

## Searching for a Perfect World

Medicine has made great progress. We are confronted with immense changes in medical treatments, which for centuries were regulated by a strict ethical code. But this traditional code is now embattled on many fronts. What was unheard of in the past has now become possible through the development of modern technology. In many ways, the introduction of modern technology has changed the attitude of the doctors to medical treatment. Doctors now ask that more and more tests be run on their patients to avoid being second-guessed with the hindsight of 20/20 vision. But these developments in medical technology raise such questions as: "What is right and wrong in the new developments and treatments?" And "How is it possible that despite the rapid progress in medical care, people are still anxiety-ridden?" Many have greatly benefited from new medical techniques. But there is also a dark side to these developments. How then should we approach this new medical technology in our postmodern culture? What should we be aware of?

### Technology in a Babel Culture

The average person has only respect for technology. But the negative aspect is the religious veneration of technology. For example, many put all their trust in it to control climate change. Science and technology are accepted as the solution for all the problems in the world as well as making it possible to satisfy every desire. Former president Clinton is such a true believer in technology. In an address to the United Nations in June 1997 on the global pollution of the environment and the destruction of nature he seemed to expect the solution to all these problems from technology.

But the ideology of modern technology deserves critical analysis. In *Faith and Hope in Technology*, Dr. Egbert Schuurman points out that the Bible in numerous places makes it perfectly plain that technological development can carry people away from God. Like the builders of the tower of Babel, the desire is to become like God. Secularists build society according to their own blueprint, and draw up their own laws and use new technologies without giving any thought to God. Creation is no longer what God has created, but what man himself creates. The choice is made for this world and against heaven. Consequently, our Western culture has become a secularized godless Babel culture. Humanity with its scientific-technical power is now central.

Has technology brought increased human freedom? On the contrary. It is now all too clear how extensively people have become the *prisoners* of technology. Schuurman observes that it is now a power to which humans themselves seem to have become subordinate, and by which nature is exploited and culture fragmented. I believe he is right. In our Babel culture one pretends to be lord and master over technology but is its slave instead. If this world is the only reality, life is no more than an existence that ends in a final exit – death without an eternal beyond.

## Paradise Lost – Paradise Regained

In the midst of all the uncertainties in the world, many believe that better days are still to come. And aren't we all in the habit of focussing on the future? What must I do next? What is going to happen tomorrow? What shall I do for my holidays? What will the world be like a decade from now? Now we see terrorism, death, hunger, genocide, war, but perhaps our children's children will see a world without jealousy and crime. Whether one believes in God or not, there remains a longing for the "lost paradise." For secularists, modern technology is the engine which drives progress in our culture, a source of inspiration to get a hold on the future. Their hope is the restoration of Paradise. They believe that human power will solve all problems. They will determine the origin and goal of all things. In their own strength, the lost paradise must be regained. Bathing in wealth and health will mark the future. This secularized faith in the future has a powerful grip on the masses in the western world. It is a faith that longs for utopia. Utopia is derived from two Greek words, which mean - *not* and *place*. Utopia then means no-man's land. The word was chosen by the British humanist, Thomas More (1478-1535) to describe an ideal state. Hence, utopia is used to point to an ideal situation, which is not real. It portrays a dream world that will never become reality. A hundred years after More, Francis Bacon (1561-1626) wrote the *New Atlantis*. In this book, Bacon describes an ideal society in which all the power is in the hands of natural scientists and engineers. They ensure great "progress."

Although the search for utopia has a long history, serious research into the future began only in the mid-twentieth century. In 1964, a project called "Mankind 2000" attempted to sensitize Europeans to rapidly approaching global problems. The first *World Future Research Conference* was convened in Oslo in 1967. *The Club of Rome* was organized in 1968 for the purpose of alerting world leaders to the coming collision between human population and economic growth.

