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RICHARD BAUCKHAM

Approaching the Millennium

Richard Bauckham offers a perceptive analysis of the hold which the year 2000 is exercising on our culture. Against this background, he argues for the central importance of a Christian eschatology which takes seriously both the transcendent (God's promised future new creation) and the utopian (inspiration to work for change in the present).

My title, of course, is a play on two meanings of 'millennium': the millennium as the year 2000, the beginning of the third millennium of the Christian era, and the millennium as a term in Christian eschatology, the thousand-year reign of Christ on earth. The two meanings come together in the kind of epochal (millenarian) significance with which the approaching turn of the millennia is being viewed by many people, Christians and others.

Calendrical Magic and the Millennium

Why should anyone think the year 2000 of any significance? At first sight we might think the fascination of this date no more than a trick the calendar plays on us. Much as our microchips threaten technological chaos on the 1st January 2000, because we have negligently programmed them to do so, so the way of reckoning time which we ourselves have devised happens to throw up a mind-boggling date which could easily have been otherwise. Informed people now realize that, on any probable dating of the birth of Christ, we have already passed its two-thousandth anniversary. But in any case, reckoning time in centuries and millennia, self-evident though it seems to us, is little more than an arbitrary convention. The Bible, for example, never does so;¹ nor did most people for most of history or most Christians for most of Christian history. Were we concerned to follow a biblical model of calculating the times and the seasons, we should be counting not centuries, but generations, in sequences of sevens, tens or twelves. Or, with some ancient Jewish chronographers, we might use the jubilee as the God-given way of periodizing history, and the significant dates would turn out to be quite different ones. The sense of nearly unprecedented epochal meaning in the year 2000 is a trick our own calendrical magic is playing on us, but nevertheless there is more to be said about it. That we find such epochal significance – or, better, *whether* we find such

1 In Ps. 90:4 (echoed in 2 Pet. 3:8) 'a thousand years' is used, in contrast with 'a day,' to indicate simply a very long time, not as a chronological measure of time. But this verse was later interpreted to mean that what Scripture calls a 'day' is in some cases a millennium (R. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter* [Word Biblical Commentary 50] Word Books, Waco, Texas 1983, pp 306f), and

that that each of the 'days' of the Genesis creation account is equivalent to a thousand years of world history (Epistle of Barnabas 15:4; Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 5.28.3), providing the exegetical basis for the world-week theory (the world will last six thousand years followed by a millennial Sabbath) which is discussed below.

epochal significance – in this date can tell us much about the juncture of history at which we find ourselves.

To appreciate this we must consider how the calendrical magic² works. It works in different ways from at least two points of view – Christian and secular – and, although the Christian perspective on the year 2000 has a longer history, I shall begin with the secular. In 1892 a columnist for the *Spectator*, a well-known British periodical, wrote this:

The fact that we are approaching the end of another century of our era, strongly affects the popular imagination. It is supposed that, in some undefined way, we must be better or worse merely because of this chronological fact. Were it the end, not of the nineteenth [century], but of the twentieth, we should be still more excited. Even now, the idea of that *Annus Mirabilis*, the Year of Grace 2000, begins to affect us. We feel that if we could live to witness its advent, we should witness an immense event. We should almost expect something to happen in the Cosmos, so that we might read the great date written on the skies.³

The author's tone is a little ironic, but the mood he reflects is the famous *fin de siècle* mood of 1890s Europe. If *fin de siècle* – the end of the nineteenth century – created such an outpouring of angst and excitement, what, he not unreasonably wonders, would *fin de millénaire* – the approach of the second millennium – be like?

The *fin de siècle* mood of the 1890s entailed a process of assessment of the progress of civilization, at the end of a century whose élite, at least, considered it indisputably the century of progress, when civilization had advanced more than in the rest of human history. The process involved reviewing the past century and looking forward – enthusiastically or fearfully – into the next. The mood was an unstable mixture of optimism and pessimism, the assessment a kind of weighing of progress and decadence in the balance. On the one hand, Max Nordau famously lamented the feeling of imminent perdition which he detected among intellectuals ('vague qualms of the Dusk of Nations, in which all suns and all stars are gradually waning, and mankind with all its institutions and creations is perishing in the midst of a dying world'⁴), while, on the other hand, Frederic Harrison expressed the more prevalent, upbeat anticipation of a twentieth century propelled by the accelerating momentum of the nineteenth into a qualitatively better era:

We are on the threshold of a great time, even if our time itself is not great. In science, in religion, in social organization, we all know what things are in the air.... It is the age of great expectation and unwearied striving after better things.⁵

2 I owe this phrase to M. Grosso, *The Millennium Myth: Love and Death at the End of Time*, Quest Books, Wheaton, Illinois 1995, p 108.

