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THE EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN, SOCIAL CONCERN, AND A THEOLOGY OF HOPE

by ROBERT G. CLOUSE

THIS paper formed part of the programme of the twenty-first meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, held at Cincinnati, Ohio, in December, 1969, to consider the theme "Futurology and Eschatology". Dr. Clouse is Associate Professor of History in Indiana State University. He contributed a chapter on "The Rebirth of Millenarianism" to the symposium "Puritans, the Millennium and the Future of Israel", edited by Peter Toon (1970), which received editorial notice in the *QUARTERLY* for January-March, 1971. Among those who took part in the discussion following Dr. Clouse's paper were Dr. Robert D. Linder and Dr. Richard V. Pierard, joint-authors with him of "Protest and Politics", reviewed in our October-December issue for 1970. The contributions by Dr. Linder and Dr. Pierard are reproduced here after Dr. Clouse's paper.

HOPE has become a major theme of many leaders of Western thought. Both secular and religious schools have rediscovered the future. For Evangelicals of premillennial persuasion this interest is certainly not new. We have long been accustomed to discussions of the destiny of human society based upon certain pessimistically interpreted statements in the Apocalypse and Daniel. It is with the social isolation and unconcern fostered by this view that my paper will attempt to deal.

First, it might be well to mention some of the recent future oriented thought. One of the more important secular expressions of an interest in tomorrow is the book, *The Year 2000: A Framework for Speculation on the Next Thirty-Three Years*, by Kahn and Weiner.¹ The reasons for the appearance of this book as suggested in the introduction by Daniel Bell include concern for the coming of the millennial number 2000, the romance of space travel, and the need for planning so that social change can be regulated to increase the standard of living. The book itself is based upon statistical techniques, computer data, social analysis, and the

¹ Herman Kahn and Anthony J. Weiner, *The Year 2000: A Framework for Speculation on the Next Thirty-Three Years* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1967). For more of this sort of speculation about the future see *The Futurist: A Newsletter for Tomorrow's World*, published by the World Future Society, P.O. Box 19285, Twentieth Station, Washington, D.C.

imagination of artists and philosophical historians. This cross-disciplinary approach is used to detect trends and patterns in the past and present. These currents are then projected into the future through systematic discussions and imaginative "scenarios". The predictions are difficult to dismiss as science fiction since they have enough data in the present to make them credible.

Many of the anticipations of the future suggested by the authors of this volume and their colleagues at the Hudson Institute are summed up in what they label "Standard World" of the future. This world, although filled with such frightening prospects as the expansion of violence, nevertheless posits the clumsy but continuing containment of major dehumanizing factors. This world is described as becoming increasingly empirical, pragmatic, secular, contractual, and literate with an accumulation of scientific and technological knowledge, industrialization, and urbanization.² The danger that some catastrophe might overtake man is cared for by the elaboration of "canonical" variables, that is, options that stretch the mind creatively toward the future but are less likely than the Standard World picture. Hopefully, the authors feel, this information may help man control more of his fate than he has ever been able to do before. As the introduction states: "In his famous distinction between *fortuna* and *virtu* (in Chapter 25 of *The Prince*), Machiavelli argues that half of men's actions are ruled by chance, and the other half are governed by men themselves. This volume, and the work of the Commission on the Year 2000, is an effort to change that balance".³

Interest in the future has also spread into contemporary theology. This focuses in a movement called the theology of hope. One of the leading spirits in this new current is Jürgen Moltmann, Professor of Theology and Christian Ethics at the University of Tübingen.⁴ Moltmann and others like him seem to be trying to find a point of contact between theology and current thought. Thus, he elaborates many of his views in dialogue with the German Marxist-humanist philosopher, Ernst Bloch. Moltmann believes that eschatology "is

² Kahn and Weiner, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

³ *Ibid.*, p. xxviii.

⁴ Other scholars who might be mentioned include Carl Braaten, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Johannes Metz, Leslie Dewart, and Harvey Cox. For an interesting collection of articles dealing with the theology of hope by these men and others see Martin E. Marty and Dean G. Peerman, eds., *New Theology No. 5* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1968). Also, a capable assessment of the theology of hope from a more orthodox perspective can be found in Gabriel Fackre, *The Rainbow Sign: Christian Futurity* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1969).

not one element of Christianity but it is the medium of the Christian faith as such, the key in which everything in it is set, the glow that suffuses everything here in the dawn of an expected new day".⁵ With this as his watchword he seeks to recover the authentic Christian hope from what he feels are the distortions given to it by Millenarians and Marxists as well as by the work of Bultmann and Barth. Turning to the history of God's people, Moltmann notes that from the day of the Exodus and the Prophets there has been a constant cycle of promise and fulfillment in God's dealings with His own. The greatest of these promises was that of a future society of peace, justice, and righteousness. The Old Testament teachings in turn become the basis for New Testament eschatology.

