

An Amazing Century?

By John F. Brug

The year 2001 has arrived, but *1984*, a *Brave New World*, and *2001—A Space Odyssey* have not yet arrived. Despite the predictions of these futuristic novels, space travel has not yet had a significant impact on human life. Neither has *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* brought us into friendly contact with beneficent neighbors in the heavens. Computers are not yet rebelling against their makers (just frustrating them). Artificial reproduction has not replaced the natural way. At present, totalitarian mind-control regimes do not seem to be the wave of the future. So what does the 21st century hold for mankind? Will the 21st century produce as great a leap forward for mankind as the 20th century did? If the new century does produce similar speed-of-light change, will it be for good or for evil?

In spite of progress, some very basic problems will remain unsolved and perhaps unsolvable. As we enter a new century, Americans think it is more likely that medical science will find a cure for AIDS (75%) or cancer (80%) than for the common cold (39%). Most think that in the 21st century the Thomas Edisons of science will continue to have a greater impact on life than the Albert Einsteins. People are more focused on down-to-earth, practical progress than on the grand dreams of futurists. Nevertheless, there are a few critical problems and issues that will determine whether the 21st century is a leap forward or a descent into darkness or horror.

Energy

Even in a microchip age prosperity is dependent on energy. What will be the fuel for prosperity in the 21st century? Pessimists see excessive use of fossil fuels leading first to environmental disaster, then to a darkening of the lights of progress. Optimists see the end of the oil age and the marginalizing of the oil sheiks, who will be rendered obsolete by a bounty of solar and first fission, then fusion, power. After failing to be the power source of the 20th century, will the atom make its comeback as the savior of the 21st century's dreams of worldwide progress, or will the energy solution be found in processes that no one is even dreaming of yet? Probably the only safe turn-of-the-century prophecy is that most of the turn-of-the-century prophecies will prove wrong. During the heyday of the lumber barons in the late 19th century, alarmists calculated that the United States would run out of trees by 1920. Instead the world turned to other materials.

Though the church can prosper in the most adverse circumstances, world-wide outreach by the Western church as it is currently being conducted is, humanly speaking, dependent on maintaining progress in communications and transportation, which in turn is dependent on a steady supply of energy. The church does not work in a vacuum but is affected by the ebb and flow of the culture that surrounds it.

Demographics

It remains to be seen whether the greatest demographic challenge to the work of the church in the 21st century will be population or depopulation. If current trends prevail, Africa, the area of the most rapid numerical growth of Christianity, will suffer devastating population losses due to the AIDS epidemic. Up to a third of the projected population may be lost. It is not out of the realm of possibility that the AIDS problem will explode in other countries, especially in Asia. What is not as often recognized is that Europe, the former heart of Christendom, is expected to suffer even greater population declines. Projected population loss for Germany in the first half of the 21st century is 30%, for Italy 32%. The United Kingdom is projected to be the only major European country to escape double-digit losses, due to continued immigration from former Commonwealth countries. The rich, consuming portion of the world may solve the energy crisis not by innovation but by reproductive suicide. In Germany the fertility rate is 1.4 children per woman, well below the replacement rate.

(The US is expected to be an exception to this trend due to a reproduction rate that is about at the replacement level and to continued immigration.)

A closely related demographic problem is the impending drastic inversion of the ratio between working and retired population in Western industrialized countries. In Germany the ratio is currently 51 million workers to 14 million retirees. It is expected to change to 29 million workers to 21 million retirees. This will bring about the collapse of Western social systems unless productivity increases are so dramatic that fewer workers can support themselves as well as a host of retirees. A possible escape route is vastly increased immigration, but this would greatly change the ethnic demographics of the industrialized countries including Japan.

It seems likely that in this century as in the last, people's chance to enjoy material prosperity will be heavily dependent on where they live. This imbalance in wealth will continue to fuel mass migrations unless countries like India and China make major advances in their standards of living.

It is quite possible that the principle "the rich get richer and the poor get poorer" will have a significant impact on the financial stewardship of the church in the West. The shrinking and diminishing of the proportion of wealth in the hands of the middle class will make the church once again much more dependent on a relatively small number of large donors, as it has been at most times in the past. In the 20th century the dramatic increase in the wages of industrial workers enabled the church to be supported by the offerings of the rank and file members to a degree unprecedented in history. We already see in our church body some movement toward the medieval pattern of support, as wealth becomes more concentrated in the hands of the upper economic stratum of society. The dependence of the church on a narrower band of its members for a greater proportion of its support can be expected to have an effect on how the church determines its priorities.

