuracy: how can we know at any time which of the multitude of voices reckoning to tell us about the future have real insight into what's coming? Only when predictions prove right do we know who had the ability to see ahead. Who can tell what lies ahead of us in the area of designer families? Almost certainly we'll see such interventions as human cloning. Doubtless, also, ideas yet to occur to most of us will lead to techniques that would repel us, were we to be told about them today. What is intolerable today, however, can be the subject of popular demand tomorrow. After all, some of the things we're increasingly comfortable with now outraged a previous generation when they were part of the Nazi programme – selective breeding and euthanasia for humans, for example. Today's thinking appears to be: if we *can* do something technologically, and we *want* to do it, then we *will* do it. Our wills and emotions have become the foundation of our ethics: we have few objective standards any more.

GAY RELATIONSHIPS Over the past 25 years there's been a 'gay revolution'. In Britain, until 1967, male homosexual practice had been against the law, even if lesbianism hadn't. But even when the law was relaxed, the stigma attached to homosexuality was such that most male and female homosexuals tried to hide their sexual orientation. Across the West, though, the revolution in heterosexual behaviour prompted the idea that the homosexuals might 'come out' and enjoy a similar freedom. 'Gay Pride' marches began to be organised in high-profile cities such as New York and Sydney. Indeed, in Britain (as elsewhere), the radical activists amongst the 'gay' community began a campaign of 'outing' well-known figures who, though homosexual, pretended to be otherwise.

The West prides itself on being tolerant – even if often it isn't. So the homosexual activists were, if not pushing at an open door, pushing a door that was always going to open for them. By now the gay community is part of the general scene, and 'inclusiveness' and anti-discrimination values in society are powerfully helping their cause. Some scientists argue that homosexuality is part of the natural order in the human race just as in the rest of the animal world – and that, therefore, it's perverse and unfair not to accept it. Liberal Christian theologians, following the scientists, speak of 'the God-given sexuality' of gays. In the past, they say, Christians accepted slavery, rejected left-handedness, and discriminated against women, but had to change their attitude on each of these. Now the Christian community, they say, must see homosexuality in a new, and positive, light.

There's an issue of science versus revealed truth here (as well as issues of biblical interpretation that follow from it). For a long time it's been pointed out that the Bible isn't a scientific textbook, and never pretended to be one. Fair enough, up to a point. But the Bible does make a host of assertions that are either true in the science they imply, or false. Homosexuality is a case in point – as would be the case of miracles. The question is whether we take our view of the ultimate structure of reality – 'the way the world is' – from science or from revealed truth.

In other words, do we recognise spiritual or material reality as the more fundamental in our account of the universe?

Currently the front line of the battle for gay acceptance focuses on two main issues: a push for 'gay marriage', and another for the ordination of gays to church leadership. The former looks like a battle almost won – and would seem to need only the passing of time for victory to be complete. The latter, though, is being strongly contested – and may well be the issue on which the Church is prepared to divide for the sake of what is considered to be truth and godliness (on which there are opposing views). But because 'gay marriage' – or its 'civil partnership' equivalent – has come to be seen as part of the way things now are, the whole concept of marriage in the West is by now seriously compromised.

The Times of Saturday February 19, 2005 had a headline: 'Once it was the love that dared not speak its name. Now it's announced in *The Times*.' Stephanie Marsh explains:

A gay couple have made history by announcing their engagement in *The Times* today. John O'Connor and Mark Jones, from London, plan to take advantage of legislation expected to come into force in the autumn which allows gay and lesbian couples to form legally recognised unions. After their civil union, Mr O'Connor and Dr Jones will have their partnership blessed at an Anglican church in West London, followed by a reception for 50 people at Dr Jones's club, the Athenaeum. It is the first time that the announcement of a civil partnership between a same-sex couple has been printed in *The Times*'s Forthcoming Marriages column in the paper's 220-year history.

This, note, involves the institutional heart of British life – not just life at the margins of society.

