

OPTIMISM AND PESSIMISM: SCIENCE AND ESCHATOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

A view of the future calls for a perspective on the relationship between the present and the future. Varieties of Christian eschatology have established this relationship in different ways in spite of the fact that all Christians share in the ultimate optimism of God's finished work of redemption and new creation. Among those concerned with the role of science and technology in the shaping of the future, there has arisen a neo-post-millennialism in which growth of scientific understanding is seen as grounds for optimism in the present, leading to the construction of a world suitable to receive its returning Lord. This neo-post-millennialism tends to minimize the ultimate work of God in the future in comparison with the present work of God through men, rests on a false idealism as to the potentialities of science in a sinful world, and creates frustration leading even to violence and despair among Christians who believe that they are God's only instruments for bringing in the Kingdom. Christian realism, on the other hand, avoids both optimism and pessimism based on false premises in the present, and permits a Christian to be free to work constructively for the betterment of a world destined for destruction.

INTRODUCTION

Every Christian who seriously seeks to relate the Biblical insights into the future with the Biblical responsibilities for the present faces a problem which is far from trivial. Briefly put, the problem is this: how can a Christian work wholeheartedly for the coming of the Kingdom on earth, as our Lord commanded us to pray in that prayer He prepared especially for us, when at the same time he knows that the present earth is destined for destruction? The ultimate Christian hope is in a new heaven and a new earth, fresh from the hand of the Creator without the sufferings and sins of this present world; there are no final answers to the world's problems except those given by this final work of God in which He will complete

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the work of redemption and truly make all one in Christ. Yet the command is plain that Christians are to be a salt in the present day, actively working in every aspect of life in spite of odds that transcend all human abilities, praying and working for the establishment of whatever degree of the Kingdom of God it is possible to have here and now.

In this dilemma optimism and pessimism are curiously interwoven. All Christians share in the ultimate optimism of God's finished work of redemption when the evils of the present day shall be no more. Is the appropriate response in the present day, however, to be one of optimism or pessimism? If of optimism, then how is it possible to function with respect to problems which have no human solution and which will never yield to human efforts in a divided world? If of pessimism, then how is it possible to produce the zeal and devotion necessary to tackle personal and social problems that cry out for the saltiness of Christians?

Traditional eschatological positions have offered a variety of answers to these questions. Although each position can be Biblically defended and need not lead to a distortion of a Christian worldview, historically there is evidence that particular eschatological positions have led empirically to particular types of social consciousness (or perhaps those with a particular social consciousness have chosen that eschatological position which reinforces their convictions). In the apocalyptic atmosphere of our times, eschatological views assume new importance.

The attempt to view scientific achievement as a key to eschatological understanding has led to a variation on one of these traditional positions. This variation seems the most likely to be acceptable to a large portion of the Christian community, simply because it does seem to have support from both science and Christianity. This variation, however, can be shown to be seriously deficient with respect to both theology and Christian practice.

Only an approach of Christian realism, in which ultimate optimism is allowed to provide the motivation in spite of present pessimism, is adequate for a dynamic Christian response to the present-future dilemma.

ESCHATOLOGICAL SYSTEMS

The focal point for the definition of traditional eschatological systems is the millennium. Even patterns of eschatology which do not fit these traditional categories can be interpreted in an analogous way. By considering the three traditional approaches to the question of eschatology, therefore, we consider the principal aspects of any such approach. Culver¹ has put together a bibliography of over 150 titles on millennial views dating from 1826 to 1953. Ladd² also provides an extensive bibliography in his treatment of the subject.

1. Culver, Robert D., *Daniel and the Latter Days* (Fleming H. Revell, 1954).
2. Ladd, George E., *Crucial Questions about the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1954).

Pre-millennialism

In the pre-millennial view,¹⁻⁶ the last great acts of God in bringing an end to the present age and preparing the stage for the eternal Kingdom involve the second return of Christ unexpectedly to a world deep in suffering and sin. Christ sets up a thousand-year kingdom on earth in a kind of interregnum period, principally to demonstrate the Lordship given to Him and in literal fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies to Israel. At the end of the thousand years, a final insurrection is quenched, and the way opened for the completion of God's work and the establishment of the eternal Kingdom in a new earth created by God. This view emphasizes the pessimism of the present day, in which we can look forward to nothing more than continued degradation of the world and disintegration of human society until Christ returns to establish justice and righteousness by His power.