The Family

There is at present little encouraging evidence that the decline of family stability will be reversed in the near future. The situation may, in fact, get worse as more and more children grow up without good models of the roles of father and mother, husband and wife, in their childhood homes. Even more confusion of the roles of men and women seems inevitable with advocacy of aberrant life-styles dominating the media. Some have suggested that a lessening of parental commitment in order to pursue personal goals will make the schools of the future 24-hour-a-day operations. It seems nearly certain that the challenges to the church in this area will increase in coming decades.

Genetic Engineering

The possibilities for "designing your own family" will be increased by various forms of artificial reproduction and genetic engineering. Genetic engineering, various forms of artificially assisted conception, cloning, and perhaps yet unforeseen technologies will raise challenging ethical and theological questions in the next century. Attempts at human cloning seem imminent. We can't say with certainty what will happen if an attempt is made to clone a human (which is one reason why it shouldn't be done). Perhaps it cannot be done at all. Perhaps only some sort of monstrous being that was not truly human would result. It is clear that, at least in the early stages, the cost of every clone will be the production and rejection of many "defective products." Perhaps the result of cloning would be a normal, healthy person as happens in the division process that produces identical twins.

There are a number of things we can say. If it is possible for cloning to produce a real human, that person would be subject to the same principles of sin and grace as any other human. Nevertheless, cloning of human beings should not be done because it is a dangerous intrusion into the beginning of human life, which departs from the way which God established for such life to begin. The zeal for genetic engineering is an expression of the folly of reducing people to genetics, i.e., to their genes. Mankind was created with the capacity to receive and enjoy (or, sadly, to reject and forfeit) a relationship with God. It is the image of God that sets man apart from other creatures. We are not a life form that evolved through a series of small steps to our

current species, an animal separated from other species by mere genetic differences. Unless attempts at genetic engineering are controlled by this knowledge, they will lead to bane and not blessing. We would be wiser to speak of “genetic medicine” rather than “genetic engineering.” If it is folly for scientists to think that they have the wisdom to engineer the course of evolution, how much more so to think that they have the wisdom to step into the role of the Creator.

We do well to understand the limited ability of technology to address fundamental issues of life or to provide authoritative definitions of life or of a good life. Many scientists think genetic engineering will give mankind an almost god-like power to improve its physical condition. But how can the scientific mind find an ethical and moral code to match its scientific knowledge? Man needs to learn not only what he can do, but what he should do. Learning how to answer these questions will be one of the biggest ethical challenges of the new century. The most crucial question is whether man has the wisdom to control the forces he is unleashing. Will he be guided by sinful reason or divine law?

Evolution of Religion?

Somewhat surprisingly, 55% of Americans think religion will be more influential in 21st century America than it is today. Whether they were thinking of Age Old Truth or New Age Fad was not specified.

Predictions are that the communications revolution will continue to impact the practice of religion. Pornography and religion are two of the biggest topics on the internet. Are virtual sex and virtual religion the wave of the future? Though we should not underestimate the menace of internet porn and internet cults, it does not seem likely that the internet will replace the need for personal contact that people crave as gregarious beings. Even mega-churches will have to combat “lost in the crowd” feelings with opportunities for small group contact. People’s desire for face-to-face interaction is unlikely to evaporate.

In general, ritual prospers in cultures in which few people read. Some futurists see churches like the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches prospering in a post-literate world. Others see Protestants and Jews, who will continue to be “people of the book,” dominating the economic, scientific, and academic realms because of their high literacy.

We already see the impact of “niche culture” in television. The proliferation of options results in fewer presentations shared by the large audiences that characterized the days when three networks ruled the airways. Many expect a similar phenomenon in worship and Bible study as more and more options are offered to fill different niches or, in crasser terms, different “markets.” Given man’s spiritual bipolarity it is likely that there will be a market both for no-demand, do-your-own-thing religions and for demanding, ascetic cults.

The demand for life-long education in virtually every realm of life will very likely make this a more common and expected feature of religious life than it has been in the recent past.

Conclusion

It is certain that the church will be challenged by cultural and material trends in the next century and the next millennium. They may be quite different from what futurists expect them to be. As Mark Twain observed, “The art of prophecy is very difficult—especially with respect to the future.” In the Fall of 1992 TIME magazine had an article of projections for the 21st century. A lot of them already seem obsolete. One thing that is clear is that in the next century the most fundamental questions will still be “What is life for?” and “Why are we here to live it?” Then as now God’s Word will remain the only reliable source of answers.

While we can try to understand the trends in culture that can be expected to have an impact on the work of the church, we should remember that whether our predictions hit the bulls eye or miss by a mile, the fundamental problems of mankind will remain the same and the basic principles of God’s law and gospel which address those issues will remain the same. In this respect, there will be nothing new under the sun in the 21st century.