



Visions, Trends, and Seers

It is obvious that the theme of this issue is based on the title of the book by George Orwell, *1984* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1949). In this book Orwell projects his fascinating and troublesome vision of a future which could come upon the human race a generation later, unless things change. That future would be a high tech society in which everyone would be watched closely by Big Brother on the omnipresent telescreen to secure control of behavior by the Party; unrelenting propaganda would shape thinking; and “thought-criminals” would disappear.

However we evaluate Orwell, now that the year 1984 is here, his book fits somewhere in a constellation of literary forms which seek to speak of, envision, warn of, promise, or guess the future—based on certain present realities, as well as on convictions about human nature and forces (divine or otherwise) beyond. Before Orwell, with him, and after him there have been and continue to be prophets, apocalyptists, utopians and other visionaries, and—more recently—futurists, science-fiction writers, and trend-watchers.

In the still early 1980s—with attention given to the results of the 1980 census, the economy, and the high tech/electronic revolution—it seems that the trend-watchers are the new generation of “seers” to whom many turn. A major book in this category is that of John Naisbitt, *Megatrends: Ten New Directions Transforming Our Lives* (New York: Warner Books, 1982). His book confirms that the high tech society has indeed arrived. But other aspects of the Orwellian vision (or nightmare) have not. For example, along with high tech, he says, has come “high touch.” As more technology is introduced, the more people sense the need to be together and to choose the options available which high tech provides. “Jet airplanes, as far as I can tell, have led only to more meetings” (41). The widespread use of word processors (providing unlimited copies of letters with “personalized” greetings) has led to a revival of handwritten notes and letters. Very few responses are recorded on electronic telephone answering services. Although many people can now work at home in their “electronic cottages,” they prefer to “go to the office” to be with other persons. Moreover, we can expect more decentralization in all institutions, more participatory democracy, more consumer movements, and the successful marketing of multiple options (typified by the 31 flavors at Baskin-Robbins and the 752 different models of cars and trucks sold in the U.S.). The multiple options, says Naisbitt, will also be seen in religion with the proliferation of independent churches, numbering in the thousands already in the U.S.

Orwell, aware of trends in the late 1940s, portrayed a pessimistic vision of the future. Naisbitt, watching trends on the threshold of 1984, ends on the note:

“My God, what a fantastic time to be alive!” (252). If one were to categorize Naisbitt’s book in

terms of the categories applied to biblical literature, it would not be called prophetic or apocalyptic. It is a kind of “wisdom literature.” It is a “fantastic time to be alive” for those who possess the means, the skills, the jargon, the savvy, the ethic, and the lifestyle which make it possible for them to flow with the megatrends. Like wisdom literature frequently, this one even has proverbs: “Trends, like horses, are easier to ride in the direction they are already going” (9).

Theological reflection, insofar as it is truly in the world, must be aware of trends. But it must also attend to the “visionary” tradition expressed by voices of the past and present in order to offer critique and constructive reorientation, and to aid the proclamation of divine judgment and grace in the churches. In fact, one of the trends of our time is a new or renewed interest in apocalyptic literature (expressed in both academic and popular writing), science fiction, and novels with apocalyptic overtones. Envisioning, fantasizing, the expression of dread and hope—these are all very much with us in the culture and in the theological tradition.

This issue of the journal begins with a reflective and vibrant essay on Christian hope by *Alvin Rogness*, who affirms that in spite of much pessimism, we are to “care for those at hand and reach out as far as we can” and, he says, it may well be that God “has much more hope for us and his world than we dare to entertain.” *Wendell Frerichs* offers a survey of “dreams of the future” which are expressed in Scripture and subsequent history, and he goes on to maintain, among other things, that the misuse of apocalyptic in our culture is due in part to its interpretive neglect in theology and the churches. *Cordell Strug* examines the work of recent novelists who speak to the terrors and possibilities of the present, using apocalyptic imagery, and in some way stand in the apocalyptic tradition. *Irving Hexham* reviews recent films and books (mostly science fiction) which present the spectacle of a “technic civilization” and calls for an outlook by Christians which does not seek to escape from the new civilization but addresses its realities and faces the future without fear. *Jack Schwandt* reviews the vigorous debate which took place in the early years of the United States concerning the character of public life, showing that the basic principles assumed in the U.S. Constitution are not utopian: “Our Founders did not aim high, and their political objectives were limited. And about all of this...they were remarkably candid.” *Lowell Satre* offers a helpful guide for the interpretation of the Book of Revelation and suggests ways in which one might plan instruction in it.

The Resources section opens with a review essay by *James VanderKam* on apocalyptic in recent studies. Other essays in this section are not devoted specifically to our theme, but are timely at the outset of 1984. *Gracia Grindal* provides reflections on the “Father” imagery of God in Scripture and the church from the standpoint of the use of imagery in literature generally. The “Texts in Context” essay, written by *David Tiede*, is devoted this time to passages in the Sermon on the Mount, which are prominent in the lectionary for the Sundays after the Epiphany in 1984.

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