3 Quoted in H. Schwartz, *Century's End: A Cultural History of the Fin de Siècle from the 1890s through the 1990s*, Doubleday, New York 1990, p 275.

4 M. Nordau, *Degeneration*, London 1895, p 2, quoted in C. Townshend, 'The Fin de Siècle,' in A. Dancher ed., *Fin de Siècle: The Meaning of the Twentieth Century*, Tauris, London 1995, p 201.

5 Quoted in D. Thompson, *The End of Time: Faith and Fear in the Shadow of the Millennium*, Random House, London 1997, p 119.

Enthusiasm was not uncritical: there were end-of-century failures which required to be surmounted in the better future. Alfred Russel Wallace assessed the past century in a book called *The Wonderful Century* published in 1898 (notice, incidentally, how unlikely it is that a book published in 1998 could describe our century in such a title). He catalogued the extraordinary technological advances of the century, but castigated his contemporaries for neglecting hypnotism and phrenology while taking up the harmful practice of vaccination.⁶ More significantly (so it seems with hindsight), he deplored the militarism which harnessed technological advance to the development of ever deadlier machines of war.⁷ But the dogmatic optimism of the century was not easily crushed. Alexander Sutherland, writing a year later under the title 'The natural decline of warfare,' argued that a trajectory of progress over recent centuries pointed to the elimination of warfare in the not too distant future. At the end of the century, he pointed out, it was already the case that absolute peace reigned among civilized nations, though not yet on the borders of the civilized world⁸ (the Anglo-Boer war began that same year, 1899). This is the kind of thinking which lay in the background to the devastating effect which the First World War was to have on progressivist optimism just a few years into the new century on which so much expectation had so recently been focused.

The intense cultural self-assessment which occurred at the end of the nineteenth century was unique to the nineteenth.⁹ It is not the case that centuries' ends had regularly provoked such reflection. The sense of entering a new period which accompanied the end of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was minor by comparison, and previously there had been no such phenomenon at all. The reasons are twofold. The first concerns what I have called the magic of the calendar. Until the seventeenth century few people noticed the year-date Anno Domini. For much of European history people had normally reckoned by the years of a king or by some local era, not by a world-historical era. Few seventh-century people, for example, knew that they lived in the seventh century. Even when dating by the Christian era became common in official usage, ordinary people did not think in such terms. They did not use AD dates in letters or conversation. Our sense of living in a particular period defined as the umpteenth century probably only began in the sixteenth century, while it was the growing use of calendars in the seventeenth century that spread the typically modern sense of situating one's time in a numerical sequence of dates and centuries marking the forward march of a single human history.

It is noteworthy that the gradual dominance of AD dates in the western consciousness of time and history broadly coincided, not with the christianization of western society, but with its modernization. Though defined by its Christian reference-point, thinking AD was appropriate, perhaps even necessary, to the modern myth of historical progress – the modern secularized millenarianism, as

6 Townshend, 'Fin de Siècle', p 202.

7 Townshend, 'Fin de Siècle', pp 208f.

8 Townshend, 'Fin de Siècle', pp 207f.

9 For this paragraph, see Thompson, *The End of Time*, chapter 5.

we might call it. The constant movement into an unlimited future, represented by the dates of the AD era as the universal movement of human history, enabled that sense of the accelerating advance of civilization that dominated the nineteenth century. Thinking in centuries works its calendar magic not by accident, but because it coincides with the dominant myth by which the modern age has lived. That near-obsessive assessment of the past and future course of history, unique, among ends of centuries, to the 1890s, was unique precisely because it occurred at the end of the great century of progress, at the apogee of the myth of inevitable and unlimited human improvement.

