CHRISTIANITY AND THE FEAR OF THE FUTURE

by Victor Ferkiss

Our most basic problem today is in essence a theological one: It is a crisis of hope.

The world of classical society was dominated by a cyclical view of history, the "myth of the eternal return." Time was a serpent devouring its own tail. Christianity shattered this essentially static view of human destiny in two ways. It offered the possibility of individual salvation, by means of which the human personality escaped from history into eternity. It also postulated the possibility of collective redemption within history, extending through time and eventually culminating in parousia. The Enlightenment secularized these two notions.

In this way both individualism and liberalism can be said to be derived from the idea of salvation postulated by Christianity (and, in somewhat different fashion, by Judaism and Islam as well). The possibility of eternal salvation became the possibility of self-fulfillment here on earth. And the possibility of collective redemption was transformed into the possibility of human progress through science, through technology, through industrialization, and through growth, in which parousia would occur right here on earth without the need for any second coming.

What has happened to the world today is quite obviously that we, or at least some of us in the West, have begun to question the validity of both of these assumptions: the possibility of individual fulfillment within our society and the possibility of the collective redemption of that society through technology. This questioning takes basically three forms. One is fear of mechanization as presented graphically in such films as Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times,* dominated by the symbol of the man on the assembly line, or as presented in more sophisti-

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cated fashion in such works as Jacques Ellul's *The Technological Society,* in which we have what I would argue is a secularization of Calvinist predestination applied to the relationship of society to technology. This fear of the growing mechanization of the individual and society long troubled critics of modern industrial society; it goes back to the early nineteenth century and stems in part—though by no means entirely—from a romantic yearning for the past.

The second kind of fear from which we suffer is fear of environmental destruction, a fear which has become widespread in recent years, though a few years ago it was the concern of only an esoteric few.

The third form our fear takes is exemplified by Robert L. Heilbroner's *An Inquiry into the Human Prospect.* In this view, though it emphasizes our ecological plight, things do not go boom in a final ecological catastrophe, but rather our social, economic, and physical world—national and international—begins to fall apart as the result of the pressures of scarcity and the dangers posed by easily available nuclear weapons. In order for organized society to survive, Heilbroner contends, the world will have to reject the whole culture of the Enlightenment upon which modern civilization has rested and live under "military-socialist" regimes capable of ensuring social solidarity and order.

Christianity's Response to Social Problems

Before examining Heilbroner's views specifically and conjecturing about how Christians ought to respond to them, it is useful to look at the way in which Christian thought has responded to more immediate and generally recognized world social problems. Organized Christianity's basic reaction to industrial society has been what we might loosely call the "social gospel," that is, the belief that the major problem is not the nature of industrial society itself but how the benefits of industrialization are distributed, originally on the domestic level and, more recently, throughout the world. This is still, I think, the dominant tendency in the reaction of the Christian churches to industrialization, and even though the social gospel has declined in importance in many of the Protestant churches, it is, if anything, on the rise in the Catholic church, particularly in such areas as Latin America.

There is, of course, an important counterpoint to this in the recent concern of the churches, particularly the Protestant churches, with ecological problems, and anyone who has participated in any discussions of these matters is quite aware of the tensions which arise between these two points of view—between redistribution, on the one

hand, and the restructuring of society on a "no-growth" basis, on the other. Various solutions have been advanced to bridge the inevitable gap between these two emphases. The World Council of Churches, in a recent international meeting on the subject, came up with the concept of the "sustainable" society, a society which would allow growth but at the same time require that balance be maintained between growth and available resources over the foreseeable future.

Generally speaking, however, the social gospel seems to exert less and less appeal even within mainline Protestant churches, as evidenced by dwindling financial support for centralized social-action offices. What we find increasingly is a revival of the rejection of the world, an increasing emphasis on individual salvation conceived in traditional terms or, if not simply on individual salvation alone, on a collective withdrawal from the institutions of contemporary society into the Christian community or into some community defined by a common faith and a common rejection of many of the elements of modernity. The increasing importance of the conservative churches in the United States is, in part, a reflection of this phenomenon. There is also a tremendously important conservative reaction within American Catholicism as well. Generally speaking, instead of trying to change the world in the light of the norms of justice embodied in the social gospel, a growing number of Christians are trying to remove themselves as far from the world as possible, at least in spirit and concern, saying in effect that, just as in the time of Christ, we are today called upon to reject the world as such, even though we may be forced to live in it on a day-to-day basis.