MATERIALISM *Investors Chronicle* for 21 January 2005 (p52) starts its report on a small British debt advice and solutions company as follows:

Independent research conducted by debt solutions group Debit Free Direct (DFD) has revealed that 9 per cent of people regularly spend more than they earn. DFD offers advice to those who can't pay back the accumulated debt and, when appropriate, sells them a solution ... which enables them to make affordable payments over a five-year period.

Nine per cent of any population is a disturbingly high one, for such out-of-control, spending-more-than-you-earn behaviour.

The *Panorama* programme on the BBC1 terrestrial TV channel on 21 November 2004 was looking at what designer labels mean to kids; and what this, in turn, means to their parents. Clearly brand recognition starts at a young age. By the time kids are in their teens, they're quite ready to say that wearing designer-label clothing is fundamental to their identity – and that they can't function without this brand-imparted identity. One girl referred to clothes that weren't recognised brands as 'Nicky No-names'¹⁵. She said that she chose as friends, especially at school, only those who wore the right designer labels. If she chose friends on any other basis, she said, she'd be rejected, even bullied, for it. And, according to her, kids who didn't wear recognised brands were almost certain candidates for bullying.

A vast amount more money than strictly necessary was being spent on teens' clothing – and other items – simply for image reasons. Parents, of course, were picking up the tab. In fact, parents' lives were being largely dictated by the wants – rather than the needs – of their kids. The impression given was that the whole of one parent's income, in a family, could be given up to ensuring that the kids got the branded goods they wanted. One mum was quite explicit about the fact that what gave her pleasure in life was giving her children the expensive things they wanted (i.e. meeting their wants, as opposed to their needs). Many parents had very obviously given in to this culture, some willingly, others resignedly. It

¹⁵ I don't have any spelling for that. Maybe she doesn't, either.

was being driven by a massive, and quite disturbing, advertising and marketing campaign by those who sell the modern dream.

As I watched the programme, the destruction of Babylon in Revelation 18 came to mind. Babylon stands for more than a physical, historical city in the Middle East. It represents the spiritually energised, deceiving, corrupting world system that manifests in a variety of ways (not just capitalist excess). Rome, in its day, was known to some of the Christian community as Babylon (1Pet 5:13). The Western world is, in a very real way, the continuation of Rome. So it isn't particularly way-out to see Western materialism as a manifestation of Babylon¹⁶. Of spiritual Babylon, Revelation 18 says '... the merchants of the earth grew rich from her excessive luxuries' (v3). '... all the nations have drunk the maddening wine of her adulteries' (v3). Adultery is a figure of speech in Scripture for giving oneself to a false god – in this case, the spiritual power Mammon, which lies behind the love of money. 'Your merchants were the world's great men. By your magic spell all the nations were led astray. In her [Babylon] was found the blood of the prophets and of the saints, and of all who have been killed on the earth' (vv23, 24). Not surprisingly, we're told: "Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins, ... not receive any of her plagues ..." (v4). This Babylon spirit is worse than the most oppressive effects of cynical materialism would suggest – in its sinfulness it corrupts people, and it persecutes truth to the point of death. Another spiritual force it allies itself to is addiction.

ADDICTION Church leader and theologian Mark Stibbe, in *O Brave New Church: rescuing the addictive culture*, defines an addiction as 'a dependency upon any mood-altering substance, activity, belief, relationship or object. It is an anaesthetic to which we resort in order to mask the pains of life. It can be shopping, work, money, success, fitness, cleaning, perfectionism, fashion,

¹⁶ 'Babylon' here is an example of what George Otis Jnr terms 'adaptive deceptions'. These are, he says, 'deceptive schemes adopted by the enemy to replace earlier strategies whose beguiling powers have waned. These deceptions may be viewed either as necessary course corrections or as upgrades to the adversary's product line.' *Informed Intercession*; 1999; Ventura, California, USA; Renew (Gospel Light); ISBN 0-8307-1937-7; appendix 3, p 247.

cosmetics, food, chocolate, drugs – it can be just about anything’¹⁷. This is a helpful definition of one sort of addiction – the one that relates to the real problem of our addictive culture. Going with him the next step, though, I find more difficult: ‘But the truth of the matter is that we are *all* doing something, everyday, to drive off the boredom, to mask the pain, and to take a holiday from reality.’ This, for me, is to start to describe ordinary life as ‘addictive’, which tends to confuse the issue. And there are addictions – such as that to caffeine – which can relate to the intention to engage with reality (e.g. waking up at breakfast time), not avoid it.