The most popular version of the premillennial position today is coupled with a dispensationally oriented theology and with a pre-tribulation rapture of the Church.⁷⁻¹⁴ One of today's best sellers is *The Late Great Planet Earth* which presents a mod version of the pre-trib pre-mil position.¹⁵ The Church, the community or body of all those who have committed themselves to Christ in faith, is removed from the earth before the beginning of a seven-year period of severe tribulation which precedes the return of Christ and the establishment of the millennial kingdom. The coupling of the pre-tribulation rapture with the pre-millennial perspective emphasizes the present situation of the Christian as a temporary traveler in the world, waiting for the imminent rapture out of the troubles of this world, and with no really significant calling in the present except that of leading others to Christ in the saving of souls. Lindsey and Carlson, for example, say, "We

3. Alford, Henry, *The Greek Testament* (Boston: Lee and Shepherd, 1872), Vol. 4, p. 732.
4. Godet, F., *Studies on the New Testament* (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, 1873), pp. 294-398.
5. Tregelles, S. P., *The Hope of Christ's Second Coming* (London: Bagster, 1886), pp. 99, 109, 110.
6. Zahn, Theodor, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1909), Vol. 3, pp. 400, 401.
7. Chafer, Lewis Sperry, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948).
8. Darby, J. N., *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible* (London: Morrish, 1857-67), 5 Volumes.
9. English, E. Schuyler, *Rethinking the Rapture* (Travelers Rest, South Carolina: Southern Bible Book House, 1954).
10. Gaebelein, Arno C., *The Prophet Daniel* (New York: Our Hope, 1911).
11. Ironside, Harry A., *The Great Parenthesis* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1940).
12. Pettingill, W. L., *Simple Studies in Daniel and Simple Studies in Revelation* (Wilmington, Delaware: Just A Word Inc., 1933).
13. Ryrie, Charles Caldwell, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (New York: Loizeaux Brothers, 1953).
14. Scofield, C. I., *The Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1909).
15. Lindsey, H. and Carlson, C. C., *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1970).

should be living like persons who don't expect to be around much longer."¹⁶

There is no a priori reason why one who believes the pre-trib pre-mil pattern of eschatology cannot be deeply involved in a constructive way in the present problems of the world. There is no a priori reason why one who holds to the pre-trib pre-mil view cannot be effective salt in the midst of today's pressing political, social, environmental problems. Yet, I believe it must be admitted that the general pull of this position, both in theory and in practice, is such that adherents frequently become "so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good." It is possible within the framework of this view to rejoice in increasing evil for it brings the end nearer. It is all too easy to see little sense in working for better conditions for the poor and underprivileged, when the larger problems of these people will soon be solved in the return of Christ, provided only that they have accepted Him.

Pre-millennialism, particularly in its pre-tribulational form, leads to pessimism about the present. Ultimate optimism about the future is not allowed to ameliorate this attitude of practical pessimism in the present. In fact, pessimism about the present is often so complete, that it is only the future that is credited with any real value.

Post-millennialism

The post-millennial view¹⁷⁻²² had many adherents in earlier days, but in recent years has become almost a curiosity in its classical form. In the post-millennial view God continues to act in the world and particularly in the Church until finally all nations in some measure turn to God and in some sense Christianity envelops all the people of the earth. The millennium is viewed as a literal period of time (although not necessarily actually 1000 years) during which this activity is carried on, to be ended when Christ returns to receive the kingdom prepared for Him in this way. It is not expected that perfect control of all things will be achieved before the second coming of Christ, but it is expected that continuous and effective headway will be made both in bringing people to Christ and in building the Kingdom of God on earth through the strength that He provides.

It can be seen at once that post-millennialism is almost the exact opposite of pre-millennialism. Where pre-millennialism allowed no aspect of ultimate optimism to permeate into the present, post-millennialism is almost

16. *Ibid.*, p. 145.

17. Ford, Allan R., "The Second Advent in Relation to the Reign of Christ," *The Evangelical Quarterly* 23, 30-39 (1951).

18. Hodge, Archibald Alexander, *Outlines of Theology* (New York: R. Carter and Bros., 1870), p. 450 ff.

19. Orr, James, *The Christian View of God and the World* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1948).

20. Snowden, James H., *The Coming of the Lord: Will It Be Premillennial?* (New York, Macmillan, 1919).

21. Strong, Augustus Hopkins, *Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Griffith and Rowland, 1907, 1912).

22. Warfield, B. B., *Biblical Doctrines* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1929).

totally optimistic in the present because of the certainty of future optimism and the direct correlation of the present to the future.

