

## Future and Folly

By Greg L. Bahnsen

The American clergyman and historian of the Presbyterian Church, Ezra Hall Gillett (d. 1875), once commented that “We are always looking to the future; the present does not satisfy us. Our ideal, whatever it may be, lies further on.” Gillett’s analysis, though rendered almost a century ago, was never so appropriate as it is today as a description of the recent history of so-called “Christian theology.” Fascination with the future engulfs today’s theological mentality – from H. Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970) to J. Moltmann’s *Theology of Hope* (1965) and subsequent application, *Religion, Revolution, and the Future* (1969).

These futurist trends are not without historical roots and material presuppositions. Both can be traced to Immanuel Kant. While few today may be inclined to endorse the ethical reduction of eschatology (the study of “last things”) found in Kant’s often neglected treatise on 18<sup>th</sup> century eschatology, *Das Ende aller Dinge* (1794), the basic assumptions of Kantian philosophy are nevertheless the genesis of today’s eschatology. In particular, Kant’s absolute dichotomy between “phenomena” (objects-as-experienced) and “noumena” (objects-as-such) is seminal for modern theology, being responsible for the contemporary expression of the thought that God cannot clearly come into contact with calendar history (either in the person of the Messiah or in the pages of a written revelation) and for the radical separation of faith and history (popularized by Lessing).

In the theologies of Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann we find this same rigid isolation of time from eternity, leading to concentration on mystical encounter with God as “Wholly Other” in the event of revelation (Barth) – matters of history being irrelevant – and to existential interpretation of the cultural myths found in the Bible so as to gain self-understanding and “openness to God’s future” (Bultmann) – the trustworthiness of the Gospel accounts of history being impertinent to one’s noumenal self-hood. Common to Barth and Bultmann is the presupposition of God’s unknowability; revelation rests upon a subjective and man-centered fulcrum.

However, the depreciation of phenomenal history in these thinkers produced dissatisfaction among men looking for a relevant word to preach to contemporary society, a word not washed-out with the vagueness and ambiguity of neo-orthodoxy’s leaders. Men like O. Cullmann, G. E. Wright, and W. Pannenberg turned away from emphasis upon the “noumena” to emphasis upon the “phenomena” of history. Theology now came to study the “holy history” of God’s people, God’s mighty deeds for them, and the faith-governed understanding of them. Looked at apart from the eyes of faith this “holy history” is mere, ordinary history. Scripture simply records this history of Israel and the Christian church from a believer’s viewpoint. Christian faith centers in the history, not the record thereof. Hence one need not believe in literal creation and a literal second coming of Christ. Again, God is not permitted to

speak clearly and authoritatively to man; all revelation must come indirectly – through the man-interpreted deeds of history.

Popularity has also come to the theologies of process, evolution, and secularization (associated with the names of Hartshorne, Teilhard de Chardin, and Bonhoeffer respectively). Process theologians dethrone God from His transcendental sovereignty over history and pull Him into the dynamic, finite, temporal process of man's own history. Evolutionist theology sees God as the "omega point" of the evolutionary process that created man; God pulls all things into a suprapersonal unity in Himself (which sounds like a new twist on pantheism). The secularist, in harmony with all these other theologies, rejects the authority of Biblical revelation and the orthodox conception of God as creator, sustainer, governor, and judge of the world. Theology, we are told, should concentrate on social ills and politics; the "christian" should live as though God did not exist, attempting to erase the distinction between church and world by social activism. God is "where the action is." The God who was unknown and "wholly other" for Barth is the unspeaking God who is "wholly here" for contemporary theology; that is, God has been brought down from above history and incorporated into history. At all phases of the theological trek from Kant to today, however, God is commonly not seen as sovereign director of history who clearly reveals Himself in the very words of Scripture.

The theologizing action-reaction process has again begun to operate. Happy with the mute god of contemporary speculation and the here-and-now, history-oriented relevance of recent theology, but dissatisfied with the loss of God's transcendence (His other-ness or distance from man), the new theologians have embarked upon a course intended to integrate both concerns. Of course there is no interest in returning to the orthodox theology of biblical revelation: the sovereign God over history. Instead the new theologians would project God's transcendence as something *ahead* of us, rather than *over* us. God is not seen as distinct from man in a different order of being (i.e., the traditional Creator/creature distinction, one an originative and self-sufficient Person and the other a derivative and dependent person), but in a different order of *time*. Moltmann says that God has the future as His essential nature; He is not the "I AM THAT I AM" of orthodox theology, the Lord who revealed Himself to Moses as the burning bush, but is "I am what I will be." In short, God is the future – whatever it should eventuate. Recent Roman Catholic theology has come to agree with (protestant) Moltmann. L. Dewart's *The Foundation of Belief*, E. Baltazar's *God Within Process*, E. Fontinell's *Toward a Reconstruction of Religion*, and G. Baum's *Man Becoming* all put forward this horizontal view of divine transcendence. They reach a consensus in saying that the world is a developmental process wherein man creates himself through his own freedom – determines what he shall be. This man is future-oriented, and thereby he transcends himself and is always more than man – he participates in the very *futuristic* nature of divinity! Thus Baum declares, "The doctrine of god is the Good News that Humanity is possible."

The implications of this new theology, this new eschatology, are blatantly presented by Johannes B. Metz in his article, "Creative Hope." Making eschatology the core of your doctrine of God means "that the world appears as a becoming reality whose development is entrusted to the freedom of men . . . THIS IMPLIES INTRINSICALLY A KIND OF "POLITICAL THEOLOGY." If God is the future, right now man (whose nature participates in God's futurity) must use political strength to plan the future. Man must be the new source of predestination through politics. The Kingdom of Christ has *become* the kingdom of the world! But God's sure word declares this to be folly: I Cor. 3:20-21, Dan. 4:28-32, 34-35, 7:13-14. The future is not man and politics as god, but God as God: "The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ: and he shall reign forever and ever" (Rev. 11:15).