None of the addictive patterns of behaviour we see today is new – just some of the anaesthetics available to us. All societies and cultures since the Fall have been potentially addictive. What we see today is addictive behaviour of epidemic proportions. It’s the scale and the extent that are significant, not the vulnerability to addictive behaviour. The combination of high disposable incomes and regular leisure time have created conditions which facilitate an addiction epidemic. Loss of traditional religious belief has removed restraint from personal behaviour, and the high stress levels, personal identity crises, and sense of alienation generated by modern society have heightened a felt need for ‘anaesthesia’.

The Ten Commandments, and other injunctions and pieces of advice in Scripture, anticipate some of the basic addictions we observe today. For instance, the prohibition of idolatry. In an article *Bill Shankley The Saviour*¹⁸, the author begins, ‘If football is a religion, then Bill Shankley was one of its chief prophets.’ And he reminds us of Shankley’s celebrated remark during a television interview in 1981, when he sat alongside his friend Prime Minister Harold Wilson: “Someone said, ‘Football is more important than life and death to you,’ and I said, ‘Listen, it’s more important than that’.”

¹⁷ 1995; London; Darton, Longman and Todd; ISBN 0-232-52054-2; p6. If Stibbe somewhat overstates his case, this is nevertheless a thought-provoking and illuminating book.

¹⁸ T 30 Jun 04

I wrote down the gist of what one England fan, in Portugal for the Euro 2004 football competition, said when interviewed for the radio: 'Football is just like a drug. When your team wins it's brilliant, unbelievable. When they lose, it's terrible.' And he sounded like someone who'd used illegal substances in his time.

Football heroes have become idols. So too have film stars and celebrity entertainers. The name of the show *Pop Idol* is revealing. In an article *Blinded By The Stars* (ST 17 Aug 03), John Harlow suggests: 'Our love affair with fame may be bad for our health, according to new research.' The research he refers to had been carried out by Lynn McCutcheon of DeVry University in Florida, John Maltby of Leicester University, and two of their colleagues. Initial findings indicated that about a third of people suffer from what the researchers call 'celebrity worship syndrome'; and it affects their mental wellbeing. McCutcheon, Maltby, and their colleagues, speak of an era of 'industrialised fame'¹⁹. 700 people were interviewed in their survey. 'Most were just casually interested in stars. But one in five people displayed such a determined interest that they exhibited signs of anxiety and social dysfunction ... Some 10% of people displayed such "intense-personal" attitudes towards celebrities that they showed signs of addiction.' 'According to McCutcheon, the most unsettling finding of her research was that a significant number of fans said they were prepared to commit "an illegal act" to get closer to, or aid, their idol.'

According to Mark Griffiths, a professor of psychology at Nottingham Trent University, who conducted a study into fans of Boyzone: "What has happened is that people are not so religious and they don't look up to political and religious leaders any more. They have been replaced by David Beckham and the pop stars and film stars. That's who you see on the walls of teenagers because these are the people they look up to and admire." Griffiths himself considers this a healthy development. Research by Nancy Salzborg, who is investigating the

¹⁹ It's been said that ours is a generation in which you can be a celebrity just for being in the public eye ('famous for being famous', as someone put it).

phenomenon of charisma, suggests that – to an extent, at least – we become like those we worship; which echoes one of the things the Bible has to say about idol-worship (Ps 105:8; Jer 2:5; Hos 9:10).