The promises to Israel are confirmed and transfigured in the coming of Jesus Christ. The fulfillment of the promises is secured through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. When Jesus was raised from the dead, life triumphed over death and the believer can be assured because of this that one day the shattered creation will be made new, the dead raised, and God will be all in all. In the light of the vision of the resurrection we can see how hopelessly corrupt and wicked our age is. Thus, the true Christian, according to Moltmann, is dissatisfied with the status quo. Rather than leading to passive acceptance of life the way it is, the gap between what is and what will be drives the Christian to action. This hope is never satisfied for it presses beyond the resting places that men choose. In a recent article, Moltmann explains some of the concrete goals toward which Christian hope should be directed. As he puts it, "Activation of the Christian hope means that the hope of faith which man discovers in God becomes real here in agony over present inhumanities and struggles against them. Christian social action will be concerned with the overthrow of 'all relationships in which man is a despised, humiliated, enslaved, and rejected being' (Marx), in order that this man may become a more abundant, upright, regal, and purposeful man".⁶ By working for abundance he means that Christians should participate in those social programs which attempt to ease hunger and illness for as many as possible. This should be done in such a way that man does not lose his dignity, but remains the "upright man". The appellation "regal" means that man would not lose control of his destiny by forfeiting

⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Theology of Hope* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), p. 16.

⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, "New Boundaries of Christendom," *Dialog*, VII (Autumn, 1968), p. 290.

the initiative in society to science and technology. Finally, he suggests that belief in the resurrected Christ will give purpose to man.

Against this background of both secular and religious teaching of hope we turn to a consideration of premillennialism. Certainly there are many evangelicals who are not premillennialists. Still, one senses that this teaching has been more concerned with the future than other shades of evangelical theology. Modern premillennial teaching began in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The preaching of this doctrine was especially prevalent in the seventeenth century, and it helped to feed the fires of the English Civil War of the 1640's.⁷ Toward the end of the seventeenth century the development of postmillennial views and the growth of Enlightenment thought led to a decline of millennial teaching. Even during the eighteenth century, however, men like Newton, Bengel, and Priestley kept the premillennial doctrine alive. During the last century there was a revival of premillennial teaching and the Plymouth Brethren movement (founded by John Nelson Darby) helped to foster dispensationalist approach among adherents to the view. "The line of continuity from Darby to the present can be traced unbroken from the works of his contemporaries: C. H. Mackintosh, William Trotter, William Kelly, and F. W. Grant, through the intermediary works of W. E. Blackstone, James Hall Brooks, A. J. Frost, G. Campbell Morgan, Harry Ironside, A. C. Gaebelein, C. I. Scofield, and the Scofield Bible, to the contemporary adherents of his views."⁸

This version of millenarian teaching has become quite important in our day. According to this view the Kingdom of God was offered to the Jews at the time of Jesus but they rejected it and killed the king, consequently, the coming of the kingdom has been postponed. During the years of this postponement, which include the present age, the church is being formed. When the last individual to be saved through the church is won to Christ, the believers will be

⁷ For the revival of premillennial teaching in Early Modern Europe see Robert G. Clouse, "The Influence of Johann Heinrich Alsted on English Millennialism," *Harvard Theological Review*, LXVIII (Spring, 1969), pp. 189-207; and Peter Toon, Robert Clouse, et al., *Puritans, the Millennium, and the Future of Israel* (London: Jas. Clarke, 1970).

⁸ Clarence B. Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1960), pp. 17f. [It should be added that the Brethren movement is not eschatologically monochrome; it is arguable that Darbyism was an early intrusion into it, and that a more authentic Brethren tradition stems (farther back than Darby) from Anthony Norris Groves, the "archetypal Open Brother". Cf. F. R. Coad, *Prophetic Developments* (CBRF Occasional Paper 2, 1966). ED.]