Serious scientific forecasting had its first futurist in Arthur C. Clarke (b.1917), a scientist-writer equally renowned for his science fiction. He envisions the practical use of robots, for home and office. Weather-control will be advanced. *Death will be no more.* [italics mine] He says, "Death – like sleep – does not appear to be biologically inevitable... Because biological immortality and the preservation of youth are such potent lures, men will never cease to search for them... It would be foolish to imagine that this search will never be successful, down all the ages that lie ahead." With the publication of *Future Shock* in 1971, Alvin Toffler reached international prominence as a futurist. He claims we are faced with "an awesome but exhilarating task that few generations in human history have ever faced: the design of a new civilization." He argues that we cannot create a sane social system until technology is tamed, the educational system revolutionized, and future-consciousness injected into our political lives. The artist, Robert T. McCall, who painted the famous poster of the space wheel for the movie *2001: A Space Odyssey*, believes in a world where human beings have solved their major problems and learned peace. He wrote: "I want people to trust technology. I trust it. I'm not worried about it. I'm not fearful that it will get out of hand. I'm intrigued by the

joyous vision of where we can go with technology and want to say something about it in my paintings. We human beings will be in charge of technology; technology will not be in charge of us." In other words, many secular thinkers still believe in perfectibility of the human condition and a Garden of Eden to which we will return someday. Some day human beings will live in perfect happiness and without the reality of suffering, sickness and death. A paradise without God. But in every utopia, the serpent of human nature sooner or later reappears.

Not all secularist thinkers believe in a coming perfect world. Some totally dismiss the idea of a coming utopia. These anti-utopians foresee a technological future controlled by a totalitarian system. They fear a state which regulates everything from the cradle to the grave so that personal initiative gets lost in a jungle of bureaucracy, a state which tells its citizens how to spend their leisure time and what they are allowed to eat. In recent decades these anti-utopians have made their impact felt. For example, the warnings of totalitarian dangers in Huxley's *Brave New World* and Orwell's *1984* were heard by many. Much of their success was due to the fact that they were recognized as future versions of conditions they could already observe around them. That's why they mistrust people who have grandiose ideas about building a new world. Think of communism (Russia, China, North Korea, Cuba). Too many western idealists turned a blind eye to these oppressive regimes and often were apologists for them.

## **Medical Technology**

We can expect continued improvement of life-extending technology. But the expectations of patients can become too unrealistic. For many, this progress in medical treatment seems to fulfill a messianic role. New treatments and cures through modern technology appear to have a saving function. It is supposed to liberate people from all their cares, miseries and suffering and will guarantee permanent material prosperity. Health is the highest good. What drives current medical practice is the "technological imperative" that requires that when someone is faced with a medical problem, every possible test must be given and every new medication must be tried. But modern medicine cannot usher in a utopia without suffering and death. In fact, it can be aggressive and often the treatments can be worse than the disease.

Also in the field of medicine, worldviews do matter. Rising in the minds of more and more people in our society is secular humanism, replacing the Christian worldview. For the Christian, God is central; in humanism, man is central. The Christian submits himself to the standards of Scripture; the humanist creates his own standards, and creates his own values. Since worldviews do influence what you do, many act as if the world of technology is the only real one. This view has placed a distorted value on resisting terminal illnesses that afflict the very elderly and infirm. When one does not have hope of eternal life, the value of one's temporal life is given a distorted value. Post-Christian secularists seek eternal life on earth with perfect health. Their religion is their faith in modern science and technology. It is faith in progress. But death and life are outside human control. The only thing a person can do, either for good or evil, is to

influence conditions when life can be prolonged until death takes over. Of course, we should welcome new treatments for the relief of suffering and pain. But is death an enemy to be fought off at all costs, or is it a condition of life to be accepted? The issue of death cannot be dealt with until we accept that our temporal lives are finite, bounded by conception at the beginning and death at the end of life. Death is not something to be postponed indefinitely, an evil to be avoided at all cost. Health is of course important and a healthy body is a great good. But there is more to life than health. When we are instructed in the Bible to number our days, we are told to make them count. The issue is not necessarily an extended life, but a better life (Ps. 90:12).