Some of our addictions do us serious damage of a very observable kind. One example is food and soft drink addiction leading to obesity. Governments in some European nations like my own are becoming seriously concerned about the present and predicted future consequences of our dietary habits – particularly those of the young. Coca-Cola is the world's top brand and McDonald's the seventh. 'A recent report by the World Health Organisation reveals that Italian children are now the fattest in Europe' – despite Italy's traditionally healthy Mediterranean eating habits – says Clare Longrigg (T 31 Jul 04). 'Nutritionists say this is because American-style fast-food has become popular in Italy as elsewhere, and young Italians snack between meals on crisps, cookies and bread plastered with Nutella, while the pressures of modern living have induced an almost sedentary lifestyle.' She quotes the Italian chef Antonio Carlucci, based in London: "There is something wrong with the way we live," he says. "Generally, all of Italy now suffers from American culture shock, imposed through television. Italians don't produce enough children any more. They have one, and that child is cocooned, he doesn't go out to play. Parents are lazy, they don't cook, they take them to the pizzeria ... you can't be healthy living like that." France has a similar problem: '...with the increase in junk food, the average French person now consume 34kg of sugar annually [2004], compared with 23kg just five years ago. The under-15s consume 39kg. According to nutritionists, 80 per cent of this sugar is included in snacks, sweets and soft drinks.' (Adam Sage, T 30 Jul 04). The French are currently in the process of banning vending machines in schools offering snacks and fizzy drinks – as are several other countries.

In *Jumbo portions of junk food are 'a grave danger'* (T 22 Jan 03), Valerie Elliot quotes a spokesman for Pizza Express, who said that people wouldn't accept

smaller pizzas: “We have just had to increase our pizzas from 9in to 11in [23cm to 28cm] because people thought they were shrinking. Our feedback is that people wish to eat more.” These words were in response to a call by Malcolm Law, an epidemiologist and heart specialist at London University’s Medical School, for jumbo pizzas and two-for-one deals to be banned for health reasons. He had also said that chocolate bars and ice creams should be shrunk to reduce the number of deaths from heart attacks, strokes and obesity. In her article Elliot also referred to a study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* that has found that food portions are getting bigger. It said that fast-food restaurants served the largest portions and that the size of soft drinks, chips and hamburgers had increased. When we read a headline such as *Fat children ‘may die before their parents’* (Nigel Hawkes, T 10 Sept 02) above a well-researched, non-sensational article on the topic, the time has come to be concerned. In Britain, 20% of people are chronically obese, and 60% overweight. In the USA 30% are obese, ‘with the figure rising to more than half among middle-class white women, and black and Hispanic women of all classes.’ “The epidemic struck first in the US and is rapidly spreading outwards,” said Professor Andrew Prentice, of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. “High levels of obesity are now recorded in Europe – especially Eastern Europe – Australasia, Central America and the Middle East. Asian nations are reporting rapid increases in their statistics ... and some of the poorest nations in the world have burgeoning levels of obesity in their urban areas. Thus the original epidemic in North America can now be described as a pandemic.” Interestingly, Prentice refuses to blame the young: “The kids aren’t gluttonous – they have been ambushed by the changes [to exercise levels and diet].” The human metabolism, he reckons, designed to help us survive famines, has been unable to react to recent changes in lifestyle.

Beyond this, though, is the addictive effect of salt, sugar, fat and the chemicals released in high-temperature frying, especially when taken in combination²⁰.

²⁰ Added to which are the dangerous levels of saturated fats and trans-fats in many fast-foods, leading to cardiovascular problems.

Food manufacturers and retailers, it appears, aren't entirely innocent of trying to get their existing and potential customers hooked on their products.

Food clearly can be an addiction, as Mark Stibbe defines addiction (see above) – for cultures as well as individuals. But obesity has been known – amongst those able to indulge in it – in sub-cultures in the past that wouldn't naturally be termed 'addictive'. In our own culture, three factors seem to be in play: the high stress levels generated by modern life; simple self-indulgence; and a commercial system that can reasonably be suspected of encouraging – even promoting – addictive behaviour.

