

THE CHURCHES AND THE FUTURE: A UTOPIAN PROPOSAL

by *Kenneth Cauthen*

There is a growing consensus among futurist writers that the human race is moving through a unique period of transition toward a radically new epoch in human history. It is a time of immense peril and immense promise, and the years between now and the year 2000 are crucial to the determination of the outcome. Put briefly, the thesis is this. A planetary society is emerging. A worldwide network of interacting, interdependent human thought and activity covering the spherical skin of the earth is developing, held together by global processes of communication, travel, commerce, and cultural exchange. This is happening under conditions in which the human race is approaching the biological limits of the earth. These limits must be seen both in terms of the capacity of the planet to support the rapidly increasing numbers of people with food and other necessities and in terms of its ability to absorb the polluting poisons we cast off into the land, the sea, and the air. At the same time, the knowledge and know-how explosion is putting unprecedented powers in man's hands, either to bless the earth or to curse it, to feed, clothe, and house all people and open up new vistas of enjoyment and creative adventure or to destroy the human race with doomsday weapons. In the light of all this I believe that it is true to say that we live in a situation radically different in these respects from what any previous generation has known.

The emergence of the planetary society sets specifications for human fulfillment for the species as a whole that cannot be met unless there are profound changes in the ideas, values, and power coalitions that now determine our priorities and shape our politics. Our present ways of thinking and doing are not adequate to deal with the ecological realities of planet earth in a fashion that allows us not only to survive as a race but also to provide justice and joy for

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all. It is my conviction that neither science plus technology nor politics can provide the solutions required for our problems apart from a major transformation of ideas and ideals. I further believe that our best hope may lie in the emergence of a creative minority of dreamers and doers who can provide us with the visions and the values that we need to transform our thinking and acting throughout the whole political and cultural realm. This conviction has been strengthened by a reading of Frederick Polak's massive two-volume work, *The Image of the Future*.¹ His contention, based on a study of 3,000 years of Western civilization, is that the major (though obviously not the only) factor in generating social change has been the image of the future widely held and deeply believed in society. However, Polak offers evidence to show that the process by which such positive utopian images are formed, revised, and renewed has in our time slowed almost to a stop. Contemporary man tends to live in a continual present in which he feels little or no energizing pull from the lure of projected good futures. The vital need of the day, he believes, is for the rebirth of dreaming in ways that motivate men to act to make the dream come true.

Surprisingly enough, in his own paradoxical way Reinhold Niebuhr provides support for the idea that utopian ideals have a transforming power. He speaks of them as illusions but recognizes them as essential to social salvation even though they need to be subject to the realism of reason. In the concluding paragraph of his famous early work, Niebuhr writes:

In the task of that redemption (of the total human enterprise) the most effective agents will be men who have substituted some new illusions for the abandoned ones. The most important of these illusions is that the collective life of mankind can achieve perfect justice. It is a very valuable illusion for the moment; for justice cannot be approximated if the hope of its perfect realization does not generate a sublime madness in the soul. Nothing but such madness will do battle with malignant power and "spiritual wickedness in high places." The illusion is dangerous because it encourages terrible fanaticisms. It must therefore be brought under the control of reason. One can only hope that reason will not destroy it before its work is done.²

I am among a growing number of people who believe that there is an urgent need for a rebirth of utopian thinking within the church and in society at large along the very lines suggested by Niebuhr. This may be the dawning of "the Age of Aquarius," as the song from *Hair* says. But can we dare to believe that it may also become the age of the Spirit spoken of by the prophet Joel? "Then shall it be that I pour out my spirit on all; your sons and daughters shall be inspired,

your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions" (2:28). Utopian visions need to be rooted in the earth of present actualities but must extend to the heaven of future possibility, so that the ultimate horizon of projected ideals becomes a powerful lure generating hopeful action which begins to make dreams come true. Put theologically, the concept of the Kingdom of God needs to be translated into contemporary terms which preserves the tension between immanent historical potentiality (thy kingdom come on earth) and transcendent ultimate perfection (as it is in heaven). Without the former, a vision cannot be recognized as concretely relevant for its own time. Without the latter, ideals do not stand out sufficiently beyond the ambiguities of the present to serve either as a judgment on historical actuality or as a lure for future realization.

In short, I believe that Polak provides a remarkable confirmation of the validity of Christian strategy—militant transforming action growing out of the hope of a good future that is promised by God and cocreated by man. Such, I believe, is one way of understanding the logic of social transformation implicit in Scripture. There are clues here for the Christian mission as we look forward to the year 2000—a time of transition fraught with unprecedented peril and promise. There is no greater need, I contend, than for a rebirth of visions of the human future in the light of the Christian past and the Christian promise.