There is no *a priori* reason why one who holds the post-millennial view should not maintain a balanced perspective on the mutual importance of personal evangelism and social action. Indeed, the holders of this view referred to earlier represent some of the staunchest advocates of orthodox theology. There is no reason why one who holds the post-millennial view should minimize eternal destiny with respect to present involvement. Yet, I believe that it must be admitted that the general pull of this position, both in theory and in practice, is such that adherents overemphasize the role and power of human activity in providing solutions for the problems of human nature. Although the motivation for millennial activity can be closely linked to the work of God by orthodox post-millennialists, it can also be closely linked to some other process such as revolution, social reform, or evolution, by their more liberal colleagues.

Implicit signs of this shift in the emphasis of post-millennialism can be seen in even the most orthodox of authors, and was early recognized. James Orr, for example, says,²³

In our own century the world is opened up as never before, and the means of a rapid spread of the gospel are put within our power, if the Church has only faithfulness to use them. It is difficult to avoid the belief that the singular development of conditions in this century, its unexampled progress in discovery and in the practical mastery of nature, the marvellous opening up of the world which has been the result, and the extraordinary multiplication of the means and agencies of rapid communication, together portend some striking development of the kingdom of God which shall cast all others into the shade—a crisis, perhaps, which shall have the most profound effect upon the future of humanity.

Orr was speaking of the 19th century, not the 20th. Commenting on the way such optimism was appropriated by other less orthodox theologians, Culver writes,²⁴

During the "golden age" of American Protestant Modernism, which came to an end with World War II, Modernists adopted a kind of Postmillennialism to which earlier advocates would have given no approval. It was based more on the theory of evolution and humanism than on any interpretation of the Bible.

Ladd also remarks,²⁵

There is a notable similarity between the postmillennial position of conservative students and the optimistic evolutionary view which was developed among liberals. With the former, the kingdom began with the life and death of Christ and is extended through the preach-

23. Orr, James., *op. cit.*, pp. 360, 361.

24. Culver, Robert D., *op. cit.*, p. 196.

25. Ladd, George E., *op. cit.*, p. 47.

ing of the Gospel until the entire world is won for God. With the latter, there are principles at work in the world of men which will grow until a perfect society is attained. In both, the kingdom is a process of growth from small beginnings to an all-encompassing fruition.

Ladd points out that more recent attempts to revive postmillennialism argue that it is "a necessity to bolster a sound Christian optimism."²⁶

Post-millennialism, then, leads in general to complete optimism about the present. This is probably the reason why it has not been very popular since the first World War. But it is also a reason why forms of post-millennial are currently enjoying resurgence; their attitude of optimism is refreshing in a day so dominated by secular and orthodox pessimism. Ultimate optimism about the future dominates the present. In fact, optimism about the present is often so complete, that it is only the present that is credited with real value.

A-millennialism

A perspective with equal historical support is that of a-millennialism.²⁷⁻³⁶ Although "a-millennialism" literally means a belief in "no millennium," this is not strictly true. A-millennialists do not view the millennium as a literal period of time either immediately following or immediately preceding the return of Christ, but they consider the whole present age from the resurrection of Christ until His second coming to be symbolically the millennium. The time-span of the millennium is interpreted to indicate a complete period of time, that period when the people of God work to establish the Kingdom of God on earth, in spite of present difficulties and in view of future completion at the return of Christ. When Christ ascended into the heavens, He took his place at the right hand of God, ruling over the world. Those He left behind were to be His followers, ruling with Him in a rule that was never one of force or coercion but was a rule based upon the giving of oneself in service to others while proclaiming the Gospel. Thus the millennium is an initial period in which the work of redemption

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 47, 48.

27. Allis, Oswald T., *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1945).

28. Berkhof, L., *The Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951); *The Second Coming of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953).

29. Hamilton, Floyd E., *The Basis of Millennial Faith* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1942).

30. Jones, Russell Bradley, *The Things Which Shall Be Hereafter* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1947).

31. Masselink, William, *Why Thousand Years?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1930).

32. Murray, George L., *Millennial Studies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1945).

33. Pieters, Albertus, *The Seed of Abraham* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950); *Studies in the Revelation of St. John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954).

34. Rutgers, William H., *Pre-millennialism in America* (Goes, Holland: Oosterbaan and Le Cointre, 1930).

35. Vos, Geerhardus, *The Teaching of Jesus Concerning the Kingdom of God and the Church* (New York: American Tract Society, 1903); reprinted by Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1951.