Given the background of this increasing tendency of Christians to reject the mission of "Christianizing" social institutions and of using Christianity as a standard and means for solving social problems, how can one, as a Christian, respond to the challenges raised by Heilbroner's thesis?

Before that question can be answered we must first ask oursleves how valid Heilbroner's basic thesis about the future actually is. Certainly, he makes more sense than the other schools of technological pessimists I referred to earlier. The world is most unlikely to move en masse toward general disaster within the next two generations.

I think that the basic point made by the first Club of Rome study and similar projections is accurate: There are "limits to growth," and we cannot go on increasing population and pollution and GNP forever. Even their severest critics, such as the University of Sussex group, admit this either explicitly or implicitly. But the first Club of Rome study, which received all the attention, has a basic methodological flaw. Put in the simplest terms, it commits what some social scien-

tists refer to (in an unfortunate usage) as the "ecological fallacy," that is, it infers the nature of the part from the whole. The study aggregates data in a misleading fashion, rather as if one were to say that a person who had one foot in near-boiling water and another in freezing water had comfortable feet on the average. We may continue to have mass starvation in Bangladesh and even India at the same time we have relative affluence in Canada and the United States (or in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia). Even though we do have a worldwide weather system, pollution will continue to be much worse in some areas than others: The air over the Arctic or even Iowa will be more breathable than that over Tokyo or Zagreb. Some governments will collapse under the strain of unsolved problems of hunger and intolerable living conditions, while others will remain relatively stable. Local wars, even possibly with nuclear weapons, will take place on some continents and not on others. One can think of the world today as one overall system headed for disaster, but this total system may break up before any final disaster occurs.

Already some students of economics see a "decoupling" taking place of the economies of the less-developed countries from the rest of the world. Long before we are completely doomed by aerosol sprays, supersonic transports, or radiation leaks from nuclear plants, advanced industrial society may simply collapse, economically and socially. Instead of the world automobile crashing into the brick wall of a finite planet, the tires will go flat or the motor will stall and we will be stranded on a pile of junk. This is essentially what Heilbroner is predicting, indeed counting on implicitly as a backdrop for his "military socialism," and I think this outcome is more probable than any of the "doomsday" scenarios.

Through the courtesy of the Columbia University Conference on the Humanities and Public Policy Issues, I have had the opportunity to see a paper, called "Second Thoughts on the Human Prospect," which Heilbroner presented. In it he takes the position that, while he finds it necessary to alter his views on some of the short-run mechanisms of the impending collapse, he is more convinced than ever that in the long run modern society is coming to an end. In the short run he is a little more optimistic, or at least a little more flexible, than in his book; in the long run, even more pessimistic. His pessimism about the ability of human beings as individuals and as societies to do anything about their futures, or at least anything about the human future as a whole, has deepened. Somewhat paradoxically, he is also concerned that his own mood of gloom might become so infectious as to constitute part of the problem, even though there is no solution anyway.[1]

Perhaps partially as a result, he is starting to look upon the future society he projects with a somewhat less jaundiced eye and is beginning to feel that religion, especially, can play a significant role in humanizing this society. He refers to "monastic" socialism as well as military socialism as a future form of social adjustment to the problems of social control required by a scarcity economy. By monasticism he does not, of course, mean the rule of Saint Benedict. Specifically, he is thinking of Red China as an example, with Maoism as the religious foundation of a social community in which people are able to cooperate without—and this is very important—any perceived diminution of their freedom as far as they are concerned. I think that when Heilbroner writes in his book about the need for discipline and social control, his readers usually conjure up visions of a repressive 1984-type state with a cop on every corner and, understandably, recoil from the prospect. But what Heilbroner seems to be saying now is that you can have a highly coordinated system of control and authority in which people feel subjectively free and perhaps in most respects really are free.

