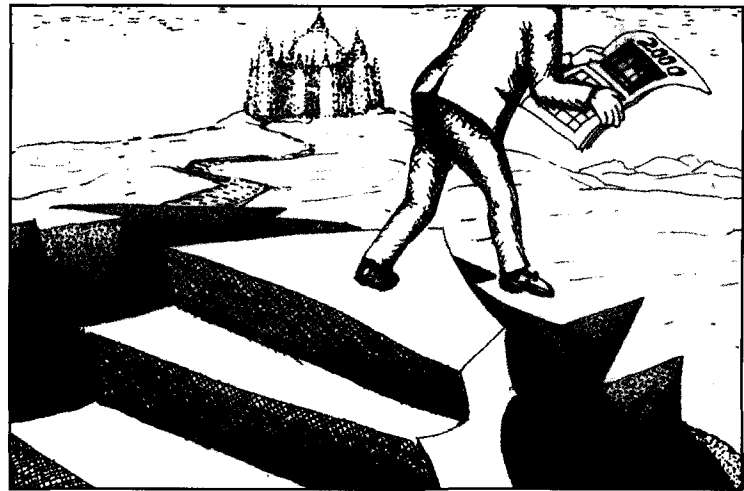


# The Coming of the Third Age

Next Month: Utopia

by Harold O.J. Brown



In the early winter of 1999, much of the world is looking forward with eager anticipation or uneasy apprehension to the dawning of the Third Millennium. It is the third millennium A.D., of course, the beginning of the third thousand of the Years of the Lord, and thus directly relevant only to those of us who count from the birth of Jesus Christ. A Muslim, Jew, or Hindu would not see the same millennial significance in our A.D. 2000, but the computer has universalized the world's dating and with it the significance of that date as the digits roll from 12/31/99 to 01/01/00.

Fifty years ago, we lived passably well without computers and probably could do so again, if it becomes necessary. Are there other reasons for the anticipation tinged with foreboding with which so many regard the end of this second millennium? Are we not merely at the end of the years whose designation starts with the numeral 1, but at the beginning of something new, a New World Order perhaps? Or is it possible that we are actually approaching the End of the Age, the Last Day of biblical prophecy? Christians have been told to expect that Last Day but not to try to predict when it will break in on us. The disciples asked Jesus more than once, "What shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?" (Matthew 24:3). Jesus's

parting words warned them, "It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power" (Acts 1:7). Earlier he had instructed them, in effect, to "Keep busy until I come."

In light of these admonitions, I am not prepared to offer any predictions about the End of the Age in the sense of that Last Day, and certainly not any based on calendars or computers. But what about signs of a lesser change to something different—better perhaps, or worse—the dawn of Utopia or of a Brave New World?

In the late spring of 1959, the world was temporarily more or less at peace. The Hungarian revolt had been suppressed by the forces of the Soviet Union. World War II had been over for almost 15 years, the Chinese civil war for ten. The independent state of Israel was also ten years old. The Republic of China, licking its wounds and still claiming to be the legitimate government of the mainland, had withdrawn across the water to Taiwan before the victorious Chinese People's Republic. There was an uneasy peace in Korea and Indochina, and most of Africa was still under colonial rule. The Council of Chalcedon, which for orthodox Christians of every confession defined Jesus Christ, the Son of God, as fully divine and fully human, had just passed its 1500th anniversary, and Billy Graham was well into his worldwide evangelistic ministry. It was a middle, neither an end nor a beginning.

Those were the external conditions under which I was given the opportunity to deliver the little oration called the Graduate

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Part at the Harvard University Commencement. My eight-minute address was entitled "The Coming of the Third Age." I used the vision of a 12th-century Italian friar, Joachim of Floris, to suggest that our world might once again be on the verge of a momentous transformation beyond our power to anticipate or plan.

Joachim believed that there was a first age, the age of the Father, which had passed into the second age, that of the Son, which in turn was drawing to an end, to be followed by a third and final age, that of the Holy Spirit. In this third age, people would no longer need to be taught by priests, for it was to be as the prophet Jeremiah said: "They shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, saith the LORD" (Jer. 31:34). The Spirit of God would rule in the hearts of men, and the tutelage of the priesthood would no longer be necessary.

After Joachim's death (ca. 1202), some of his disciples calculated that the dawning of his new age would come in the year 1260, but the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II, whom they had envisaged as the Antichrist of the Last Days, died in 1250.

The Joachite vision faded, but men have continued to hope and expect a new age, an age when mankind will somehow rise to a new stage of perfection, when tables of stone or the pages of the Book will be superseded and man will be able to know all truths on his own.

While for Joachim the priesthood was to become dispensable because the Holy Spirit would instruct each believer personally, his successors began to think in terms of the autonomy of the human spirit. Thus theirs soon came to be a secular third age, a vision of Utopia created by enlightened, self-taught human beings. G.E. Lessing (1729-1781) thought that the race was on the threshold of maturity, about to free itself, as his contemporary Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) would write, from its self-im-

posed immaturity. In *The Education of the Human Race* (1780), Lessing announced the dawn of a third age of Reason, when neither the commanding Law of Joachim's age of the Father nor the Gospel of love of the age of the Son would be necessary any longer. In this third age, man's reason would lead him into all truth. Unfortunately for Lessing's vision, the triumph of Reason in the heartland of the Enlightenment, France, would soon plunge that nation into the insane carnage of the Reign of Terror.