36. Wyngaarden, Martin J., *The Future of the Kingdom in Prophecy and Fulfillment* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1934).

is established but incompletely manifest, even as Christ in His resurrection is the firstfruit of the new life to be made ultimately manifest in the final resurrection. As He is Himself the foundation of the Kingdom, so Christians today are the building blocks of that Kingdom, living stones as Peter calls them³⁷ drawing on an Old Testament picture, in an incomplete building, yet a building destined for completion and perfection with the return of Christ.

The a-millennial view recognizes that Christ reigns over the world today, but not openly or completely. It recognizes that the victory over sin, death and Satan is won, but is not yet fully manifested. It recognizes that Christ is working through those who belong to Him, yet neither requiring of them nor promising to them any ultimate victory before His return. It is a view of realism, which assesses the seriousness of the present cosmic dilemma, provides strength and stamina to work faithfully for Christ in the midst of that dilemma and without the promise of the completion or ultimate success of that work, and yet focusses attention on the second coming and God's completion of His own work in Christ.

There is no reason why the a-millennial eschatological perspective should be identified in some necessary way with cold and intellectual orthodoxy. There is no reason why one who holds the a-millennial position should feel his zeal for evangelism and mission undermined, as compared with that of the pre-millennialist who momentarily watches for the return of Christ, nor his zeal for social justice and involvement undermined, as compared with that of the post-millennialist who sees himself as God's only instrument in the establishment of the Kingdom on earth. Both of these dangers are present, of course, but the a-millennialist position is by its very nature an intermediate, middle-ground kind of position. The pre-millennialist considers the second coming of Christ so imminent that it demands the majority of his attention; he considers that life must be lived in its totality as if Christ were to return within the hour. The post-millennialist considers the second coming of Christ in the near future a virtual impossibility for the world is clearly not yet been made ready for Christ to return. The a-millennialist considers the imminent return of Christ a constant possibility, but he considers it also necessary and Biblical to live in a kind of creative tension: living each day as if Christ were about to return, and planning responsibly for the future as if Christ might delay for a thousand years.^{37a}

A-millennialism, therefore, leads in general to critical realism about the present. Optimism in God is tempered with realism in the world. Ultimate optimism for the future upholds but does not overwhelm present pessimism. Present pessimism allows one to face the evils and shortcomings of the real world squarely without succumbing to frustration and despair at human helplessness.

37. I Peter 2:5.

37a. The "historical pre-mil" (not dispensation nor pre-trib) position is often also close to this perspective. See Ladd, Reference 2.

NEO-POST-MILLENNIALISM³⁸

Although the post-millennial view has passed through a period of eclipse due to the empirical facts of recent world history, it is likely that it has never completely vanished, but has remained alive in the more liberal theologies. This is particularly true of those theologies that consider classical eschatology to be fulfilled effectively in the present, and that existentialize all aspects of the future, including the final redemption, judgment and return of Christ, into present experience.

There is growing evidence of a neo-post-millennialism appearing with renewed vigor in our own day. This neo-post-millennialism is based upon faith in the continuing advances of scientific understanding and scientific technology, on the continuous dynamic processes of evolution and of man's ability to take control of evolution, and on a heightened human understanding in which man ceases to be a passive participant in world history but becomes, in the words of Vaux,³⁹ "co-creator" with God. As with classical post-millennialism, the neo-post-millennialist is characterized by a compulsive optimism about the present and the future, an optimism which is so basic to his system that he must often postulate optimism as the only viable option, without which nothing at all is left except blind fate and all-consuming despair. The attempt to root this neo-post-millennialism in science is often so strong that eschatology is itself effectively transformed into sociology, and theology ceases to have any real dimension beyond anthropology.

The first hope of the neo-post-millennialist is based on science and the successful applications of science to life- and world-saving technology. Typically man's travel in space was hailed as the sign of a major breakthrough, the beginning of a new period of man's ability and awareness. Vaux, for example, says,

In the late twentieth century man has brought the world more under the control of his energy in his creation of the electronic global village. The promise of the centuries to come is man's subjugation of extra-terrestrial environment to his control and communication.⁴⁰

Man marvels at his growing scientific understanding of the world, at his growing control over the universe and himself, over cybernetics and the

38. The singling out of neo-post-millennialism in this paper should not be interpreted as any kind of attempt at exhaustive categorization. There is also, I believe, a smaller group which might be classified as neo-pre-millennialists, who are responsible for one branch of the radical movement among Christians. Adherents to this position hold no hope for the present and consider that we are living in the end times, yet are driven by their interpretation of the demands of Christ on their lives to take aggressive social action leading even to violence and the disregard of present social structures and regulations in order to do that which is "right." In a sense, their pessimism about the present is so intense and overwhelming that they see little value or necessity in preserving any characteristics of the present. It is for this reason that they might be classified as neo-pre-millennialists in terms of the optimism-pessimism scale proposed in this paper.