There are compulsive behaviours which aren't actually addictions – just bad habits; even dangerous habits. And there are addictions, such as caffeine, that I mentioned above (apparently the most widespread in the world) - which don't relate to an addictive culture. Nor is simple self-indulgence necessarily an addiction – unless all of what Paul terms (the behaviour of) 'the flesh' is to be termed 'addictive', once it becomes habitual. That said, we need to understand the nature and extent of the culture-wide range of self-destructive behaviours we observe in our midst, that threaten to do us so much damage.

In the West, the entertainment culture is so pervasive as to be an addiction. It's part of a wider pleasure-seeking orientation to life. Private spaces, and increasingly public spaces too, are filled with music and other noise – such that silence is hardly tolerable any longer. Up-to-the-minute news can be an addiction for many – though others seem almost allergic to it. And, in communication generally, hype – exaggeration – has become basic to our culture. For a significant minority, work comes to be an addiction: the term 'workaholic' has real meaning. And where does 'retail therapy' end and the 'shopaholic' life begin? (Imelda Marcos's shoe-buying habits showed that it isn't just us Westerners who have a problem in this area). The following article, by Richard Owen, writing from

Rome (T 15 Jan 05), *Lottery 'kills' housewife*, brings together addictive behaviour and consumerism:

Psychologists, priests and social workers yesterday called for measures to combat Italy's addiction to gambling after a mother committed suicide because of debts run up playing the lottery. The woman, named only as Rosanna, 57, and a mother of two, had a hidden passion for the lottery which left her with EUR 5,000 [\$6,000] worth of debts. Police said she had left the day's shopping for her family on the kitchen table together with a lottery ticket and suicide note asking her husband and children to "forgive her".

Rosanna had taken a morning bus to the coast from her home in Carrara and walked unobserved into the sea after taking off her coat, skirt and shoes. There are believed to be 250,000 lottery addicts in Italy who have admitted to economic hardship exacerbated by their habit. Stefano Pallanti, a psychiatrist in Florence specialising in compulsive disorders, said he estimated that 5,000 of these were potential suicides. "The problem is that our society encourages consumerism," he said. Lottery addicts were drawn from all social classes, but those most at risk were "workers and housewives". Many fell into the hands of moneylenders and lost their jobs, families and friends.

Lottery takings rose to EUR23 billion last year from EUR16 billion in 2003. Gambling is traditionally frowned on in Italy, which has only five licensed casinos. It is also allowed in the form of bingo and betting on racing. The main outlet, however is the lottery, founded in 1990.

The sheer extent of addictions – and other compulsive behaviours – in our midst can't in itself justify the use of the term 'addictive culture' to describe modern Western life. But addictive-type behaviours can become so many and so common in a society that an increase in *degree* (of level of addiction) changes into a difference in *kind* (of life). When this happens, a different dynamic and another set of values come to prevail in people's lives. But what makes a culture truly 'addictive', though, is that – beyond exhibiting a high degree of addictedness – it *transmits* addictive and compulsive behaviours too. That's not the only serious thing about it, either. The most fundamental trouble with addictions – the more serious ones, anyway – is that they're demonic, energised and enforced by

evil (or 'unclean') spirits. What an 'addictive culture' indicates, above all, is that fundamental aspects of the life of the society concerned have been pervaded by spiritual evil to a significant degree.

So, if in this chapter I've tried to select some of the social factors that make our world the way it is, in the next I want to look at some of the spiritual ones that catch my attention – in the hope that they're really as significant as I think they are. In my understanding of things, spiritual realities explain everything we find in the world, physical or social. This isn't the way most of us in the West are taught to think of the universe. It is, however, basic to the biblical worldview.

But, to conclude this chapter: as I've said, this look at our social environment hasn't been remotely exhaustive. I might easily have looked at the considerable impact of multiculturalism or the internet on life in the West, for instance – or at the phenomenon of self harm, as increasingly significant amongst teens and young adults; whether anorexia and bulimia, young people cutting themselves, or even suicide. But space limitations have meant choosing just a few of the possible topics. You doubtless have your own list.