If the twentieth century has not quite killed the myth of progress, it has drained much of the life out of it and put its survival in increasing doubt. The *fin de millénaire* is not turning out to be a *fin de siècle* to the power of ten. Books which take the turn of the millennium as a cue for a back-and-forth-looking assessment of where we are and how we should be aiming to get where we wish have been appearing steadily,¹⁰ but even the optimists are highly chastened, while secular pessimism focuses not merely on decadence, as in the 1890s, but on truly apocalyptic danger. *Shall We Make the Year 2000?* (the title of a book published in 1985)¹¹ captures much of the mood. It is no longer a case, as in the 1890s, of drawing up a balance sheet of successes and failures of the century: credit for building the railways, debit for introducing vaccination, and so on. Now it is the case that many of the most apparently benign advances of technology are having calamitous results. The exponential continuation of the line of nineteenth-century progress is putting the future of the planet in the balance. But not only has the myth of progress turned sour. The typically modern sense of history as a forward moving process, in which we participate through reflection on the past and projection of the future, has been sapped by the culture of postmodernism. At least in Britain, we are still modernists enough to feel that the turn of the millennium should be of epoch-making significance, but we are also postmodernists enough not to be able to get excited about it. Most people are just looking forward to the party.

For the secularized millenarianism of the modern world, for the myth of inevitable progress to the utopian goal of history, the turn of the millennium is a critical time. It coincides with a widespread sense that the modern age is passing, and the magic of the date is likely to intensify that sense. If we could awaken ourselves to the task, the *fin de millénaire* could be a time, not of taking stock of the past century as in *fin de siècle*, but of taking stock of the whole modern age. With the *fin de millénaire*, the time has come to assess not progress, but the myth of progress itself. Can the secular millenarianism of modernity survive the millennium?

10 e.g. R. Williams, *Towards 2000*, Chatto & Windus/Hogarth Press, London, 1983; R. M. Kidder ed., *An Agenda for the 21st Century*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1987; J. Chesneaux, *Brave Modern World: The Prospects for Survival* and B. A. Butterfield ed., *Breakdowns: The Destiny of the Twentieth*

Century, Peter (tr. D. Johnstone, K. Bowie and F. Garvie; Thames & Hudson, London, 1992); J. Kleist Lang, New York, 1994; Dancher ed., *Fin de Siècle*.

11 J. G. de Beus, *Shall We Make the Year 2000?: The Decisive Challenge to Western Civilization*, Sidgwick & Jackson, London 1985.

We turn to the second perspective from which the calendar endows the year 2000 with seemingly magical power.¹² Early in the eighth century AD (as we call it), in the year 708 (as we count it), the Venerable Bede, English monk and scholar, expressed his irritation that unlearned people (clergy, one suspects) pestered him to tell them how many years were left in the sixth and last millennium of world history. Such people, he later explained, concluded from the Genesis creation narrative that, just as God created the world in six days, so it was destined to last six millennia. At least some of them thought the six millennia would be followed by a world sabbath, a millennium of paradise on earth. Unused to year-dates, these people needed Bede's learned help to calculate how near to the millennium they were. But behind their question lay the chronology generally accepted at this time, which dated the creation of the world somewhere around 5200 BC and therefore the end of the sixth millennium of the world around 800 AD.

The notion of the world-week – six thousand-year days of history followed by a thousand-year Sabbath, *the* millennium – has influenced Christian millenarianism from a very early time. But it has been attached to three main chronological schemes. Since these reckon years from the creation of the world, they are known as Anno Mundi (Year of the World) I, Anno Mundi II, and Anno Mundi III. Anno Mundi I dated the creation around 5500 BC and therefore the end of the sixth millennium around 500 AD.¹³ This chronology, introduced by Hippolytus and Julius Africanus in the early third century, prevailed in the Christian church for some time. It enabled Hippolytus, himself a millenarian, to keep the parousia and the millennium a safe 250 years or so in the future. But before the dangerous year 500 came at all close, it was replaced by another system, Anno Mundi II, originally devised by Eusebius of Caesarea in the fourth century, which made the world rather younger, created around 5200. This was the system which the people who irritated Bede knew. When first introduced, it had served to distance the end of history a few centuries, just as the previous system Anno Mundi I had when first introduced. But by Bede's time the end of the sixth millennium was again approaching, and if one deployed the common notion that God might mercifully shorten the time then the end of history was already imminent. In the contrast between Bede and the people he reports we see a frequent typology: the eager sense of eschatological imminence in the ordinary people, versus the much more cautious approach of the church's leaders and theologians, who give reason to think that the end is still remote.¹⁴ The medieval historian Richard Landes calls them the roosters and the owls.¹⁵ Roosters crow about the imminent dawn, owls postpone it by learned recalculation.

