

Diary of a Futurist: Looking to a Future which is Human and Divine

A Personal Essay

Proceedings: Foresight 2006 Conference - September

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From September 20-22, 2006, the School of Global Leadership and Entrepreneurship hosted Dr. Ted Peters on campus at Regent University, for the fourth annual futures conference for Christian leaders. This essay by Bezold was circulated to participants beforehand. We encourage you to join us for our annual Foresight conferences, as we hear from top futurists from the both the U.S. and around the world.

Redemptive Engineering

The basement of my childhood home was a wonder of tools, table saws, drill presses, lathes. It included a glorious array of gears and fan belts and buttons and levers that just dazzled the eyes of a little boy. My father was a tinkerer. He tinkered at home, and at work too. He designed and sometimes invented things such as the first American roto-tiller and his own version of the automatic garage door opener. By the time he died he had twenty-two U.S. patents with his name on them. I was proud of my dad. But, this is not what is important here. What is important is what I learned by osmosis in my home. Each morning my dad would put on his suit and tie and head for General Motors where his goal would be to invent something new that hitherto had never existed in the history of the world. He thought he was just earning a living. Yet, what he assumed without question has profound philosophical and theological implications.

Is reality static, or does it change? Is the sacred to be found in the past, or the future? Is salvation something eternal, or does it transform what is temporal? If the work of an automotive engineer is a clue, then reality changes, the sacred is to be found in the transformed future, and eternity needs to take account of what happens in time.

In the 1960's my dad was given the task by General Motors to design a mechanism to protect a car's occupants when caught in a head-on collision. Careful analysis showed that it would take four one hundredths of a second (.04 seconds) from the moment of impact to the onset of injury to a car's passengers. His assignment: blow up an air bag in time to protect the car's occupants from injury. I remember him pondering this. "Mmmmmm. Might a bomb work?" He examined at least four alternatives to the stage of drawing initial designs. Once a large team of engineers had finally solved this problem so that air bags could now be required in new cars and we can drive with improved safety, the world has become a better place for human living. This introduction of newness, in its own modest way, is redemptive in character.

The Bible and the Future

When I went to seminary and then on to doctoral studies in systematic theology, I studied the Bible. To my reading, the Bible is oriented toward the future. As my own academic career as a Christian theologian and ethicist has taken shape, I've sought as much integration as possible between secular science and technology, on the one hand, and scriptural promises for renewal and transformation, on the other hand.

"I am about to do a new thing," says the voice of God in Isaiah 43:19. God has been doing new things since the beginning. The creation of the world, at the beginning, was a new thing. The first thing God did at the moment of creation was to give the world a future. The world's future includes more new things. What is sacred and what is holy in this world is not found in what once was, back at the point of origin; because God was planning on transformation all along.

The dynamic of the Bible includes prophecy and fulfillment. Prophets make promises. And when these promises become fulfilled, curiously, they become new promises. The suffering and death of Jesus is a fulfillment, so to speak, of what we find in the suffering servant passage of Isaiah 53. But, that fulfillment includes Jesus' Easter resurrection. This resurrection is in turn another promise. What God did by raising Jesus on the first Easter becomes God's promise for our resurrection at the future advent of the City of God.

At the very front end of the Bible, in Genesis 2, we find the Garden of Eden with its river of life and tree of life. At the extreme opposite end of the Bible, Revelation 22, we find that same river of life and tree of life in the garden once more. But, something new is added. Now this garden lies down town in the New Jerusalem. The original rural Garden of Eden has become a city park, signifying the healing of the rift between the rural and the civil in the City of God. The future the Bible envisions is a future of healing, or redemption, or salvation. Not everyone wearing a cross on a neck chain would read the Bible the same way I do, I must note. Pre-millennialists and related apocalyptic movements, for example, rightly recognize that the Bible orients us toward the world's future. What I find missing in the millennialist approach, however, is the spirit of partnership or cooperation between faithful Christians with non-Christian persons of good will in working to make our world a better place.

The Life of Beatitude and Christian Ethics

God's promised future will be a blessing from God, an expression of God's sovereign and benevolent grace. Yet, we need to ask: just how does this promise for the future affect us now? My answer is this: today people of faith live the *Life of Beatitude*.

As I began to formulate the task of ethics, I began to reflect on the beatitudes in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1-11). Here is an example. ^{NRS} Matthew 5:6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (*dikiosune* or 'justice'), for they will be filled." Such a description of the godly life is structured so that the eschatological kingdom of God imbues and affects who we are today. It affects our vision, our decision, and our action.

The ethic appropriate to the *Life of Beatitude* takes the structure of beginning with a vision of the future. More specifically, it begins with a vision of the future as we believe it ought to be in light of our best understanding of God's will. Then, with this vision before us, we make the decisions and take the actions to marshal the resources at hand to move us toward an incarnation of that vision. This makes ethics essentially transformative, perhaps even redemptive, in its self-understanding.

The house for Christian ethical living is not just where our own family lives, nor is it limited to our own church. Rather, it is the wider world. It is the entire planet, a planet we share with the birds and angel fish and all the other races of human persons. This global house provides the scope of our ethical vision. Because of the global scope, Christians find themselves necessarily working in partnership with non-Christians of good will who—for their own reasons—share an approximate vision of world peace, justice, and sustainability.