Dreams, to be effective, must be more than wishful thinking. They must have a basis in reality. My task in this article is to suggest in very brief fashion a contemporary theological perspective which I believe to be adequate in terms of both its credibility and its relevance. More specifically I am concerned to develop a scheme which I call utopian biopolitics. Finally, I wish to suggest a role for the churches during this transition period in world history.

FUNDAMENTAL PRESUPPOSITIONS

The central theme of biopolitics is life and its fulfillment. An evolutionary perspective is assumed in which human existence is seen in the total context in which it emerged as the outcome of a long process of development. Moreover, man is viewed as a biospiritual creature who requires a delicate balance of prescribed environmental conditions as a necessary prerequisite to a possible flowering of his unique human capacities. In short, biopolitics presupposes the unity of nature and history, insisting that man must be viewed in a comprehensive cosmohistorical, biocultural setting.

A further characteristic of biopolitics is that it is both a theoretical and a practical enterprise. It includes a conception of reality, a theory of value, and a program of action. The primary category for interpreting the real is life conceived of as a process of goal-seeking activity. The good is understood in terms of the enjoyment of existence. Organic wholeness is held to be the rule of normative functioning in living systems. Biopolitics seeks both a conceptual understanding of life and its concrete fulfillment. Reflection and action, theory and practice, are inseparable.

Another feature of biopolitics is that it embraces both religion and ethics. Religion has to do with man's ultimate value commitments, and it reaches its acme in the achievement of moments of ecstasy—the awareness of the unity of all life in love. Ethics has to do with detailed choices and actions which lead to the maximizing of the enjoyment of existence for the whole community of living beings. Biopolitics leads in one direction to a consideration of life in relationship to its ultimate ground—God the Creator. It eventuates in the other direction in specific prescriptions for the relating of creatures to each other. Worship and work, contemplation and action, ultimate commitment and concrete deeds, religion and ethics, form one comprehensive whole in which each dimension presupposes and leads to the other.

A final identifying mark of biopolitics is that it employs a method of creative synthesis. Assuming that truth is one, science, philosophy, and theology are seen, ideally, as mutually supporting perspectives on reality. The revelation of God given in Scripture is regarded as authoritative only insofar as it provides clarifying images which illuminate experience as it is critically interpreted by reason. Theology within this framework articulates the meaning of the inherited tradition of the Christian community in the light of empirical knowledge supplied by the sciences. It makes use of the resources of the philosophical community and of other religious traditions. It seeks to incorporate the insights available in literature and the arts. In short, theology embraces wisdom from every available historical and contemporary source that assists in making sense of human experience. The Bible and the history of the interpretive tradition within the church will continue to occupy a central place for the contemporary Christian, not, however, as arbitrary dictators of dogma but as especially productive generators of imagery which actually functions to give pattern and purpose to the human venture.

The method of creative synthesis has two particularly important features for the future. In the first place, theology will need to

become increasingly a corporate enterprise in which teams of thinkers combine their efforts to relate Christian insights to the complex issues of a science-based technological age. This means that the individual theologian who laboriously over several decades works out multivolumed works of systematic theology may play a decreasing role in the total theological enterprise. In the second place, the theology of the future needs to be by design a thoroughly interdisciplinary task. Theology as an isolated discipline which is structured primarily or solely in reference to biblical and traditional dogmatic themes will decline in importance. Both the discipline isolation and the language isolation which are all too characteristic of much previous theology need to be overcome. The theological work which will be most useful in the years ahead will be that which works out its motifs in correlation with the whole range of the behavioral and social sciences and does so in language which has the widest possible touch with ordinary modes of speech common to all educated persons. Both of these points lead to the conclusion that futuristic research institutes and theological think-tanks are needed by the religious community as well as by secular agencies as we approach the twenty-first century.

PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS

With these preliminary characterizations in mind the meaning of biopolitics can further be specified. I have in another writing committed myself to a metaphysical scheme in which life is taken to be the basic category for the interpretation of reality.³ In the broadest sense life refers to the process by which the possible becomes actual under the lure of the good. As such, life is a "root-metaphor" (Pepper) which has universal relevance for understanding the nature of things at every level from subatomic particles to God. In a narrower sense life means simply living beings, those individual organisms and species which are the objects of biological science. These organisms are emergent beings produced by the life-generating creativity inherent in the cosmos. In their splendid variety they exhibit the complex nature which life in its developed forms has taken. Life has four interlocking characteristics: (1) self-creation, the process by which an organism appropriates relevant aspects of its environment into a structure which leads to the realization of its own inherent potentiality; (2) self-preservation, those activities which protect and heal the organism; (3) self-transcendence, the drive to go beyond any present actuality in order to perpetuate and improve the organism in such ways as

growth, reproduction, mutation, elaboration of novel form, etc.; and (4) self-enjoyment, the experience of satisfaction felt as the accompaniment of the activities of self-creation, self-preservation, and self-transcendence. Life suggests the drive toward attainment in the presence of obstacles, an active thrust toward internally guided ends. Organism is an equivalent term which suggests the dynamic unity of a whole made up of mutually supporting parts such as is found in all living beings. I contend that reality has an organic character. It is characterized by the dynamic-creative, organic-unitary features which are most evident in living beings studied by biologists. Biological life is a self-organizing, self-regulating, self-perpetuating system of purposive or goal-oriented activities. An organism is an intricately organized system of mutually sustaining activities internally related to each other and to the total unit to which they belong in such a way as to realize and transcend the potentialities inherent within it. The study of organisms provides the best clue to the nature of the whole of reality and of every level of evolutionary development.

The resulting perspective is an evolutionary, organic, teleological, process philosophy. Reality is viewed in terms of an evolutionary process which has given rise in successive stages to novel forms of life all aiming at the fullest possible realization of their potentialities (the lure of the good). The cosmos is a value-creating system of structured processes capable of and driving toward self transcendence. At some point in the evolutionary process organisms appeared capable of subjective awareness, of enjoying their being. The most complex of these creatures is man, a self-conscious spirit who has added to the achievements of natural evolution the wide range of developing cultural creations. But he emerges as a part and product of a total evolutionary process which is prior to him. His goal-seeking, value-processing efforts reflect the goal-seeking, value-producing activities of the cosmos itself and of God, who is both the life of the cosmic organism and its primordial ground.

The fundamental category of relevance which is implied in this philosophical outlook is organic wholeness. I speak from this point on of relevance with particular reference to man and his communities. Individuals and societies exhibit vitalities directed toward the attainment of values experienced as satisfaction. These goal-directed energies need to be organized so as to create mutually supporting patterns of interaction which lead to the greatest possible intensity and variety of human enjoyment. In its quest for value life moves forward in a creative fashion to knit together the multileveled potentialities of persons and groups into ever enlarging harmonious

systems of mutually sustaining activities. It is in this context that the category of organic wholeness is to be understood. It has reference to (1) a process of moving toward some normative unity of harmonious functioning (growth), (2) the achievement of this goal for some individual or society in a given situation (maturity), and (3) a kind of attainment which lends itself to further creative advance (self-transcendence). Enjoyment of being occurs when organic wholeness is being achieved and continuously surpassed. The implication of this is that in every case the aim of constructive human action is to find ways of overcoming self-defeating conflicts within and between persons and groups which block the free flow of the vitalities of existence and thus thwart the joy of living.

THE CULTURAL SETTING

Every theology attempts to state the substance of the Christian message in a form that is both credible and relevant in the particular cultural situation to which it is addressed. It is, in fact, a reading of the present scene that calls for a biopolitical theology. In the first place, the theological enterprise must come to terms with the scientific-secularized consciousness of our era. To come to terms with does not mean capitulate to, but it does mean directing the content of faith toward the felt needs, conscious goals, and prevailing ways of perceiving and relating to reality characteristics of a given society. Science and secularization are the twin cultural forces which have most shaped the mentality of the modern epoch. Science brings knowledge and power. Scientific ways of knowing provide the modern man with his most confidently held convictions about the real world. These convictions are widely believed to add up to a view of the world as a neutral network of causes and processes which require neither teleological principles nor supernatural powers to account for what is observed. Nature, on this reading, is a self-contained system of mutually interdependent events in which reference either to immanent purpose or to a transcendent creator becomes problematical. The effect has been an increasing erosion of confidence in the combination of Greek philosophy and Christian theology which for centuries provide a world view in which meanings and values were thought to be objective givens within the structure of things to be discovered by reason or received in faith. The spirit of the present age is strongly infused with the assumption that meaning must be humanly created, that truth is relative, that values are subjective, and that the universe does not give a damn what we do or believe.