12 The historical data in the following paragraphs is drawn especially from R. Landes, 'Lest the Millennium be Fulfilled: Apocalyptic Expectations and the Pattern of Western Chronography 100-800 CE', in W. Verbeke, D. Verhelst and A. Welkenhuysen eds, *The Use and Abuse of Eschatology in the Middle Ages*, *Mediaevalia Lovaniensia* 1/15; Leuven University Press, Leuven 1988, pp 137-211.

13 The possibility of small differences in the calculations makes all these dates approximate.

14 Of course, this is a generalization. Many church leaders and theologians have also promoted eschatological imminence.

15 R. Landes, 'On Owls, Roosters, and Apocalyptic Time: A Historical Method for Reading a Refractory Documentation,' *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 49 (1995), pp 49-69.

Bede was an especially good owl. His chronographical expertise enabled him to replace the now dangerous Anno Mundi II with not one, but two new chronological schemes. He originated neither but brought both out of obscurity into use. One was another Anno Mundi scheme, destined to be the longest lived of them all. Anno Mundi III places creation as late as around 4000 BC (Bede's date was 3952). This, of course, brings the end of the sixth millennium to around 2000 AD. Archbishop Ussher's famous seventeenth-century calculation of the age of the world, dating creation in 4004 BC, was the version of this scheme which has since become the most popular. It is the basis for the survival of the world-week notion up to the present in some circles. Since no-one has ever dated creation, on biblical evidence, significantly later than this scheme proposes, the time for the world-week theory is rapidly running out. The calculations which in Bede's time and Ussher's placed the end at a safely remote date can no longer be revised downwards. Very many people in the past have accepted this scheme and held the end to be imminent, since God could be expected to shorten the time. Now the scheme makes the end unavoidably close. Bede's calculation gives the sixth millennium till the year 2048, but that is the outside limit. By Ussher's calculations the end should already have come.

Bede's influence also brought into standard use in Latin Christendom the dating of years Anno Domini (that dating from the supposed date of the birth of Christ which we still employ). In time this replaced all Anno Mundi schemes. As we have seen, it suited the increasingly secular worldview of modernity, even though its Christian reference has now to be disguised by the term Common Era. There is a significant difference here in the attitudes to time and history which the Anno Mundi and Anno Domini schemes promote. The Anno Mundi schemes were always implicitly linked to the world-week theory. They implied an end, a completion of history which would not develop out of the immanent tendencies of history, but come disjunctively from God. The Anno Domini system, on the other hand, leaves the future open. It came to be associated with the characteristically modern sense of indefinite progress. The notion one rather commonly hears that the Jewish-Christian conception of history as linear progress towards a goal enabled the development of the modern notion of history and historical progress is overly simplistic. Progress towards a goal, as a Christian reading of history, is a modern progressivist Christian reading.¹⁶ It fits with Anno Domini chronology, but not with the older Anno Mundi chronology.

Contemporary world-week millenarianism – that is, the kind of premillennialism for which the year 2000 is significant – is still conceptually linked to the Anno Mundi III scheme.¹⁷ It has not been difficult to combine Anno Domini thinking with this, because the Anno Mundi III scheme (unlike Anno Mundi I and Anno Mundi II) places the incarnation more or less at the end of the fourth millennium. Since at

16 The older Jewish-Christian view was that God will consummate history by bringing about his kingdom, not that history itself produces its goal by some kind of cumulative process.

17 For the continued vitality of the world-week theory in American fundamentalism, see Thompson, *The End of Time*, p 147; P. Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture*, Harvard University Press Cambridge, Massachusetts 1992, pp 337f.

least the sixteenth century,¹⁸ Christian ideas of the world-week have adopted, from the Talmud (*b. Sanh.* 97a-97b; *b. Abod. Zar.* 9a), a rabbinic scheme which divides the six thousand years of world history into three periods of two thousand years: two thousand years before the Torah was given, two thousand years of Torah, two thousand years of the Messianic era. Understood against this background, the year 2000 AD still evokes the end of the sixth millennium and the advent of the millennial Sabbath. (In passing we should note that if we want historical precedent for the millenarian significance of the year 2000, we should not be looking to the year 1000, as is commonly being done. The year 1000 had nothing to do with world-week millenarianism.¹⁹ The real precedents for 2000 are the two dates which, in previous chronologies, should have been the end of the sixth millennium: 500 and 800.)

