

Guest Editor's Note:

Looking back and looking forward: Some good news

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Published online 30 December 2018

Soon we will be welcoming a New Year, 2019. In ancient Roman religion and mythology, Janus is the god of beginnings and transitions, thence also of gates, doors, doorways, endings and time. He is usually depicted as a two-faced god since he looks to the future and the past. The Romans dedicated the month of January to Janus.

The writers of several recently published books have provided us with facts that give us some cause for optimism – not pessimism, with respect to the future. I wish to share some of their findings – a kind of literary New Year's gift!

The ascent of the developing world. We live at a time when major players on the world's stage are mired in political fighting and trade wars. One only has to look at the daily news emanating from USA: the Office of the President, and the Congress. Or, the turmoil which has resulted from the UK's decision to leave the European Union. Other nations, though, are noticing that they are not immune from fallout resulting from those events: the so-called 'ripple effects'.

These two events, among the many, have eclipsed the fact that never before have so many people, in so many developing countries, made so much progress in reducing poverty, increasing incomes, improving health, and reducing conflict and war. Steven Radelet, in his 2016 book, *The Great Surge: the Ascent of the Developing World*, presents facts to support what he labels, the 'great surge'.

Most people believe the opposite, though: that with a few exceptions like China and India, the majority of developing countries are hopelessly mired in deep poverty, led by self-serving inept rulers, and have little hope for change.

But, Radelet presents evidence that a major transformation is underway—and has been for two decades. Since the early 1990s more than 700 million people have been lifted out of extreme poverty, six million fewer children die every year from disease, tens of millions more girls are in school, millions more people have access to clean water, and newly elected governments – many by fragile narrow margins - has become the norm in developing countries around the world.

The number of extremely poor people (defined as those earning less than \$1 or \$1.25 a day) rose inexorably until the middle of the 20th century, then roughly stabilized for a few decades. Since the 1990s, the number of poor has actually plummeted.

In 1990, more than 12 million children died before the age of 5; this toll has since dropped by more than half. More children than ever are becoming educated, especially girls. In the 1980s, only half of girls in developing countries completed elementary school; now, 80 percent do.

Nicholas Kristof, in his Opinion piece in the *New York Times* on January 21, 2017, wrote: “Remember: The most important thing happening is not a Trump tweet. What’s infinitely more important is that today some 18,000 children, who in the past would have died of simple diseases, will survive; about 300,000 people will gain electricity; and a cool 250,000 will graduate from extreme poverty.”

Peace be unto you. This is a familiar phrase to many Christians, especially as they prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus this month, December. The desire for peace in the world, of course, is one of the fundamental beliefs of other world religions, too. However, it is such a vain hope – so impossible to even imagine. But is it a possibility?

Yuval Harari, in his 2014 book *Sapiens: A Brief History of Human Kind*, brought to everyone’s attention the fact that, actually, the world is much less violent than it was years ago. He states, “We live in a peaceful era . . .” (p. 410).

That one line should catch the attention of all of us. It caught the attention of an august body of scientists, the Royal Society of Biologist (UK). They shortlisted Harari’s book in its 2015 Book Awards; and, *The Guardian* described his book as “among the ten brainy books of the decade”.

Here are a few of the facts that led Harari to make such a statement.

- In the year 2000, wars caused the deaths of 310,000; violent crime 520,000. ‘Each and every death is a world destroyed, a family ruined, friends and relatives scarred for life’.
- Yet, these 830,000 victims comprise only 1.5% of the 56,000,000 people who died in that year.
- In that same year, 1.26 million died in car accidents; 815,000 committed suicide.
- Two years later, 2002, 172,000 died in war; 569,000 died in violent crime; 873 committed suicide.

Harari argues that, at the same time, fewer people fear violence in the night time; students (in most countries) don’t suffer caning by their school principal; fewer children will not be sold into slavery; and, women in many parts of the world know that there’s a law which forbids their husbands/boyfriends from beating them.

He presents a convincing argument about the *implausibility* of war. Robert Oppenheimer, the ‘father of the atomic bomb, should receive the Nobel Peace Prize, Harari muses.

Wars in the past were most often over wealth and land – material things – fields, cattle, slaves, gold. Looting was one of the objectives. However, today wealth consists of human capital and organisational know-how – it is not easy to loot those ‘things’, he asserts.

Wars today are less profitable; peace is more lucrative. Harari believes that our world is dominated by peace loving ‘elites’ who see war as avoidable. And, it appears that internationalization, which erodes the independence of most countries, can be a sort of catalyst that seeks compromise-type solutions, not conflict. Most people today could not even imagine the plausibility of a war like the great wars of the past.

Peace be among you, our readers. We hope 2019 will be one of the best years of your life!

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