

Welcome

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I am personally delighted that His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Rowan Williams have initiated this event to explore issues that impact on the whole of humanity and the very future of our planet. The Orcadian poet Edwin Muir wrote, "The world's great day is running out," more than 60 years ago, and for many of us that prophecy is staring us in the face even more starkly today. He continued with the phrase, "Time's handiworks by time are haunted," going on to show that good and evil are bound up together in this world, but could refer equally to the world of instant communication that the speed of light now offers us. In this year designated by the United Nations as the "Year of light and light technologies," we are aware of the huge impact harnessing light has on globalization, communications, many areas of science and technology, and on health. The ability to manipulate genes by laser tweezers and other methods in the field of synthetic biology asks fundamental questions about what it is to be human.

It was four years ago that a vice-chancellor from a university in Hong Kong posed a question at one of my organisation's conferences for heads of universities: "How should we educate students in a world where greed predominates?" Since then, many of us have been looking at this question in the light of various pressures from politicians worldwide to show the value of universities in terms of economic and social impact. Have universities sold their soul to the highest bidder? For some universities there are more pressing needs. Recently I was talking to a deputy vice-chancellor from an island in the South Pacific, which will be the first island to disappear under the sea if sea levels rise. In other areas of the world, education, especially of women, is denied, and the pursuit of scholarship and knowledge persecuted.

I see this event providing a catalyst to nucleate conversations, dialogue, listening across cultures and disciplines to become responsible global citizens mandated to confront the issues before us. Coming from a scientific background, I am fully aware that transformations have to start somewhere and then spread out. His Holiness asks if this is all a pipe dream. If it remains a dream then, yes, it is incumbent upon us to turn dreams into reality.

John Wood