Just as the year 2000 is a critical point for the secular millenarianism of modernity, so it is for the traditional world-week millenarianism of the Christian tradition. Either the millennium will actually bring the millennium, or this kind of millenarianism cannot survive. Despite the well-known phenomenon of recalculation and reinterpretation after eschatological disappointments and despite the ingenuity of biblical chronographers, it is hard to see how world-week millenarianism can survive much beyond 2000. Moreover, the same may well apply to any form of millenarianism which depends on periodization of history and sees a providential plan unfolding in a series of prophesied stages of which the millennium is the last within this world. Such prophetic schemes and the calculations of periods and dates that go with them all seem to reach the limits of their plausibility as we move into the third millennium. Just as the approach of the millennium activates the calendrical magic both of the secular modern myth of progress and of the traditional Christian myth of providential completion of history, so it should also provoke the reassessment of both.

Thus our two perspectives on the calendrical magic of the year 2000 – secular and Christian – leave us with the two questions: *Can the secular millenarianism of modernity (the myth of progress) survive the year 2000? Can the Christian millenarianism of providential completion of history (world-week millenarianism) survive the year 2000?* There is a third perspective – that of the New Age movement – from which the year 2000 appears of epochal significance,²⁰ and had we space to examine it we

18 R. Bauckham, *Tudor Apocalypse: Sixteenth Century Apocalypticism, Millenarianism and the English Reformation*, Sutton Courtenay Press, Appleford 1978, pp 165f.

19 For a summary of the historical debate about the year 1000, see Thompson, *The End of Time*, chapter 2; and cf., most recently, Landes, 'On Owls', pp 59-65. The apocalyptic significance of the year depended on an Augustinian exegesis of Revelation 20, understanding the millennium there to be the age of the church. Such an exegesis cannot yield significance for the year 2000.

20 Thompson, *The End of Time*, chapter 9; Grosso, *Millennium Myth*, chapter 8. The focus on the year 2000 results in part from Nostradamus' famous prophecy (much interpreted) of the year 1999 (see Schwartz, *Century's End*, p 268), and from the fact that the 'year 2000 marks the point at which both Pisces and Aquarius have equality' (J. Hogue, *Nostradamus and the Millennium: Predictions of the Future*, Bloomsbury, London 1987, p 188) and so the dawning of the age of Aquarius. According to New Age prophet Ruth Montgomery's spirit guides, a poleshift will occur in 1999 which will wipe

might reach a similar conclusion with respect to it. It too is one of the contenders for the future and is no less millenarian than modernity or Christianity. But given limited space, I pass on to a broader assessment of the Christian millenarian tradition.

Christian Hope for the New Millennium?

My aim now is to ask whether the Christian millenarian tradition may still have a role in pointing us to the possibilities of Christian hope at the turn of the millennium. If the hopes generated by the myth of historical progress are running out and the hopes generated by predetermined schemes of providential chronology are also running out, is there a postmodern and postmillenarian form of hope for Christians at the turn of the millennium? Paradoxical as it may seem, it is with the Christian millenarian tradition that I propose we begin.

(1) We need to define millenarianism. In the Christian tradition the millennium is a future period which is post-historical and pre-eschatological. It represents a qualitative leap to conditions transcending those of present history, but it precedes the total transformation of creation which is called the new creation. It is therefore a transitional reality. It is in time, not eternity. It is this world perfected, this world as it might have been without sin and evil. But it is not yet transfigured in eternal glory in the immediate presence of God.

(2) Expectation of the millennium is therefore a form of utopian vision. It envisages a reordering and perfecting of life in this world in its various dimensions: social, political, economic, ecological, as well as spiritual. It is frequently depicted as the antithesis of the unjust social order or the harsh conditions of the present. Nature will be bountiful and beneficent, providing lavishly for human needs; privilege and hierarchy in human society will be abolished; there will be just distribution of economic goods or common ownership; there will be peace and security; suffering and grief will be banished. In relation to God, usually the emphasis is therefore on God's or Christ's just and perfect rule over the world. This is to summarize a rich variety of millennial expectations, but it will serve to show what I mean by calling them utopian.