At this point science and secularization merge. The secular mentality is this-worldly, empirical, pragmatic, materialistic, and hedonistic; it focuses on the fulfillment of existence in the here and now in ways that include full stomachs, healthy bodies, and enough goods and gadgets to provide a comfortable life. The secular mind assumes that man is responsible for his own destiny and hence has the task of directing the course of history toward self-chosen goals. Viewing himself as an autonomous creature in a contingent world, the secular man of today depends upon science for knowledge and technology for power to order his common life to achieve happiness and well-being.

To this general characterization of the contemporary mentality a second, more specific, factor can be added. Man's growing powers to alter his destiny—and that of all living beings—and the increasing interdependence of men with each other, with nature, and with the machines they create make future-oriented research and planning imperative in order to avoid disaster and to achieve a desirable future. Increasingly we will live in an age of futuristic inquiry which aims toward the anticipation of alternative futures and directed management of natural, technological, and social systems. Herbert Richardson speaks of the emergency of sociotechnics as the crucial factor in the cultural epoch already dawning. "By socio-technics is meant that new knowledge whereby man exercises technical control not only over nature but over all the specific institutions that make up society: i.e., economics, education, science, and politics."⁴ I would only add that we ought to think in terms of a biosociotechnic age in order to stress the fact that what is at stake is the future organization and control of life itself.

At this point it must be recognized that the interdependence of all life in relationship to the planetary environment places special obligations and limitations on the present generation. There is one world, one human family, one interrelated web of life woven on the spherical skin of the earth. Plants, animals, and men share a common environment. It is imperative not only that nations and races learn to live in peace with justice for all but that we also learn how to relate ourselves to our natural surroundings in such a way as to stay alive and prosper. We cannot afford to continue to make war, to tolerate oppression, to allow the gap between the rich and the poor to persist, but neither can we indiscriminately and indefinitely plunder the planet for its resources, overpopulate it with people, and pollute our air and water without paying the terrible consequences

in human misery. If we are to have a future at all, we must at least learn the elementary requirements of biological survival.

THE STRUCTURE OF BIOPOLITICS

The preceding analysis leads to the conclusion that a comprehensive approach to the world's destiny is required. Put in systematic structural terms, biopolitics takes into account the totality of (1) natural systems (the given resources of earth with its evolved life), (2) social systems (the sum total of all humanly developed knowledge, skills, cultural patterns, institutions, values, and goals), and (3) machine systems (all humanly invented technologies and servomechanisms which extend man's powers). With respect to each of these spheres biopolitics is concerned with (1) goals (the ideal ends which should guide the planning of men in search of a better future), (2) analysis (the investigation and interpretation of a given situation to gain understanding of the structures and processes which are presently operative), and (3) strategy (the organization of human action in order to achieve the goals deemed desirable).

In short, the coming age must take into account all those systems and subsystems that affect the quality of human existence with the aim of producing a harmonious functioning of the whole. This means that men must think of the whole range of biosocial conditions which pertain to the realization of the potentialities of individuals in a justly ordered society living in symbiotic union with the planetary environment. The good future must be planned for in the light of some utopian vision sufficiently compelling to motivate men to devote themselves to its achievement. The aim of biopolitics is precisely that of elaborating such a vision of the ideal and advising ways of attaining it. Biopolitics seeks, minimally, to bring about those elementary conditions which must be met if life—human, animal, and plant—is to survive at all and, maximally, to make possible the optimum enjoyment of existence.

A theology which takes the form of biopolitics will need to relate itself to the whole range of the natural, social, and behavioral sciences. Within the last decade most attention has been given by the churches to social analysis. A great deal of work has been done in relating the Christian imperative to the problems of war, poverty, and racism. In this connection extensive use has been made of the contributions of sociologists, political scientists, and economists. Less but still substantial inquiry has been undertaken in relating theological insights to psychology. Increasingly in the future theologians

must learn to converse with biologists. A theology of the body is crucial in the days of heart transplants and in anticipation of the coming age of genetic engineering. Moreover, new attitudes toward sex, marriage, birth control, and abortion make an understanding of the body essential. What is the body, and how is it related to the spirit? What are the genetic components of personality and behavior, of aggression, violence, and crime? Is there a biological basis for the love ethic? What are the theological implications of cryonics (freezing of bodies at death in hope of subsequent resuscitation), of the physical and chemical control of the mind, of cloning, of the creation of the cyborg (combining of an organism with a machine), and of the possible emergence of computers that think, feel, and choose? These and a host of related questions are swarming to the surface, and theologians have scarcely begun to come to terms with them. Clearly this is an area which demands a high priority on the theological agenda of the future.