"raptured", i.e., miraculously withdrawn from the earth. Then the woes predicted in the Book of Revelation will be poured upon the earth. An evil ruler, the Antichrist, will form the most rigorous, anti-God religious, political, social, and economic totalitarianism that the world has ever seen. He will be defied by the Jews, however, who in turn will be converted to Christ through their suffering. Finally, when the forces of evil are ready to destroy the last of the believing Jews, Christ will return to earth in power with His saints and defeat the minions of Satan. After the destruction of His enemies, Christ will establish a kingdom over all the earth which will last 1000 years. During the days of His reign all of man's longings for perfect and complete justice will be fulfilled. One recent writer describes the kingdom in the following way:

Righteousness will flourish (Isa. 11: 3-5) and peace will be universal (Isa. 2: 4) . . . The utopian state which men have dreamed of setting up through politics, spending, and legislation will exist during the Millennium. Success will be assured because Christ will rule the nations with a rod of iron in accord with perfect righteousness and justice (Rev. 19: 15), not according to the imperfect desires of the majority . . . No crime will go unpunished; oppression will not be allowed to continue . . . The productivity of the earth will be greatly increased . . . Increased rainfall, food, and productivity will, of course, bring in an era of great prosperity for all, and the rule of justice will guarantee that all are properly paid for whatever they produce by way of products of services. Peace on earth will also mean prosperity on earth. In addition, physical life will be lengthened so that a 100-year-old person will be considered still a child (Isa. 35: 5, 6), and in every way life will be better than it has ever been since sin came into man's history.⁹

At the end of this Chiliad of joy there will be a final rebellion against God called the Battle of Gog and Magog. Again, the enemy is defeated by divine intervention and the last judgment is held. By this judicial action of God the righteous are established in everlasting heavenly bliss and the wicked are turned into hell. Such in briefest outline is the general view of many premillennialists in America today.¹⁰

This opinion contains a powerful solace for people who need comfort. No matter what position a person has today, if he believes

⁹ Charles C. Ryrie, *The Bible and Tomorrow's News* (Wheaton: Scripture Press Publications, Inc., 1969), pp. 184f.

¹⁰ Much research needs to be done on a typology of American millennialists and the numbers of those who hold such a view. Bass, George E. Ladd (*Crucial Questions about the Kingdom of God* [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1952]), and Harold J. Ockenga (*The Church in God* [Westwood, N. J.: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1956]) represent a different outlook on the future than do traditional dispensationalist millennialists such as Ryrie, Alva McClain, and John Walvoord.

in Christ, millennial glory awaits. Perhaps one's social class is losing out in society or his conservative theological viewpoint is on the wane in his denomination or perhaps some great personal tragedy has afflicted him. Certainly in cases like this the teaching that one day the believers will rule the world with Christ will give great encouragement. If this were the only result of premillennialism one would not need to speak out on the subject. However, this viewpoint has had a very divisive effect upon the Christian church and has often cut the nerve to social action by those who adhere to it. Let us consider the unfortunate effect this teaching has had on social concern.

Note carefully the statements of two premillennial preachers.

Understanding prophecy produces poise in a person. Poise is defined as balance and stability. But how can anyone be stable in a world like ours? A dog-eat-dog attitude pervades business affairs. The materialism of this day of plenty puts pressure on all of us . . . Riots in our cities and rebellion against authority in general make people afraid to walk the streets. Parents are afraid for their children, races fight each other, and nations compete to see who can first destroy the others. . . . We cannot help but wonder where the trend will lead. . . . The answer to these questions is in the Bible, and particularly in an understanding of God's program for the future. This sort of knowledge will impart to you a certainty and confidence not available elsewhere.¹¹

So, the trend seems to go from bad to worse and there is little any of us can do about it. What fatalism!

Another minister seems to speak for the well-to-do and the middle class as he declares on the basis of his premillennial understanding the utter folly of social improvement programs.

Also I am afraid the church is trying to speak out on too many issues that really do not concern the church. There are certain issues we know to be wrong—racial injustice, crime, gambling, dishonesty, pornography. On these matters we must thunder forth as the prophets of God. However, I am not so sure that the corporate body of the church has a right to make political decisions. . . . Although Christ said that a man's life does not consist of the things he has, we in the church are very dangerously near to teaching the people that 'things' are life's most important possessions. I live in Appalachia. . . . I know families who . . . are considered poor. . . . However, they have a joy, a radiance, and a peace rooted deep in their spiritual faith that gives them contentment and peace. I know millionaires in New York, Texas, and California who are almost ready to blow their brains out. . . . Which is the wealthiest? Who is the richer?¹²