(3) The Christian millenarian tradition owes very little – other than the term 'millennium' – to the account of the thousand-year reign of the martyrs with Christ in Revelation 20. This account is notable for its brevity and its concentration on a single function of the millennium: the vindication of the martyrs.²¹ Those who suffered during the rule of the beast, such that the beast appeared to be the victor, must now be seen to be the true victors, participating in the rule of Christ. The thousand years of their rule demonstrates its reality by contrast with the transience (a mere three and a half years) of the beast's apparent triumph. This function of vindicating the martyrs is not a major function of the millennium in the tradition,

out millions while paving the way to the Golden Age (Grosso, *Millennium Myth*, 233). For a Gnostic interpretation of the approach of the millennium, see H. Bloom, *Omens of Millennium: The Gnosis of Angels, Dreams, and Resurrection*, Fourth Estate, London 1996.

21 R. Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1993, pp 106-108.

whereas the utopian state of the world which is the real concern of the millenarian tradition is absent from Revelation 20. Of course, Revelation 20 provided a scriptural peg on which to hang the millennium, but it was not the source of the tradition or influential in its development. For example, the very earliest account of the millennium, ascribed to Jesus himself by the early second-century bishop Papias (*apud* Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 5.33.3-4), describes the paradisaical fruitfulness of the earth, the harmony among the animals, and their obedience to humans. The description closely follows Jewish descriptions of the messianic age, but makes no contact with Revelation 20 at all. Patristic and later descriptions of the millennium drew on OT prophecy, Jewish traditions about paradise and the messianic age, Greco-Roman ideas about the golden age of the past, and even the account of the new creation in Revelation 21. The twelfth-century abbot Joachim of Fiore's enormously influential form of millenarianism had much more to do with his trinitarian pattern of history and with the ideals of contemplative monasticism than they had with Revelation 20. Modern dispensationalist premillennialism applies most of the eschatological prophecies of the OT to the millennium. And throughout the history of Christian millenarianism, down to the present, it is the reversal of the felt evils of the present which provides the attractive pictures of utopian bliss.

Thus it is only in superficial appearance that the millenarian tradition can be seen as a tradition of exegesis of Revelation 20. The usual debates between millenarians and amillenarians, premillenarians and postmillenarians about the exegesis of Revelation 20 are largely beside the point. They scarcely touch the real sources or the real vitality of the millenarian tradition. I do not say this in order to dismiss the millenarian tradition. On the contrary, I take it seriously, but not as a tradition of exegesis of Revelation 20. I take it seriously as a tradition of Christian utopian imagination, with an important role in the Christian eschatological expectation. The sheer persistence and fecundity of millenarianism despite all attempts to marginalize it is reason enough to take it seriously.

(4) What has happened is that for much of Christian history the eschatological imagination has bifurcated. In one form it has focused on the more this-worldly expectation of a millennial utopia, while in another form it has projected a more transcendent image of the new creation or heaven. The former is a perfected form of life in this world, the latter an eternal state far transcending this world. The former is conceived in terms of the kingdom of God, the latter in terms of the vision of God. In bifurcating in this way, the Christian eschatological tradition was initially following Jewish precedent. It was a way of doing justice to both aspects of eschatology, the side which is turned towards this world and the side that is turned towards eternity. But because the millenarian expectation was considered too this-worldly – too seemingly unspiritual – it was frequently denounced by the ecclesiastical authorities and marginalized by the mainstream theological tradition. Its this-worldliness also made it a potentially disruptive and subversive force. It put Christian hope in touch with the harsh realities of the life of ordinary people. It gave voice to dissatisfaction with the world as it is and nurtured eschatological fervour more readily than the more transcendent terms in which the non-millenarian mainstream increasingly expressed the Christian hope. The millenarian hope offered

an enticingly concrete utopia, while the heaven of the mainstream tradition often became unimaginably ethereal and theocentric to the point of theomonism.

The bifurcation was detrimental to Christian eschatology because it effectively created two alternative focuses of hope: the this worldly utopia and the transcendent heaven. In theory, millenarians have held the millennium to be transitional and the ultimate Christian hope to be the new creation. But in practice the millennium itself, in its more immediate, indeed imminent reality, has inevitably displaced any real function for the new creation for many millenarians. Vital and relevant Christian hope has thus been divided between the mutually exclusive approaches of the this-worldly utopians and the other-worldly visionaries.