Within the next decade, however, there is a special urgency for theology to seek an alliance with ecology. Nothing less than our survival is at stake. Ecologists are telling us in ever more somber tones that man may perish in a cesspool of his own making unless he repents of his folly and amends his ways radically and soon. It is not so much the preachers but the environmental scientists these days who seem to believe most in the end of the human world. Commentary by three eminent nonscientists of this generation further underscores the need for politics broad enough to include ecology. First, Aldous Huxley has argued that only if we take into account the biological as well as the merely political facts can we hope to shorten the time of trouble into which we are moving:

Only when we get it into our collective head that the basic problem confronting twentieth-century man is an ecological problem will our politics improve. How does the human race propose to survive and, if possible, improve the lot and the intrinsic quality of its individual members? Do we propose to live on this planet in symbiotic harmony with our environment? Or, preferring to be wantonly stupid, shall we choose to live like murderous and suicidal parasites that kill their host and so destroy themselves? . . . If our politicians were realists, they would think rather less about missiles and the problem of landing astronauts on the moon, rather more about hunger and moral squalor and the problem of enabling three billion men, women, and children, who will soon be six billions, to lead a tolerably human existence without, in the process, ruining and befouling their planetary environment.⁵

Second, Norman Cousins has recently proposed that some foundation establish a Commission on the World's Future made up of

eminent scientists and humanists with moral vision who would devote themselves to thinking about the problem of survival and fulfillment in the future. The commission would think in planetary terms about the whole human race, transcending the narrow ties of national governments and racial and ideological prejudices. It would issue annually a report on the State of Mankind. Cousins points out, as does Huxley, that our problem is bad politics. Governments which were instituted among men to insure their security and well-being now constitute a big part of the problem. Devoting themselves to nationalistic interests, the governments of the world have become potential instruments of race suicide and world holocaust. Noting how men have polluted and raped the natural environment and how we have applied our ingenuity to practically everything except how to make the earth fit for human habitation, Cousins concludes: "What has been happening to people that they don't understand is that they have made a geographical entity out of their world without a philosophy for ennobling it, a plan for conserving it, or an organization for sustaining it. Men crave to do good, to act reasonably and think decently. But goodness and decency and wisdom must have a world purpose in our time if life and thought are to have any meaning at all."⁶ What is called for is some way to transcend or transform the idolatrous governments of the world and to develop a goal and a plan for making the earth into a proper home for mankind. Perhaps, he suggests, a Commission on the World's Future would help.

Finally, Secretary General of the United Nations U Thant has recently reported a study made for a Global Conference on Man's Environment in 1972. He calls attention, as experts increasingly are doing, to the deterioration of the world's resources in arable land and forests and to the pollution of air and water by pesticides and waste products. Noting that the population of the earth is expected to double by the year 2000, reaching seven billion, the study adds: "The need to provide food, water, minerals, fuel and other necessities for such increasing numbers of people will place pressures on virtually all areas of the earth and demand the most careful planning and management of natural resources. No nation can any longer be isolated from these global pressures."⁷

But what has theology to do with ecology? Part of the Christian vision involves an understanding of nature and of man's place in the cosmic scheme of things. Moreover, man's ideas and attitudes with respect to nature are important ingredients in the total ecosystem. These ideas and attitudes have powerful consequences for the des-

tiny of life as man's power to affect the ecosystem increases. Hence, a theology of nature is ecologically relevant and is a prime prerequisite if the churches are to make any substantial contribution to the understanding and solution of the environmental crisis which has come so rapidly to the public consciousness within the last few years. Lynn White, jr., in an article that evoked both rage and enthusiasm, argues that both the roots and the remedy of the present problem are religious in nature. His contention is that attitudes developed in the Latin West and the Middle Ages led to the rise of science and technology, the union of which a century ago has resulted in the contemporary threat of extinction pictured by today's apocalyptic ecologists. White's thesis is that Christianity banished the spirits from trees, fields, mountains, and streams, leaving man as the only place on earth where spirit resides. "By destroying paganism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects."⁸ An alternative Christian view with therapeutic potential, White believes, is to be found in Saint Francis's view of the spiritual democracy of created beings in which birds, flowers, ants, and wolves all have a contribution to make to the praise of God. Cosmic humility must replace arrogance, and an appreciation for the goodness of the whole creation must replace anthropocentric egoism. Since Saint Francis points in this direction, White urges ecologists to make him their patron saint. The churches can, if they will but seize the opportunity, have a resource in their creation and eschatological faith that can contribute to our ecological salvation. (1) A theology of nature combined with (2) ecological knowledge and incorporated into (3) a relevant program of action are the prime ingredients of a constructive program for the churches in the seventies in relation to the environmental crisis.