39. Vaux, Kenneth, *Subduing the Cosmos* (Richmond, Va.: John Knox (1970).

40. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

reaching out of scientific understanding about the inner man, and sees here the final hope of mankind. Harman, for example, predicts a revolution in understanding like that of the Copernican revolution in astronomy: a revolution of understanding of the inner man.⁴¹ By turning the full force of scientific investigation upon the nature of man and his inner resources, Harman predicts consequences "even more far-reaching than those which emerged from the Copernican, Darwinian, and Freudian revolutions." He argues that

we have undersold man, underestimated his possibilities, and misunderstood what is needed for . . . "the great transition."

Hope for the future is very much related to hope for this present earth. Vaux writes,

Christian faith has a peculiar hope for a future earthly society that is very much shaped by the technological enterprise of man.⁴²

Elsewhere he argues that "*this life, this history, this cosmos*" must be "at least a correlate of ultimate meaning," or else "nothing is justified except pessimism."⁴³ By becoming ultimately aware of his situation and ultimately in charge of its future dispensation, the neo-post-millennialist hopes that man can rise above the historical limitations on his nature. By scientifically arriving at new understandings, visions and comprehensions, man will be able to take full charge of his life and transform the world. As Beck puts it,

Their purpose is to bring closer to fulfillment the society that we should like to have ready for presentation to our Lord when He comes again.⁴⁴

Although it is tacitly admitted that the motive power behind this vast enterprise of science comes from God, e.g.,

We must carefully differentiate at this point Christian redemptive eschatology from uncritical evolutionary optimism.⁴⁵

His (the Christian's) goal is the "new heavens and the new earth" that only our Lord Himself will finally bring into the fullness of being.⁴⁶

this fact often tends to slip into the background of day-to-day practice, and man's own capabilities and potentialities take center stage front in practical considerations.

The second hope of the neo-post-millennialist, based upon its scientific foundations, is the inevitable progress assured by the evolutionary process.

41. Harman, Willis W., "The New Copernican Revolution," *Stanford Today*, Series II, No. 1 (1969); *Journal ASA* 23, 42 (1971).

42. Vaux, Kenneth, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

43. As quoted in McIntyre, J. A. and Bube, R. H., "The Relevance of Science to Practical Theology," *Journal ASA* 24, 27 (1972).

44. Beck, Hubert F., *The Christian Encounters the Age of Technology* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1970), p. 125.

45. Vaux, Kenneth, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

46. Beck, Hubert F., *op. cit.*, p. 125.

Present indications to the contrary, we can trust in the fact that the evolutionary process which has carried man this far will continue to develop him not only physically, but morally and socially as well. Pessimism about the future of man is out of place; optimism is justified by the inevitable triumph of evolution. Dark predictions about the ultimate demise of the universe in keeping with the Second Law of Thermodynamics are rejected by advocates of evolutionary optimism like Teilhard de Chardin.⁴⁷

Fr. Teilhard vehemently denies these pessimistic predictions of the future—on the basis of evolution which he believed is a cosmic process in which and by which cosmic matter ascends toward ever higher forms of life.⁴⁸

If at the present it seems as if overpopulation and increased person-to-person crowding and contact are destined to lead to greater strife, impersonalization and frustration in the future, we have the contrary assurance of Teilhard that the convergence of mankind in the noosphere after the period of divergence in the biosphere will assuredly lead to the next great step in the evolutionary process: Christogenesis, as the process focusses on Omega. Trust in the evolutionary process varies from that of the non-Christian advocate of extreme reductionism,

According to our mechanistic point of view, a tendency toward moral behavior is a genetically determined, evolutionarily developed physical property of the human animal, just like the number of fingers and the size of the brain.⁴⁹

to that of the follower of Teilhard, who sees the future hope of man in his taking over the course of evolution, in transforming biological evolution into sociological and cultural evolution under the control of man.