### **Impersonal Healthcare**

Technology is supposed to make life easier for humanity. Many modern medical interventions are now available to make it more bearable for the sick and to develop new cures. Although many have greatly benefited from all these new developments, we still may well ask: "What is the meaning, or the point of all this?" Surely, there is more to medical care than the purely biological quality of life. Modern man seems technologically driven, marked by the loss of interpersonal relationships. Medicine is now so technological, that people, in training to become doctors, seem to think they can find out everything they need to know by ordering the right tests. They are acquiring the art to isolate disease. They no longer see the patient as a person, but as an illness the person has. The patient becomes an object, a diagnosis – pneumonia in one corner, kidney in room 18, the heart in room 20. The common complaint in large hospitals is, there is no busier life than a patient. From morning to evening something is done to him. Taking temperature, making beds, doctors' visits, blood-taking at five a.m., visits to the x-ray and ultrasound departments. Forget it, if you believe you can get rest in a hospital. But there is also another side to a patient than trouble with organs. Modern patient care tends to reflect secular society's tendency to depersonalize. Many complain that in our technological age, no one cares about them or loves them. There is a feeling of estrangement. Books have been written about the lonely crowd and bowling alone. Someone received a letter from a single woman, saying, "Nowadays you are no longer a person, but a little cog in one or another group: you are categorized 'aged person,' 'single,' 'handicapped person,' 'foreign worker' ... and what all! But have we still received from God a name as a person?".

Depersonalized medical care is a contradiction in itself. It excludes the totality of the human being. Who am I? Am I only a biological-physiological machine without spirit or a sense of the eternal? In the sight of God, I am a unique person, whether healthy or sick (Ps. 139). He knows my name and calls me by name and thereby makes me a person. He is concerned about us. For Jesus, every man stands directly before God, is of value to Him, and is called by name. Each patient has a name, an identity. In the Bible, names are given to denote the person – for example, Matt. 1:21; 16:18; Acts 4:36; Phil. 2:9. The name gives a person his uniqueness, whether rich or poor, a king or a beggar, a uniqueness which is still valid even when the name is a common one. A name, therefore, is thus the privilege of each person. A patient, therefore, should be treated as a total human being. However important medical research and technology may be for

the patients today and in the future, the well-being of the patient should not be sacrificed on the altar of technology. That's why it is so important to allow the patient to speak, to guide him/her along so that a real diagnosis emerges. The narrative of the patient is important. The medical staff should know the circumstances of the patients – their worries, fears, and their illness. Personal cares maybe the cause of an illness – the stress factor in the workplace, for example.

## **Conclusion**

The Christian faith is not the opium for the people, as Karl Marx argued; it gives a perspective through which we look at life with hope. The goal of a Christian is certainly not striving for eternal life – he has it already (John 6:40,54). Christians should treasure health, but not at all costs. The fundamental thought in Scripture is that people are to love and honour God, in getting to know and serve Him. In all they do, they are accountable to God. They each give a personal account of their actions and thoughts in this life. Their responsibility also includes being responsible for the other. If this is so, then science and technology should be in the service of responsible thinking and acting.

In the 21st century, practical atheism has become a fact of everyday life. It is the atmosphere in which Christians must live and work. This makes it more difficult for conscientious Christian healthcare workers. Despite all the anti-Christian forces at work in our time, we still should do our utmost to guide our culture into a new direction – Godward. We must know our times to influence them for the Gospel. But we cannot build a new utopia. In *The Hidden Question of God*, Helmut Thielicke observed that the recognition of our fallenness is one of the most vital reasons why the Bible does not present the kingdom of God as the goal of evolution in history but as something that comes at the end. Indeed, Christians are looking for the new heaven and earth. This new world will not come through human effort; it is a gift that will come from God.

Johan D. Tangelder  
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