THE BIOPOLITICAL ROLE OF THE CHURCH

How, then, can we organize ourselves as a human family first of all to survive and then to prosper in a peaceful and just society? That is the basic question of our time, and to deal with this question is the task of biopolitics. Does the church have a contribution to make to the theory and practice of biopolitics? I think it can have if its leaders can rise to the occasion. Three phases of this mission of the church can be briefly noted.

First of all, the task of the church is to be a witness in the world to the Christian vision of reality. Today that message should be framed in eschatological terms pointing to the purpose of God to create life and to fulfill its potentialities for the widest possible range and depth

of enjoyment. Life is good, and it is a gift of God. The goal of life is realized in the harmonious union of life with all life in love. Existence is enjoyed and life is enjoyable when organic wholeness prevails, when the individual is reconciled to himself, to his neighbors, and to the whole community of living beings, to the cosmic environment which produces and sustains life, and to God—the life of the world. The reconciled community of life in love is the kingdom of God, and it is always coming, always a possibility hovering over life waiting to be realized. The church must in our day be a witness to a utopian vision of a community of persons who live in adoration of the God who made them and in love with all creatures who likewise have their being from God. This is *heaven* on earth, and it can be heaven *on earth*. One mission of the church in our time is to keep this visionary goal before the planners, decision makers, and plain citizens of our world. This is the vision which should guide the practice of biopolitics.

In the second place, the mission of the church is to bear prophetic witness against idolatry. Heaven can come on earth, but so can hell. The future is open, pregnant with promise but also with peril. Whether the kingdom of God or the kingdom of Satan comes to pass depends considerably on our choices and actions. We practice today by and large the politics of nationalism, of ideology, of military power, of race, of class, of economic interest. These are idols. Their worship will at worst lead literally to our destruction or at best to the continuation of the violence, oppression, misery, and hatreds that are so familiar from our past. The church must first free itself from the worship of these idols and then condemn them by word and deed wherever they appear. God is life and the author of life, and the practice of biopolitics is the way of worship and mission in our time. Biopolitics is concerned with the survival and enchancement of the total community of living beings, with the harmonizing of life with its planetary environment, with defusing the population bomb, with feeding the world's hungry people, with healing the sick, with establishing justice, with promoting among all of earth's peoples the enjoyment of existence. Any vision less universal than this is infected with the cancer of idolatry.

In the third place, the mission of the church is to be a model of the kingdom of God within its own life and an agent of the universal coming of the kingdom of God in the whole world. Within itself the church should be a laboratory of love here and now. In the world the church should be a lobbyist for a future in which all of life is reconciled in love to all of life. This worldly service will take a variety

of forms, but its common focus will be the increase among all men—and indeed in all living creatures—of the enjoyment of existence.

THE CHURCHES VIS-À-VIS ECONOMIC, POLITICAL,
AND SOCIAL ISSUES

Let me now try to be more specific by looking at the present situation in the churches and trying to show how the analysis I have presented can be related to what is actually going on with church members. For this purpose I am thinking primarily of mainline, white Protestant churches. Jeffery Hadden, in his book *The Gathering Storm in the Churches*,⁹ provides valuable insight into what is happening within the community of believers. A conflict has emerged between the liberal and militant activist pastors and national leaders, on the one hand, and a large body of conservative laymen (and some pastors, too), on the other hand. The latter group think that the church should stick to spiritual matters and stop meddling in politics and social issues. The "new breed" of clergyman is often seen in the streets and elsewhere protesting the war in Vietnam, demonstrating for civil rights for blacks, and leading the fight against poverty. This sight has produced consternation in many pious hearts of people who wonder what has happened to ministers to make them become fomentors of disorder. In addition, churches of mainline Protestantism have frequently resounded with sermons lambasting the complacency of the comfortable. Scorn has been heaped upon the defenders of the status quo who happen, also, to be pillars of the congregation. The vices of the middle-aged and the middle class of middle America have been scorned repeatedly, while the suburbanite is routinely pictured as one who cowardly flees from the tumult of the inner city to enjoy his affluence in the privacy of his backyard with its green grass and ubiquitous charcoal grill. Then, when these occupants of the comfortable pew who have been so severely rebuked are asked for their money to support liberal social causes that in their minds are not the proper business of the church anyway, it is no wonder that stormy weather has developed.