We do have it in our power to change the world and make it a better place in which to live; *we can* help in building heaven for the simple reason that we are evolution become aware of itself; *we must* do this lest we perish.⁵⁰

Evolution is the great inevitable dynamic transforming the uncertain present into the superior future. Although it is possible to view this process in full theistic emphasis, it is also a common experience to see this theistic emphasis depersonalized and distorted far from that of Biblical Christianity.⁵¹

The third hope of the neo-post-millennialist is that in a new and ultimate sense man has come of age, that man is now capable of controlling his own destiny not only in peripheral and symptomatic details but in the areas of ultimate and intrinsic concern. Science helps him here, as well as the inevitable pressure of the evolutionary process, but there is also specific

47. Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre, *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961).

48. Kraft, R. Wayne, *The Revelance of Teilhard* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Fides, 1968), p. 138.

49. Wooldridge, Dean E., *Mechanical Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), p. 191.

50. Kraft, R. Wayne, *op cit.*, pp. 125, 126.

51. Jones, D. Gareth, *Teilhard de Chardin* (London: Tyndale, 1969).

emphasis on the ability of man himself to guide his future, to take charge of the evolutionary process, to accelerate progress through the substitution of cultural and social evolution for biological evolution, and to clarify ethical dilemmas by approaching ethical problems scientifically rather than subjectively. It is possible to derive hope and optimism in even the most unlikely of situations; non-Christian Wooldridge looks forward optimistically to the time when all men will realize that they are only machines.

The revolution in religion, the preservation of morality, the perseverance of individual ambition, the increased liberality of society toward the individual, the decrease in unreasoning prejudice resulting from the elimination of the mystical idea of absolute right and wrong—these consequences seem important to us. . . . And men who know they are machines should be able to bring a higher degree of objectivity to bear on their problems than machines that think they are Men.⁵²

Neo-post-millennial theologians wrest the words and the probable meanings of Bonhoeffer⁵³⁻⁵⁵ and have taken the phrase "man come of age" to imply the deliverance of man from bondage and from ignorance into a new possibility of intrinsic self enlightenment, self achievement, and even self salvation. This scientifically developed product of evolution—the man come of age—faces a golden age in which the ancient foes of mankind will finally be put to rest, and the world may be made fit for the Kingdom of God, regardless of whether that term is interpreted theologically or in the most secular and humanistic sense possible.

CRITIQUE OF NEO-POST-MILLENNIALISM

Each of these three hopes of the neo-post-millennialist is falsely based. To plan a philosophy of life and a course of action based on their acceptance can lead only to frustration, despair and disaster.

In a variety of contexts men, particularly in recent years, have become increasingly aware of the folly of relying upon science and technology as the basis for human deliverance.^{56, 57} No matter how marvelous its achievements and how far-reaching its potentialities, science itself remains ambivalent. This is true not only of science, but of any human behavior, as discussed by von Weizsacker.⁵⁸ Having no power within itself to define its own morals or ethics—its "ought"—science is totally at the mercy of man. Scientific man is no more effective in achieving positive results of the application of science than is non-scientific man. Every power of science

52. Wooldridge, Dean E., *op. cit.*, pp. 203, 204.

53. Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Macmillan; E. Bethge, editor; revised 1967).

54. Robinson, John A. T., *Honest to God* (SCM Press, 1963).

55. Bube, R. H., "Man Come of Age: Bonhoeffer's Response to the God-of-the-Gaps," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 14, 203 (1971).

56. Bube, R. H., "Whatever Happened to Scientific Prestige?" *Journal ASA*, 23, 7 (1971).

57. Bube, R. H., *The Human Quest: A New Look at Science and Christian Faith* (Waco, Texas: Word, 1971).

58. von Weizsacker, C. F., *The Relevance of Science* (London: Collins, 1964).

has the ability to be used for both good and evil. All knowledge is dangerous. As von Weizsacker writes,

But that scientific knowledge would supply us with the ethical greatness needed to bear this responsibility is a hope not warranted by the facts. I think it can be stated bluntly that scientism, if it rests its trust on the expectation that science by its own nature is enabled to give us sufficient guidance in human affairs, is a false religion. Its faith, if going so far, is superstition; the role of priest does not become the scientist, and good scientists know that; the scientific code of behavior needs a background of an ethics which science has not been able to provide.⁵⁹