The effect of statements like these is to discourage evangelicals

¹¹ Rylie, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

¹² Billy Graham, *World Aflame* (New York: Pocket Books, 1966), pp. 155ff.

from engaging in social action and to foster a supernatural social ethic which effectively supports the status quo in society. With considerable justification a recent sociological study declared: "Evangelical Protestantism tends to take a miraculous view of social justice. . . . Thus they concentrate their energies on conversion and evangelism and largely ignore social issues except for occasional efforts to make unlawful what they judge to be personal vices. They also largely ignore the empirical fact that 'born-again' and regenerated Christians remain noticeably sinful and thus offer their followers little guidance in ethical behavior".¹³ Hence, most evangelicals do not support purposive social change which could improve the lot of their fellow men. Despite the clear teaching of Scripture about loving our neighbors and helping those who have need (the bodily needs are certainly not excluded here—Matt. 25 and I Cor. 6: 13), I am afraid that what one person has facetiously defined as "evangelical social concern" would be applicable to far too many evangelicals, namely, "They stand beside the Jericho road and hand out gospel tracts".

These attitudes must change if we expect to reach men effectively for Christ. Without losing the premillennial perspective we must preach a social involvement that would promote righteousness. The history of the church is replete with examples of believers changing their minds on important issues. There was a day when Christians looked with distrust on natural science. An early scientist named Adelard of Bath illustrates this change in a conversation with his nephew. The nephew cited the growth of plants and other natural phenomena and stated, "To what else do you attribute this but to the marvellous effect of the divine will?"¹⁴ Continuing his remarks he indicated that it would be better not to question the operation of the universe but rather attribute everything to the hidden will of God. To this Adelard answered: "I do not detract from God. Everything that is, is from him and because of him. But nature is not confused and without system and so far as human knowledge has progressed it should be given a hearing. Only when it fails utterly should there be recourse to God".¹⁵ This attitude, which some centuries later won the day among evangelicals, led to many advances in natural science and in turn has caused the improvement of the living standard for all countries touched by the Western

¹³ Rodney Stark and Charles Y. Glock, *American Piety: The Nature of Religious Commitment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), p. 75.

¹⁴ Cited by Alistair Cameron Crombie, *Medieval and Early Modern Science* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959), I, 26.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

tradition. Again, there are those who have taken a strictly miraculous view of conversion and have opposed missions and evangelism. One may recall the experience of William Carey when he proposed that a ministerial meeting at Nottingham discuss the topic "The Duty of Christians to Attempt the Spread of the Gospel among Heathen Nations". The moderator revealed his stiff, assured supernaturalism by saying with agitation: "Young man, sit down. When God pleases to convert the heathen, he will do it without your aid or mine".

Just as evangelicals are engaged in work as scientists, ministers, and evangelists, so we need to be involved actively in political, social, and economic movements to bring social justice to men. Why should we wait for the millennium to help our fellow men? We should try to relate to the so-called "freedom revolution" among the blacks, women, students, and emerging nations. We must try to feed the hungry and take a position for world peace rather than our present bellicose, militarist approach to international affairs. This of course is just the beginning of the list of social duties that I am charging evangelicals with ignoring. We have become unwitting tools of those who would stop these movements for their own personal gain.

Yet, some words of caution to those who are interested in social change are in order. First, one must remember that not all new things are better than the old. A second caution a Christian activist must keep in mind is that if one begins doing duty on the Jericho road he may find that the sheer weight of meeting basic needs is so demanding that less and less time is devoted to preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ and winning men to Him. Finally, in a world that is becoming increasingly secular some might be tempted to mute the preaching of the gospel because the terminology of orthodox Christianity has fallen into disuse in so many quarters. Let us not shrink from the social task, however. The future is indeed ours and despite the finiteness of all human efforts to solve man's predicament, those upright and noble souls who labor toward this goal can be assured that in the end God's kingdom will accomplish all that they now try so hard to achieve.¹⁶

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¹⁶ For an admirable statement of the paradox of the Christian's involvement in social affairs see George W. Forell, *Faith Active in Love* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1954), p. 189. Also, for a discussion of a few of the more pressing social problems to which evangelicals should give attention see *Protest and Politics: Christianity and Contemporary Affairs*, edited by Robert G. Clouse, Robert D. Linder, and Richard V. Pierard (Greenwood, S.C.: The Attic Press, 1968).