While my own sentiments fundamentally favor the social activists, I recognize that there are complex cultural and theological issues at stake that cannot be easily resolved. The storm not only has to do with the social role of the church but also relates, as Hadden points out, to confusion having to do with beliefs and the authority of the minister. Hence, the church is likely to be in for even more turmoil in the next decade. But with regard to the meaning and purpose of

the church, both sides have a point. The conservatives are right in insisting that the primary function of the church is not to be a social action agency. The basic concern of the Christian message is with the ultimate issues of life, death, and destiny, that is, with man's relationship to God, his will and work, his providence and purpose. The sermon ought to offer more than another partisan line on current political controversies. The church should be a "sanctuary" from the world, an extrawordly source of hope, wisdom, and comfort.

But the liberal activists are right in insisting that one cannot separate the individual's relationship to God at the ultimate level from his relationships to other persons in the political and economic spheres. It is precisely the encounter with the gift and demand of God's love that puts the prevailing social order under radical judgment and requires a fundamental transformation of its structures. The experience of salvation is not complete apart from wordly action by individuals and churches not only to preach the Gospel but also to secure justice in society. If taken seriously, this task calls for corporate action by bodies of Christians as well as efforts by individual Christians in the various secular spheres in which they are involved. The Gospel is a revolutionary social force precisely because it does confront individuals with the living God of the Bible, and appropriate means must be sought by which Christians make a corporate witness and impact upon the whole social order.

Beyond this, however, I think there are probably practical as well as theological factors that have entered into the turmoil of recent years over the role of the church in dealing with economic, political, and social issues. The point I am leading up to is that, for many laymen, the gospel of liberal social activism offered to them by many pastors, denominational headquarters, and ecumenical leaders has not come as good news. Some laymen, of course, share the visions of their activist leaders. But for larger numbers, the message of judgment and condemnation which has come through has not produced militant social action designed to transform the structures of society. Rather, the result has been to stiffen their support of the status quo. The reason may simply be that a message of liberation has been preached, but the liberation is *for somebody else*. They have been pronounced guilty, but guilt alone is not a motivator but a paralyzer, even if the judgment is accepted. They have heard demands for sacrifice of comforts but have not heard much promise of salvation for them. The white, affluent American, presumably, has it made already, and it is his heavy foot, he is told, which rests on the neck of the black, the poor, and the discontented. In this situation it should

come as no surprise that not many volunteers have come forth to play the role of suffering servant.

If white middle-class and affluent Protestant churches are to become dynamic centers of social transformation, then a vision must be offered them which makes it clear that the ideas, values, and actions required by the vision lead to *their* liberation. This is why the black church has become a positive social force in the previous decade. Black Christians were awakened to the possibility of their release from bondage, a vision inspired and undergirded by the language of liberation growing out of the eschatological faith of the Bible. I believe it can be shown that the vision and the values required to carry the human race through the perils of the transition to enjoy the promises beyond result in a union of self-interest and morality. There is no happier combination than this. If what is demanded of me by high moral principles also leads to my deliverance in a situation where not to act in accordance with these ethical demands or to continue in my same ways of acting leads to my destruction, then there are possibilities for basic transformations of my ideas, ideals, attitudes, and goals. It is not surprising that affluent, white Americans have been defensive of present arrangements in America. A social order that has enabled them through hard work to succeed and prosper cannot be all bad. Where members of churches are also members of "the establishment," we should expect them to see basic congruence between the prevailing order and what Christian principles require. If, however, the analysis I am assuming is correct, we are *all* in trouble unless we change. We are *all* in an overturned boat. *Our* lives are at stake. *Our* liberation is the prize that must be sought. If this is true, then changes of ideas and ideals are required by persons outside as well as inside the church. Can white middle-class and affluent churches be a factor in facilitating the birth of a new vision, a new consciousness? There are some signs of hope.

There are, for example, reasons for believing that the group most able to appreciate the ecological dimensions of the emerging crisis—population, pollution, use of resources—may well be prosperous white Americans, especially their children. These are the same people that make up a good portion of the membership of mainline Protestant churches. In these congregations are thousands of professional people, teachers, scientists, engineers, physicians, and well-informed people who are generally in a position to understand the ecological facts of life. Perhaps more important, it is the children of the affluent who are most alienated from the present order and in quest of a new society where peace and love dwell and

where technology has lost its dehumanizing, demonic power. It is among the militant young, most of all, that the ideas and ideals that the future requires with respect to war, to consumption, to population, to pollution, and to nationalism may be expected to flourish.