I think that Heilbroner's second diagnosis may be more accurate than his first when it comes to the nature of the ecological perils which threaten us, but I do not want to dwell on these issues. The basic premise of his original argument is, I think, still sound. Society will begin to fall apart in various ways, and we will radically change our society to prevent chaos from ensuing long before any ultimate ecological catastrophe destroys the human race.

Unfortunately, I cannot guarantee this—I do not have a pipeline to the Deity—and we may be in for a very rude shock. There is always the possibility—one which we should never forget in discussing our ecological crisis—of the existence of thresholds that may be passed without our realizing what is taking place, where one little additional increment becomes deadly for the total system. In a lake, just a small additional quantity of pollution can cause eutrophication which is irreversible by natural means. A bit too much pollution could destroy the oceans, a bit too much destruction of vegetation could make it impossible for the earth's atmosphere to renew itself. Despite Pentagon claims to the contrary, all-out nuclear war could destroy the earth's atmosphere within days.

But if we are going to destroy ourselves by passing over such thresholds inadvertently, we have no future to worry about anyway—not in the time frame or the sense that Heilbroner is talking about. The problem at hand is how and to what extent—given Heilbroner's premises of not overnight doom but steady, rapid

economic and environmental decay plus the increasing danger of small-scale nuclear adventurism—we can possibly mitigate such decay and escape the social, political, and cultural results he postulates as accompanying it.

It appears quite obvious to me that Heilbroner is not merely a prophet of things to come but someone who is extrapolating from conditions already present and trends already underway. We are so close to the process of decay that we simply do not perceive it clearly in historical terms. Not only are we suffering from an economic crisis of inflation, depression, and shortage, but we are caught in a serious social crisis as well. It can easily be argued that the city of Washington is itself in many ways a much less civilized place than it was ten years ago and that the quality of life in the United States is beginning to decline in many subtle ways. The U.S. Postal Service is not as bad as the Italian post office yet, but it is working on it. The quality of workmanship, of professional competence and organizational efficiency throughout our economy, seems to be on a steady downtrend. Telephones are answered more slowly in offices or, increasingly, by recorded messages. Lines get longer, stores and waiting rooms more crowded. More and more of us lock our doors more and more of the time in more and more communities.

In some ways our failure to recognize what is happening may be a good thing. The transition to the unpleasant and tawdry world of tomorrow may be so slow as to be not quite as painful as we sometimes envision it. But the price of painless transition may be irreversibility. Society can slide downhill so imperceptibly—like the declining health of a chronically sick person—that it can reach a point where recovery is no longer possible and alarm has no meaning. A recent article about India in the *Wall Street Journal* quoted an unnamed foreign diplomat as saying, "Don't worry about India going down the drain, there is no drain big enough." Once a society has totally collapsed, it can fall no further.

But we must beware of such terminology as social "collapse" which often involves too glib a use of metaphor. Save for brief moments of transition during turning points in war or revolution, social interaction goes on in some patterned fashion somehow. Society "collapses," but it is still there, and life continues. Life went on in China during the era of the warlords; life went on in the Congo during the civil war. Life has gone on for millennia of human history despite the existence of poverty, oppression, and chaos. People were born; they lived and died; they worshiped their gods; they loved and hated. There are levels of social disorganization which many of us, looking at them in

the abstract or from the outside, might find intolerable. But human beings are tremendously resilient and adaptable. Life will go on, even in Heilbroner's world.

Hope and Change: Requirements for Survival

But do we have to settle for the world of his most pessimistic predictions? Not necessarily. It is very "in" these days to be a pessimist—to indulge in gloomy speculations about the human future over the second martini. But those who are bearing the brunt of the world's present miseries cannot afford this indulgence; the struggle to survive requires some visceral optimism. Pessimism is both operationally useless and self-defeating, as every football coach knows. If we are going to avoid the world which Heilbroner predicts—and which he says we cannot avoid—we must somehow be optimists. This should come naturally to Christians, for whom hope is one of the three traditional cardinal virtues. Hope, of course, is ultimately concerned with salvation in the traditional religious sense, but this does not mean that it cannot inform our attitudes toward a world created by God and under the dominion of his providence. Hope implies that, however we describe human nature and whatever our concept of original sin, we do not despair about the ability of human beings to attain standards of decent behavior over long periods of time or to use the reason which is part of their nature in solving their problems. We are not necessarily programmed for self-destruction, either as individuals or collectively. To believe that this is so is to make the most dangerous of self-fulfilling prophecies.