(5) My view, then, of the Christian millenarian tradition is that the forms of hope it has embodied are a necessary aspect of Christian hope, but I doubt the need to postulate a transitional future period for their fulfilment. The more we accept, with much recent Christian theological treatment of eschatology, that the Christian hope is for the renewal of the whole of this worldly reality in a way that integrates the dualisms of this-worldly and other-worldly, the material and the spiritual, the corporate and the individual, the natural and the human, the social and the theocentric, the kingdom of God and the vision of God, then the more we shall be able to see the utopian expectations of the millenarian tradition as one aspect of the single hope of the new creation of all things. The new creation does not exclude such expectations of perfected creation: it fulfils them while also transcending them. Thus, taking the millenarian tradition seriously as witness to the more this-worldly and utopian aspect of the Christian eschatological hope need not mean accepting its identification of this aspect with a transitional, post-historical but pre-eschatological period. Rather it can mean giving the utopian imagination its place in our thinking about the final and eternal glorification of all things in God.

This attitude to millenarianism has an important consequence for our approach to the year 2000. It frees eschatology from those theological periodizations of world history which the specifically millenarian expectation seems to require. As a post-historical but pre-eschatological period, the millennium literally understood has to be in some sense the final period of the time of this world imagined as a straight line moving from past to future. It has to be dated in Anno Mundi or Anno Domini years. Even if we do not claim to know these dates, in principle a literal millennium has to have such dates. Even if we suppose the figure one thousand to be symbolic, a literal period of whatever actual length must in principle have AM or AD (or CE) dates. It requires us to expect the millennium in much the same sort of way as we expect the Scottish parliament, European monetary union, or the millennium celebrations in the year 2000. This is not the way in which we expect the eschatological moment of new creation, which, though it ends history, is not the future only of the end of history but the future of all history, the ultimate future of every present.

(6) So far I have attempted to neutralize the calendrical magic of the year 2000 in its significance for Christian eschatology. Before attempting a positive statement of Christian hope for the new millennium, I need also to neutralize the calendrical magic of the year 2000 in its significance for secular eschatology. At least since

the Enlightenment Christian eschatology in the West has always had secular eschatology as its enemy or ally, its polemical target, its conversation partner, its guru, its bastard child, its rebellious and prodigal son or its legitimate heir. The relationship has taken many forms but relationship there always is. I deliberately spoke of the dominant myth of modernity as secularized millenarianism. Oversimplification as that is, it makes an essential point. In its orientation to a qualitatively different future, its aspiration to a post-historical utopia, its confidence that it is in the nature of things that history should thus move ever forward, transcending itself, the modern age has inherited something of the Christian millenarian tradition. Historically it was postmillennialism that especially prepared the way for and actually merged into the modern myth of historical progress. But typologically we could see the secular analogue of premillennialism, with its expectation of radical disjuncture, in the more revolutionary forms of the modern myth – the French Revolution, Marxism and Fascism – and the secular analogue of postmillennialism in the more evolutionary forms of the modern myth – the idea of progress in its heyday and in the attenuated form in which it still influences the west and the westernized world. Specifically modern forms of Christian eschatology also fit this typology, straddling the analogy between millenarianism and its secular analogue: liberal Christian progressivism conforms to the more evolutionary type, liberationist eschatologies more to the revolutionary type.

As we have seen it is the increasingly obvious failures of modernity which make the 1990s quite different from the 1890s. The so-called fall of communism – the failure of Marxist millenarianism – is if anything eclipsed by the impending catastrophes to which the whole modern technological project to remake the world technologically and the whole modern economic project to create unlimited growth are leading. Theologically we must read these failures as the failures of secular millenarianism, which in striving to create utopia risks apocalyptic doom. It is unlikely that secular millenarianism – modernity with its myth of inevitable progress – can survive far beyond 2000.