Every scientific Utopia⁶⁰ ends up with the necessity for some human beings to be ultimately responsible for the decisions that will shape and determine the lives of others, the latter now becoming progressively more manipulated and less human by the process, and the former being faced with greater temptations and dilemmas than ever before. All knowledge is not scientific knowledge, is not ascertainable by scientific methodology which restricts itself to sense contacts with the natural world, and is not appropriately applied to human beings within the framework of a scientist who abstracts himself "objectively" from the field of his science. Every attempt to see science as the sure road to truth, as the objective basis for ethics, or as the foundation for human deliverance is doomed at the very beginning by the inability of science to meet the claims. Indeed, a look at the progress of modern science is much more suitably viewed in terms of pessimism than of optimism. Science and technology appear to be in the process of running away with the human race, rather than men being in control of the applications and results of science. The expectation that further science will enable men to stop this wild explosion of potentially evil power has little basis in reality. There is no turning back with science and there is no end of science and technological developments. Even the Christian cannot resolve the intrinsic ambivalence of science by calling for a moratorium on science or on research into new areas of threatening direction. From his divine mandate to apply his understanding and effort to the alleviation of suffering in the world, the Christian is driven of necessity into science and into the continuance of science for the potentially good results which are possible. If, in recognition of the potential evil of man's applications of scientific understanding in the last century, for example, men were to call for the removal of all effects of that scientific understanding, over three-fourths of the human race would be thereby sentenced to death by starvation or disease.⁶¹ We are left ultimately with the realization that knowledge—all knowledge—is usable for good or for evil. And the advance of knowledge is hardly under the control of man; it is more like a wild horse running free and unrestrainable dragging man kicking and scream-

59. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

60. Skinner, B. F., *Walden Two* (New York: Macmillan, 1948).

61. Boardman, John, *Physics Today*, February 1971, p. 9.

ing behind. Science remains to the end helplessly ambivalent and utterly unstoppable.

Optimism derived from trust in the inevitability of the evolutionary process can hardly be termed a scientifically derived attitude. Even if it were justified, any such optimism is based on a leap of faith, on a blind trust in the unknowable, as groundless as the most non-rational leap of faith commonly deprecated in conventional religious controversy. The most serious difficulty of such optimism is its inability to deal with the real evils of the world. In his presuppositional acceptance by faith of the inherent perfectability of human nature, and his neglect of the Biblical doctrine of sin and separation from God as the result of rebellion by the individual, the neo-post-millennialist is constantly amazed by the outbreaks of evil he constantly sees before him. Convinced that man is by nature inherently good, he can conclude only that environmental and societal forces prevent man from exercising this goodness, that such forces are inhibiting and blocking the natural success of evolutionary development. But if it is only a matter of environmental and societal forces that cause evil, then almost any course of action which will remove these influences is justified. Even a course of action without specific positive plan for the future, but which is simply committed to the destruction of present evil structures, can be positively embraced on the grounds that improvement is impossible in the presence of these structures. After their destruction there will arise at least some chance that improvement will be possible. In this kind of conflict, every disagreement is cast into the form of a moral debate, as the self-righteousness of the reformers leads them to become the tyrants they justifiably cry out against. Unable to accept evil as the intrinsic heritage of fallen man, they seek to proclaim their own evil as universal good. When their optimism is not supported by the voluntary activities of their fellow man, it demands reinforcement by enforced adherence.

Finally there is the tremendous weight of responsibility that rests upon the shoulders of the "man come of age" who sees no salvation except that which he is able to bring into being. Attempting to live in the optimism of the present, he is unable to cope with the disappointments and utter impossibility of solution for many of the problems which he faces. He cannot be content with small solutions and little helps; unless he is able to bring wholeness and deliverance to the whole world, he is a failure. He is convinced at least that Christians must save the world; that this world must ultimately be delivered and saved, or else nothing has any value or hope. To what response is he then forced, when faced with the immutability of structures, the apathy and selfishness of men, the inertia of establishments and all the other characteristics of human society, even at its best? As he comes to realize in frustration that he is not able to save the world in the present after all, he cannot really look forward in optimism to a deliverance by God in the future. In his thinking he has transformed the future deliverance by God so completely into the present deliverance by man that he is not able to reverse the process. All too often there remains no meaning for

him in eschatological hope except what can be found in sociological progress, no significance in theological understanding except what can be found in anthropological investigation. Frustrated by his impotence and burdened by his responsibility, he turns to the "theology of revolution" on the grounds that God's work requires grave and unusual methods. Therefore Cox⁶² argues for the importance of the activity of God in political events and revolutions, and Shaull⁶³ sees revolution as the leading edge of God's humanizing activity in history. Several authors have considered the relevance of revolution in a Biblical context and have shown the weaknesses of such a position.⁶⁴ Padilla, in particular, recognizes the positive contribution of the spirit of revolution in recognizing the need for radical changes in social structures in accordance with Christian ethics, but he puts his finger on the difficulties with this kind of neo-post-millennial perspective.