The plain fact is that societies do meet challenges and survive. Societies are capable of self-alteration, and in remarkably short order. The shape of present-day society is no mysterious accident. Suburbia exists because of many factors, including people's desire to flee certain aspects of contemporary city life. But the Federal Housing Authority lending policy after World War II, which encouraged the building of new homes rather than the rehabilitation of old ones, was a major, if not *the* major, factor in creating suburbia. Suburbia exists, also, because of money poured into highways rather than rapid transit and because of a whole web of laws controlling zoning, land taxation, and city boundaries. The reason many blacks poured into American cities in the 1930s was not solely their desire for new opportunities but the fact that the Agricultural Adjustment Administrations's crop-restriction policies made it profitable to drive tenants and farm workers off the land. Slums exist in the United States (they are not universal, even in industrial societies) because of specific legal and economic practices in this country.

Just as the shape of contemporary society is the result of the policies of the past, much of the shape of future society can be the result of the policies which we institute now, if we have the intelligence and the will to do so. For instance, the Department of Agriculture is currently proposing changes in the grading standards for meat that will eliminate much of the last-minute stuffing of animals with grain (which tends to produce only additional fat anyway), and this will make millions of tons of grain available for other uses, including, potentially, the feeding of the hungry in other nations. Just as no one forced people into suburbia or into the slums at gunpoint, no one is going to force Americans to reduce their levels of wasteful consumption at gunpoint. Nonetheless, changes in consumption patterns can be brought about by political and social action.

And what societies can do to affect their futures can be done in short order. New technological inventions—of vast social consequence—have spread rapidly throughout the modern world, interlinked as it is in its economics and communications. Television and contraceptives spread all over the world within decades. And social inventions spread readily as well; witness the income tax and its frequent corollary, the withholding tax. Witness also the credit card. Obviously, relating consciously induced incremental changes in such a way as to lead toward the kind of future world we may desire is extremely difficult, but it is not insoluble in principle. Human beings need not be simply pawns of social forces beyond their ken or control.

But, if societies are to be capable of altering the course of future events in a desired direction, they will require leadership. Changes of great importance take place rapidly in the contemporary world, and, if they are to be controlled for human purposes, societies must be able to respond rapidly. Many of our political institutions, especially in the United States, are organized to facilitate inaction rather than action. Institutional change aside, this bias toward drift can be overcome only by individuals and groups capable of inspiring confidence in the populations they serve. Unfortunately, we seem to be entering upon an era when trust in the probity of government and its ability to guide social change in desirable directions is ebbing. One task of leadership will be to reverse this distrust because it implies a lack of faith in our ability to influence the human future and because it denies us any possibility of doing so.

If I am generally more optimistic than Heilbroner, it is above all because I believe that the most vital area in which change is needed if we are going to be able to create a decent future is in the realm of ideas and because I believe such change is possible and indeed is to some extent already under way. Heilbroner is right in arguing that

the liberal political world view associated with the Enlightenment will have to be swept aside in an era which puts its emphasis on survival rather than growth. But this not at all a bad thing. The liberal world view is losing its dominance not simply because it is inappropriate in a world of relative scarcity and increasing international dangers but because it is intellectually outmoded in itself.

The Lockean world view of politics emerged in the Newtonian era, which regarded the universe as composed of separate atoms in a void, concrete particles engaged in relations of force with one another—a world of action and reaction. The American Constitution is, of course, a quintessentially liberal document because our system of separation of powers and of checks and balances is based upon this view of the social universe, analogous to the Newtonian view of the universe as a mechanism. Now the whole of modern scientific thought teaches us that this is a false conception of the universe, that the universe is instead a highly complex *process* in which everything is in some sense acting upon everything else, that the universe is more analogous to a living body than a machine.