(7) Of course, this is not to dismiss the real achievements of modernity. But what went wrong? If we have exposed the failure of Christian millenarianism, how are we to diagnose, theologically, the failure of secular millenarianism? Centrally what happened in the origins of secular millenarianism was the replacement of God by humanity. Humans took the course of history into their own hands with the aim of steering it towards the achievement of the utopian goal of which Christian millenarians had merely dreamed. What Christians had expected from God – and not yet received – modern humanity (or, more properly, the dominant élite of modern humanity) took it on themselves to achieve. Education and technology were the means. By these means humans were perfectible and the world infinitely adaptable to human needs. Education replaced grace and technology replaced creation. Indeed, in replacing God, the secular millenarian project takes up even the more transcendent goals of Christian eschatology. The whole scientific-technological project of modernity is a kind of new creation, a re-making of the world, as though humans had the creative power of God and the creative wisdom of God. Genetic engineering is the latest instantiation of the old human dream of

playing God and making, as it were, a new world of our own devising, replacing the one given to us. Indeed, it is astonishing how often the possibility of transcending death technologically is aired in the literature of modernity. Secular millenarianism, we might say, is promethean millenarianism.

The perils of attempting to achieve utopia are now well-known in the political sphere, with the former communist states as paradigms. The means – violence and power – frustrate the ends; authoritarianism and oppression result. In the drive to realise utopia dissent must be suppressed and failures concealed. Instead of utopia dystopia appears. But domination and exploitation equally characterize the technological millenarianism and the economic millenarianism of the liberal west, which exploit both the earth and the poor. What got so disastrously lost in the attempt to realize the millennium in history was the sense of limits: human, earthly and historical limits. In assuming limitless powers over a limitless future humanity reached for the eschatological freedom of God and is now discovering its limits only as we collide catastrophically against them.

(8) Now I must briefly address the claim that it is the Christian millenarian tradition which is actually to blame for all this – whether, as Christian sympathizers with modernity would say, to its credit, or, as critics of modernity would say, to its shame. There are those who consider not only secular but also Christian millenarianism promethean. They see all millenarianism as a kind of eschatological impatience which turns into utopian activism. ‘The millenarian,’ says Michael Grosso, ‘is a person in a grand hurry, weary of waiting for heaven. Millenarians want to bring heaven down to earth.’²² Arthur Mendel observes in millenarianism ‘the dialectic of despair’ according to which hope arises out of catastrophe: ‘through the dialectic of despair, having too little inspires the fantasy of getting everything, at once and violently.’²³ To this he traces the revolutionary violence of Jacobins, Marxists and Fascists, all of whom fantasize the achievement of everything all at once through violence and catastrophe.

The problem with such claims is that they take the exceptions among Christian millenarians to be typical. There have been impatient millenarians who take things into their own hands, hoping, as it were, to force God’s hand, sometimes with violence. They are the notorious ones. But they are remarkable for their rarity. In this respect there is an essential difference between Christian and secular millenarianism. Christian millenarians do indeed expect everything, but they expect it from God, and so in God’s time and God’s way. Eschatological impatience expressed in prayer is reconciled with the sovereignty of God. If it does take the millennium into its own hands, then God becomes subservient to human desires and actions, and this kind of activist millenarianism is in truth as atheistic as the frankly secular forms. Believing millenarianism maintains in faith the tension between imminence and delay.

²² Grosso, *Millennium Myth*, p 82.

²³ A. Mendel, *Vision and Violence*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor 1992, p 318.

(9) So what of Christian hope for the next millennium? Christian eschatology I suggest must be both utopian and transcendent. In its utopian aspect it is turned towards this world, in redemption and fulfilment of what this world might be, while in its transcendent aspect it is turned towards God's eternity and the new creation of all things. Christian eschatology will thus include the utopian imagining of how the world would be without sin and evil. Inspired by Scripture, but also in critical interaction with the dreams and aspirations of its present, the Christian utopian imagination both critiques and entices every present. It exposes what is wrong by contrast with what might have been and shall be. It inspires with visions of a better world. In our life in this world we seek whatever approximations to such utopias are humanly – properly humanly – possible. But utopia itself remains in principle beyond human and historical reach. History finds its fulfilment only beyond itself in new creation.

Thus Christian hope is neither promethean nor quietist. It neither attempts what can only come from God nor neglects what is humanly possible. Sustained by the hope of everything from God, it attempts what is possible within the limits of each present. It does not overreach itself in striving for a post-historical goal. It does not value what can be done only as a step in a linear progress to a goal. It does what can be done for its own sake, here and now, confident that every present will find itself, redeemed and fulfilled, in the new creation. These are the resources from which it must engage the hopes and the disappointments, the failures and the disillusionments, the despair of the poor and the facile optimism of the privileged, as well as the sheer whistling in the dark which will accompany the year 2000.

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