The idea that there are three ages in history and that we are standing at the dawn of the third has arisen more than once. Could it be true now? Human efforts to understand history have tended to see trends in threes, and history up to the present offers some basis for it. There have been three Rome: Rome itself, Constantinople, and Moscow. There have been three "millennial" empires. Rome lasted from 753 B.C. until it was extinguished in the West in A.D. 476. Its successor state, the Holy Roman Empire inaugurated under Charlemagne in A.D. 800, also endured for almost exactly a millennium, in one form or another, until it was shut down by Napoleon in 1806. When Bismarck proclaimed the establishment of the German empire in 1870, it was seen as another "second" empire, the successor to the empire of Charlemagne. But unlike Charlemagne's, it lasted only 48 years. And 15 years later, in 1933, there was a third.

Hitler's "Third Reich," proclaimed as the "Thousand Years' Reich," drew both consciously and unconsciously on the "third age" and "third empire" themes of the past. From one perspective it could be seen as the successor to the first and second German empires of Charlemagne and Bismarck, but from another and more millennial perspective, as the successor to *Roma*

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*aeterna* and the Holy Roman Empire.

Communist Russia's dream of becoming the center of a new world civilization appears to have foundered with the breakup of the Soviet empire in 1991, 927 years short of a millennium. Hitler's vision turned to nightmare and ended in blood and ashes after only 12 years. Thus this last century of our millennium has seen two very fast false starts as far as a third age is concerned. Our own new American republic, proclaiming itself the *Novus Ordo Seclorum*, the New Order of the Ages, began less pretentiously and has lasted longer, with 777 years to go until its millennium.

President George Bush evoked dreams of a New World Order in 1991, the last decade of this millennium, but once the Gulf War ended, he said nothing more about it. In his successful campaign against Bush, Bill Clinton evoked utopian ideas, calling for "the courage to change" and promising a New Covenant. He did not call his covenant *third*, but his use of the biblical expression intentionally or unintentionally evoked quasi-religious images of another New Age, as different from the present age as the New Testament is from the Old.

In the last year of this old millennium, strange events have begun to unfold. The Cold War is over—won, we say—and the victors are up to something, perhaps to more than they themselves realize. NATO, a defensive alliance forged to defend Western Europe against the Soviet Union, has been reconfigured as, in the words of a French journal, "a vehicle of American hegemony." Was its war against Yugoslavia the first battle for a new and different kind of empire? The world has become globalized, we are told. The same computers that cause us to fear 01/01/00 link every tribe and nation into one earth-encompassing internet. The surface of the earth, covered with the zoö-sphere of human and animal life, is now being covered, to use Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's term, with a nouosphere, but a mechanical one, not spiritual as he envisaged. It is not the increasing mental activity of man that will cover the entire earth in a mental net; the emerging nouosphere may be a kind of mechanical universal Mind made up of all of the interlocking computers of the world.

Are we at the dawn of One New World? There is no declared human candidate for emperor, no nation that will admit to seeking world hegemony. One nation, ours, appears to have at least some inclination in that direction, and our President seems to be appointed (or self-appointed) to exercise an office once reserved for God, that of *rerum mundi moderator*, the moderator of all the affairs of the world. On the other side of the Earth, a vast people, four times as numerous as ours, is determined to prevent that from happening. The eyes of the world are fixed upon Israel and Jerusalem, where the plan of God and the schemes of man have intersected in the past. Will Jerusalem once again be "trodden down of the Gentiles" (Luke 21:24)? For the first time in human history, it is possible to envisage an Armageddon in which the combatants number not thousands, hundreds of thousands, or even millions, but hundreds of millions, as in the imagery of the books of Daniel and of Revelation.

As we approach the turn of the millennium, we have heard or endured a series of predictions of a new order and attempts to erect it. From Lessing's naively optimistic expectations of mature human reason in *The Education of the Human Race* through America's ambitious but non-revolutionary *Novus Ordo Seclorum* to Bismarck's Second and Hitler's Third Reich, the human vision of a new order has become progressively more

secular and, alas, more awful. Are we on the threshold of another and more universal New World Order, ruled not by the mind of God, but by the universal mechanical Mind of all the world's computers?

Human attempts to create a utopia, a new order, a Third Reich, a new Communist Man have proved not merely vain but devastatingly dreadful in the inversion of their stated goals. Paul warns of those who, "Professing themselves to be wise . . . became fools" (Romans 1:22). Will our kinder, gentler pursuit of ever grander and more vainglorious dreams bring us to a climactic Third Age in the third millennium? Utopia is not possible, for man determined to force its birth becomes a monster—perhaps literally, as a genetically engineered, cloned New Man. In 1914, just before the *belle époque* disappeared in fire and smoke, the poet Stefan George warned:

You felons are the first to murder God,  
Carve out an idol not resembling Him,  
Hailed by sweet names, and hideous as no other  
You hurl the best you have into its jaws.

Christians all over the world offer the Lord's Prayer countless times every day. It has the petition, "Thy kingdom come." As we celebrate, or merely observe (as the case may be), for the last time in a year numbered 1---, the birth of the One after whom our years are numbered, we can both hope and pray that if there is to be a Third Age, it will be more like Joachim's Third Age of the Holy Spirit than like any modern messiah's Third Age of the Religion of Man. c

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## Bleeding in Gray Shadows

by Thomas Paul De Witt

I find my soul  
In the composition  
Of shadows.

A brush of gray,  
A sparkle of white,  
A dark boom  
Anchoring  
My center.

So solid, so rigid,  
So amber and so bled,  
To touch a vein so tender  
And bleed forevermore.

Drained, I fold.  
Only to stand tall  
In the shadow of God.