It is difficult for us to grasp this because we communicate through a language of transitive verbs. If we say that John kicks the football, John is acting upon the football. The football has nothing to do with it. We do not ask how it is that the football has attracted John or whether his kicking it has any effect upon him. However, this is not the way the universe works, as we have begun to realize since the late nineteenth century; but our language is still rooted in the metaphors of mechanism.

As a result of the kind of language we have to use to communicate, it is very difficult to make sense of society. Within the mainstream of American philosophy one can find people such as George Herbert Mead and John Dewey who have tried to express this "process" reality in the old-fashioned language of subject and object, essence and existence, a language which goes all the way back to Aristotle; as a result they sound sloppy, and it is difficult to grasp what they are saying. What they are, of course, trying to convey is the notion that individuals exist within a social matrix of mutual interaction and that individual and society are not competitors in a zero-sum game. Social control does not necessarily lead to a diminution of freedom. If you can regard freedom, as I do, as the ability to create a willed future, you can then see the world in a radically different fashion from that of classical liberalism.

I live in one of the suburbs of Washington, and a good part of the day it is impossible to cross the main artery safely because of continuous rapid traffic. Now, if the government had put a traffic cop there

and said, "You can't cross," all of us good Americans would have risen up and protested, "You can't do this; you are interfering with our sacred freedom of movement." But, because the traffic itself prevents us from doing it, we normally shrug our shoulders and accept the inconvenience and danger. We would have more freedom to cross this street and move about if the government stepped in and altered the system of traffic engineering by putting in stoplights and enforcing speed laws. Such social control would actually increase our freedom.

This point is directly relevant to Heilbroner's gloomy predictions because I think it is possible to conceive of a society in which there is a great deal of coordination of various kinds, a great degree of control of individual behavior, which, taken on balance and in the long run, would give us *more* freedom than we have today, *more* ability to choose what the future will be like for ourselves, our families, our communities. But we are not going to be able to create a livable future unless we start thinking very seriously about how we define freedom and unless we reject the traditional liberal view in which freedom means being let alone by the agents of government but does not mean being let alone by corporations or by the second-order effects of technology.

Please note that I am definitely not talking simply about accepting regimentation and getting used to it to the point of liking it. On the contrary, I am arguing that through the sophisticated approaches of planning and organization theory we can create means of social coordination which are decentralized, nonhierarchical, and open and which will make possible individual participation and free creativity within an overall pattern of balance. Heilbroner's prediction of a future society organized to deal with critical problems of resource allocation and use is by no means necessarily a vision of 1984 or anything like it. It may actually be a vision (though obviously he does not think so) of a far freer world than the one in which we live today.

Such a revolution in our political ideas and in the world view which underlies these ideas would not necessarily, however, mean an abandonment of every aspect of modern, post-Enlightenment culture, as Heilbroner seems to fear is inevitable in postaffluent society; nor would it necessarily mean a return to the narrow, static world view of premodern tribal societies. Both in Heilbroner's book and in Langdon Gilkey's response (see *Zygon*, this issue) there is a tendency to overdichotomize. They imply that we as individuals and human society as a whole must choose between two cultural types—a kind of neoprimitive human being with a simple, traditional, parochial, and completely integrated premodern world view and an ideal type

modern being who is a cosmopolitan, thrice-divorced nuclear physicist who belongs to an East Side reform club.

This contrast is unreal. I am very much in agreement with Andrew Greeley's contention in his recent book *Unsecular Man* that the notion that modern society is completely secular is a self-serving invention of secular intellectuals. Modern culture and society contain large and vital elements of the religious and traditional within them. By the same token, any future Western culture or world culture will retain a large measure of the skeptical, innovative, and scientific outlook on life and the universe.