THE DAWNING OF A NEW CONSCIOUSNESS IN AMERICA

There are hints of a dawning new consciousness in America. Its outlines are vague, its manifestations vary, even contradict one another. It is emerging from many sources, and its forms are still evolving. As life itself gropes toward new and higher expressions, so new visions evolve, mutate, leap up and out of imagination. My own grasp of this dawning consciousness is impressionistic, vague, partial, biased. Obviously, I have blended my intuitions about a new awareness that may actually be emerging into the vision I would like to see flourish. In relationship to the past and present, the new consciousness will likely be more sensuous, ecstatic, erotic, earthy, bodily oriented, festive, playful, feminine, idealistic, utopian, mystical, religious, hedonistic—in sum, a quest for joy in the wholeness of body and spirit. Its ways of expression will stress unity, harmony, peace, love, and universal brotherhood. Its scope will be planetary, embracing all mankind in its hopes and dreams. It will value spontaneity and vitality more than cool, calculating rationality. It will not scorn intellect or critical reason but will trust feeling and intuition. Its aim will be to humanize technology, to put machines in the service of feeding, clothing, housing, helping, and healing all mankind. It will direct science into the service of life-values—survival and fulfillment. It will seek political mechanisms which express and accomplish its universal vision rather than simply consolidate power to promote some parochial idol. Its key categories will be organism, wholeness, life. Its perspective, in the largest sense, will be ecological—seeking the unity and harmony of man with man, man with environment, and man with the vitalizing, creative, purposive powers that throb in the cosmos itself in its thrust forward. Its quest will be a kingdom of perfect justice and joy—the ecstasy of life in loving union with all life.

Among what may be a growing number of people in our churches, aspects of a new consciousness are stirring, at least in the form of a vague hunger often below the level of articulate thought. There is a feeling for a new vitality that darkly aches to be born. This yearning is more obvious in the young, but it can also be found here and there among the not so young. At least, this is my hunch, admittedly an impression based on my own contact with church

members but confirmed by what others are saying, writing, and feeling. I believe, in the light of this, that the greatest opportunity for American religion in the seventies lies in nourishing this quest for a good future and in providing a basis of hope in the face of the fears that arise from the thoughts of facing the future. I would like to see concerted efforts made in churches to discover in human experience where the growing edges of this hunger for hope are and to give shape and substance to it out of the communal memory of what God has done in Christ and in expectation of what he can and will do through the power of the Spirit.

To provide ways of expressing this dawning yearning requires the dreaming and the doing of us all. I can only confess my own conviction that this possibly emerging new consciousness should be encouraged. It needs to be given form by a utopian vision of a planetary brotherhood at peace with nature and with God. Such a world society needs to be organized politically and economically in such a way as to provide equal access to the means of material fulfillment to all the earth's people. And it needs to be organized technologically in such a way as to support a manageable population with all its needs without either exhausting vital resources or polluting us to death in the process. Such a vision grows out of the concrete situation of our time under the inspiration of the Christian idea of the transcendent goal of history. It grows also from the thrust of the human spirit itself, pushing its way to the surface of consciousness in an ever more urgent quest of a better world.

I believe the church can give form to these vague yearnings out of the treasures of its own eschatological faith. I would like to see churches become centers where Spirit-inspired followers of Jesus set their imaginations free to dream of a community united in peace and brotherhood. I would like to see worship services come alive with joyful cries of humans made ecstatic by hope of a new world. I would like to see educational programs which immerse children in the history of hope in Israel and in the church, showing how visions of a good future grew in every age out of the memories of God's past disclosures to provide anticipations of a coming kingdom. I would like to see church schools become nourishers of dreamers and creators of doers, providing growing minds with the insights of Christian hope and with the empirical data of secular futurists, setting imaginations free to create images of wonderful future worlds that could really be. I would like to hear sermons giving shape to possibilities of human delight in the future God intends for us and setting forth the moral imperatives that are required to make

the ideal real. From such visions of alternative good futures might come those guiding images that we need. From such visions might also come insights as to the social strategies and political mechanisms and technological deployment that would help give concrete substance to the futures we desire to invent. Out of such churches might come the dreamers and the doers with the visions and the values that can save us. At least, this is my hope. Or is it my fantasy run wild past all realistic probabilities?

The task to which I would like to see Christians the world over commit themselves during the next three decades is to formulate visions of a good future in the light of which believers can learn *to cause, to celebrate, and to cope with change*. Believers need to be at work causing changes that direct men toward the promise of the new world. Christians need to learn to live with the new, to welcome it, and to be open to it. Followers of Jesus need to be so deeply rooted in a confidence in God's good providence that they can live in the faith that God loves and never finally loses, always loving the life that God has given, and always hoping for the good future he has promised.

NOTES

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