The Rise of Future Consciousness in the 1960s & 1970s

The 1970s was the decade of future consciousness. In the late 1960s astute scientists became aware of the portending destruction of the planet's life-giving fecundity. The World Future Society was established in 1967; and the first Earth Day took place in 1969. During the 1970s future consciousness intensified as planners began to prepare scenarios that took the then coming year 2000 as their vision point. The United Nations published an important 2000 report in 1978; and U.S. president Jimmy Carter followed with one in 1979. The question for everyone on our globe became: how can we secure a just and sustainable and peaceful life for all people and for all nature on planet earth?

Among others, the Club of Rome in 1972, using a global model, prepared computer simulations of growth patterns that would take into account population growth, agricultural growth, industrial growth, depletion of non-renewable natural resources, and contamination by pollution. This work shocked the world's peoples into realizing the finitude of our life together in a single world. The message of the futurists was this: we must plan together now as a single global society so that the human race can live in health and peace with the rest of nature. If we fail to make the right decisions and make them soon, we can project massive die backs in the human population as well as continued destruction of the biosphere. Like biblical prophecies, these secular prophecies of the 1970s have already found some level of gruesome fulfillment in incalculable suffering to tens of millions from starvation and AIDS. More calamities are yet to come.

It seemed to me in the 1970s that the Christian ear should be listening to these secular prophets. It seemed to me that God was raising up voices from the scientific and technological community to warn the world that our only hope for survival is a social transformation that includes economic justice—reduced consumption by the rich and sustainable livelihood for the poor—combined with careful long range planetary planning. These secular prophets were calling for a cooperative spirit between religious bodies, governmental bodies, business, and all sectors of society. The song the futurists sang was a song of peace and harmony.

Attuned to this larger chorus was a distinctive melody sung by institutional leaders and management theorists. Whether in government or business or the nonprofit sector, one characteristic of effective institutional leaders could be identified by those with eyes clear enough to see. Leaders who are champions lift up a vision of the future. They draw a picture of what tomorrow can look like. They enlist the energy and enthusiasm and skills and talents of their followers into making the decisions and taking the actions that will bring such a future to pass. Whether on a global scale or a local scale, foresight for the future is the key to leadership.

The Demise of Future Consciousness in the 1980s

But, after 1980, no one would any longer listen to the futurists' song. No one wanted to follow futurists leading us toward global cooperation. With the election of President Ronald Regan in the United States and the new resurgence of competitive capitalism, the vision of global cooperation was sacrificed to private profit; and long range planning was sacrificed to short range profit.

Church leadership similarly turned a deaf ear. The rise of feminist theology and liberation theology included a rejection of everything scientific and technological on the grounds that science and technology embody modern European patriarchy and exploitation. Both secular futurists and religious futurists all but disappeared off the map. Future consciousness as a common cultural commodity all but evaporated.

With the 1987 Chernobyl warning to the world about the risk of radio-active contamination of the biosphere by domestic nuclear reactors, a modest level of interest in the ecological portion of futurology revived. Some feminist theologians began to incorporate earth consciousness into their cosmic schemes. Only slowly has a more general awareness of our responsibility for caring for the earth arisen in church bodies.

Now, let me add an interpretative assessment. When today's churches do muster enough energy to address the issues of ecological ethics, they frequently delete the role of the future. Church leaders tend to drop ecological concerns into the doctrine of creation, not redemption. They look backward, not forward. They silently and tacitly imply that the past—nature's past before it was contaminated by human artifice in the form

of science and technology—points us to the sacred. What is systematically deleted is the promise of the new, the promise of redemption.

My Own Odyssey

During the 1970s my theological work sought to draw together the distinctively Christian confidence in a God who does new things with a nascent form of secular ethics that envisioned a future planet organized around economic justice, political peace, and ecological sustainability. It seemed to me that Christian eschatology could provide an ontological foundation for an ethic of global transformation. It seemed to me that devout Christians with faith in God's future redemption could find good reason to make partners of scientists and technologists who share such a vision. What I came to call *proleptic ethics*—that is, ethics that works from a vision of future transformation—could provide the link between Christian and secular commitments.

As I mentioned, by 1980 no one I could find was any longer interested. I began turning my attention to other areas of scholarship. One was new religious movements or NRM's. I studied New Age spirituality, publishing a theological analysis and summary of my research in 1992.

More importantly, by 1982 I had begun a working relationship which has lasted down the present day with my colleagues at the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences (CTNS) at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. With CTNS I have had the privilege of working with frontier researchers in various areas of natural science. In particular, I have given considerable energy to working in genetics and related fields with molecular biologists. I'm still oriented toward the future, but I focus much more tightly on specific issues than I did previously.

Foresight & Leadership

Because of my career long commitments, I am delighted and grateful to the theoreticians that have been putting together what is becoming a significant program in Christian futures thinking. Foresight visionaries are to be thanked for lifting up the biblical promise that God will have a future that will bless us, and for pressing this vision into the service of the world God loves and we love. Built right into this concept of foresight in more than just anticipation; it includes transformation.

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