The "theology of revolution" idealizes man and consequently converts the gospel into a utopian ideology that employs theological terminology but has little relation to the eschatological message of the Bible.⁶⁵

Even as Shaull argues that

Our task is not to impose certain values, but rather to recognize and live according to those that hold sway in the world; it is not to give meaning to life, but rather to discover the meaning that life has in the world that participates in redemption; not to establish order in the universe, but rather to share in the new order of things that is taking shape through social transformation.⁶⁶

Padilla replies with the basic fallacy in this approach,

They assume that the world *has been reconciled* and that all that now is asked of men is to recognize that *they are in effect living* under the sovereign rule of Jesus Christ.⁶⁷

Finally faced with the ambivalence of revolution and violence, with the inability of revolution to replace evil except with new forms of evil, and with continuing empirical evidence of the incapability of the human being apart from Christ of governing either himself or others humanely, the neo-post-millennialist has little recourse except that of despair. Despair for one whose life's perspective is based on optimism is bitter indeed.

SUMMARY

The purpose of this paper has been to suggest a pattern of categorization by which concepts of present and future, optimism and pessimism, can be related to traditional and modern forms of eschatology. Three principal categories have been discussed.

62. Cox, Harvey, *The Church Amid Revolution* (New York: WCC, Associated Press, 1967).

63. Shaull, R., "Revolutionary Change in Theological Perspective," in *Christian Social Ethics in a Changing World* (London: SCM Press; J. C. Bennett, editor, WCC; New York: Associated Press, 1966).

64. Griffiths, Brian, editor, *Is Revolution Change* (Inter-Varsity Press, 1972).

65. Padilla, Rene, "Revolution and Revelation" in *Is Revolution Change?*, p. 81.

66. Shaull, R., "Y un Dios que actua y transforma la historia" *America Hoy* (Montevideo: Church and Society in Latin America, 1966), p. 61; English translation from Ref. 64, p. 79.

67. Padilla, Rene, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

First there is a perspective which is extremely pessimistic about the present to the extent that not even optimism based on God's future consummation of His redemption is able to alleviate the pessimism of man's social situation in the present. Pessimism about the present leads effectively to disengagement from the present. Value of the future so outweighs value of the present, that only the future is considered worthy of effort or concentration. In traditional terms, this is the kind of social response which has often, although not necessarily, accompanied a pre-millennial eschatology.

Second there is a perspective which is extremely optimistic about the present to the extent that value and concern for God's future consummation tend to be reduced to value and concern for the present. Optimism about the present leads effectively to lack of concern about the future or ultimate disposition of the world. In traditional terms, this is the kind of social response which has often, although not necessarily, accompanied a post-millennial eschatology.

Third, there is a perspective which, although pessimistic about any ultimate transformation of present society without an ultimate transformation in human nature through a redemptive faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ, nevertheless is enabled to face present reality in the light of the optimism of God's final consummation. This is a perspective given expression by Escobar,

We should not expect to build the kingdom of God here on earth or "Christianize" society. Our hope is future; but at the same time our service and our witness are signs of this hope and of the lordship of Christ in our lives.⁶⁸

Ellul likewise writes,

Thus he (the Christian) must plunge into social and political problems in order to have an influence on the world, not in the hope of making it a paradise, but simply in order to make it tolerable—not in order to diminish the opposition between this world and the Kingdom of God, but simply in order to modify the opposition between the disorder of this world and the order of preservation that God wills for it—not in order to "bring in" the Kingdom of God, but in order that the Gospel may be proclaimed, that all men may *really* hear the good news of salvation, through the Death and Resurrection of Christ⁶⁹

In traditional terms, this perspective can be most adequately related to an a-millennial perspective.

We have also taken particular note of a modern form of neo-post-millennialism which bases its optimism for the present on science, evolution and man's maturity. We have sought to show how this version of post-millennialism can lead to little else except frustration and despair if proper note is not taken of the ambivalence of science, the ambiguity of evolution, and the failure of man's maturity in many peripheral and symptomatic areas to penetrate to the basic problems of human nature.

68. Escobar, Samuel, "The Social Impact of the Gospel" in *Is Revolution Change?*, p. 105.

69. Ellul, Jacques, *The Presence of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1951), p. 47.