Just as today there are sophisticated scientists and political leaders who believe in traditional religious creeds or in new forms of mysticism, spiritualism, or so-called irrationalism, so in the world of the future there will be members of both the elite and the general population who will retain many of the liberal and Enlightenment values which Heilbroner cherishes. We are not going suddenly to forget all that we have learned about the computer, the workings of the body and the brain, and the nature of the universe. We are not going to recreate an ignorance of the existence and nature of the various cultures which coexist within the world. There are all sorts of creative tensions within culture which will continue into the future as they have continued from the past into the present. Heilbroner's world, even though it involves a certain staticness in physical terms, will achieve that staticness in large part as a result of highly sophisticated managerial and physical technology. There is an infinite distance psychologically between a person who has knowingly embraced frugality and one who has never dreamed of the possibility of affluence and between a society which has knowingly chosen stability and tradition and one which has never known that change was possible. The genie can be put back in the bottle, but he can never forget what the outside looks like.

Role of Religion in a Future World

What will the role of religion, and specifically of Christianity, be in the world of the future, granted Heilbroner's assumptions about this world's general physical and social contours? To the surprise of many, including even many Christians, it may play a major role. There is no reason why the monastic socialism of the future has to be based on Mao rather than on the long Christian tradition of monasticism or some analogue of it. In a future society of restraint and constraint, Christianity could perhaps more easily play a normative social role than it has played in recent Western culture with its Promethean and primarily materialist biases.

There are some people who think that future society will be religious in all sorts of strange ways. The work of the metahistorian William Irwin Thompson well expresses this belief that we are entering upon a new age in which the magical and the mystical will be vastly more important but quite possibly along with, rather than as a substitute for, advanced technology. At the very least, we may see the recently burgeoning "ecotheologies" come into their own as rationales for new forms of societal stewardship of nature. We may also witness a reinvigoration of the social gospel as a normative way of prescribing the frugality which will be necessary. We see evidence of this already in some of the religious inputs into the debates over world food policy. If we must increasingly share scarce resources, whether on a global or national basis, Christianity, which still has considerable influence over millions of people, could easily play a major role in society as an ideological and institutional force justifying a new social order.

Everything that I have said so far I believe to be true. It forms the basis for my own work as a social scientist and my own activity as a citizen. I believe that, in cooperation with Providence, whose instruments we are, we can, even granted Heilbroner's basic assumptions about the nature and magnitude of the crisis which confronts us, create a decent and livable future society which preserves our most cherished Christian and humanist values. But I must end on a note of caution. We seem to be implicitly asking the question "Will God save us from Heilbroner's future?" Does this not involve an identification of Christianity with a particular social form—modern society? This is an idea which is just as naive and just as insupportable as the identification of Christianity, throughout Europe, with the *ancien régime* before the French Revolution. What right do we have to assume that God would view it as a tragedy if modern Western secular society were to collapse? In this sense we may be dealing with a false problem throughout this whole discussion.

Like everyone else, including Heilbroner, I do not know what is going to happen in the next year or the next one hundred years. More than that, unlike Heilbroner, I am not sure, speaking as a Christian, that it makes any difference. At one level I am an optimist, and at that level I am working as well as I can to make my optimistic vision realizable. But at another level I am willing not to worry about the future. Recently, the religious service we normally attend in our family—one which is designed primarily for children and often includes special events—imported a circus troupe, a group of young people from the Midwest who perform before church groups. The homilist at the celebration made the point that circus people are dif-

ferent because, while all Christians are fools at heart, they alone are constantly conscious of it. That we are fools living in a fools' world of apparent meaninglessness and constant uncertainty was the "scandal to the Greeks" of which Saint Paul spoke. Maybe all sorts of things are happening to the world that we cannot now predict and would not like, and maybe this is God's will for us. He may want the world to be saved or He may not, or, most likely, He may conceive of the salvation of the world in other terms than we do. From my own theological perspective, if we are Christians we not only have to believe in Providence and exercise the virtue of hope but must expect that the fruits of hope may be something other than we expect. When we consider the notion of the folly of the Cross, we may be simplistic in thinking of it simply in terms of asceticism, suffering, and sacrifice. It implies these, of course, but maybe what is most fundamentally involved is a radical vulnerability to the world and the unknown events of the future. What distinguishes the Christian from the non-Christian may be a willingness to accept even Heilbroner's most gloomy view of the future as something which may be God's will and therefore something which we will also.

NOTE

1. A revised version appears as "The Human Prospect: Second Thoughts," *Futures* 7 (1975): 31–40.