

A Theology of the Cross—Part I

The environmental crisis--especially global climate change--has reached such a point that it is no longer reversible and that considerable further damage to the Earth and us its people is inevitable. Yet very few people--even within the environmental movement--seem to be willing to acknowledge (at least in public) that fact. This sermon and the [following one](#) along with the lecture [Finding](#)

[Hope in an Environmental Wasteland](#)

explore some of the depth of the environmental crises and the forces that make them virtually invulnerable to the usual modes of attack and explores some possible reasons why the American "positive outlook" may be obstructing our view of reality. The two sermons also look at the Christian "theology of glory" and how Christianity may have played a historical role as well as a continuing role in our illusions. Finally all three begin to look at what hope might look like in our situation.

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I sometimes teach classes about the on-going environmental crises facing us and the devastation they'll cause. One of the basic messages of the course is that, like it or not, much of that disaster is inevitable. I explain at the beginning of the course that we won't grasp the seriousness of our situation until we understand what we're up against. American consumerism, the dysfunction of government, the nature of our economic system, the power of the corporations, and the dominance of media, acting together, will prevent any significant change ... and the interweaving of those forces creates a totality that's virtually invulnerable to human action. I warn class members that the first two-thirds of our time together may be depressing and emotionally exhausting, but I ask them to hang in there with me until towards the end.

But it never happens. By the third or fourth session, the class seems unable to continue analyzing the web of forces. The discussion turns inevitably and almost immediately into what we can do about the crises.

But to ask "What can we do about them?" usually means "What can we do to fix them?" When I respond that there's nothing that we can do to fix them, there's near rebellion within the class. Where's the hope, then? What good does it do to understand it if we can't fix it? Why should we do anything at all?

Every class so far has responded this way. It seems built in, programmed.

You may have felt something similar after a few of my previous teachings. Some of you may feel that way after today's teaching.

So what's happening?

We live at a time of deep crisis in which our country's historical optimism and positive outlook are being challenged by our experience that things aren't working and our sense that the future will be dark. Over the several centuries of our history, we Americans have had an unshakeable faith in progress, a faith in the human capacity to overcome obstacles, to find our way through painful complexities, or, at least, to make the best of things. Beneath our dismay at any particular situation, beneath any suffering, our cultural expectation has been that we can fix any problem that comes our way. "Things'll turn out," we remind each other. "Look at the bright side," we say. Even when things clearly won't work out, even when there is no bright side, it's rude to say so in public.

But, over the last century or so—and more acutely in the last decade—this fundamental trust in progress has collided with our experience of reality. And when people feel their basic worldview slipping away, they'll usually go to great lengths to hang on.

I think that explains what happens in my classes. The growing sense that we can't prevent the coming catastrophe collides with our basic assumption of progress that holds the world together for us. Reluctant to let go of our assumptions, we are dearly tempted to turn our gaze away from the painful reality toward some kind of "solution," something we could do.

I've asked for two consecutive teachings to explore what might seem like an abstract issue, so I beg your patience.

The question for these two weeks is this: When we face the profound darkness of our times,

how do we avoid the false hope that we can ultimately fix it and/or the despair that it will never be fixed in favor of the true hope that comes from God's presence with us in the darkness? How do we reign in our expectation of a happy outcome, so we can accept what God does offer?

This week we'll explore why it's so difficult. There are four main points:

- first, the nature our cultural commitment to optimism and to "progress,"
- second, the problems this commitment causes us
- third, the important role Christianity has played in establishing and deepening this misguided commitment, which seriously misinterprets the biblical story,
- finally, the increasing clash between our positive outlook and our experience and what that means for us.

Next week we'll look at the Christian "theology of glory" and explore an alternative "theology of the cross" that can give us guidance in responding to the dim light that God offers to us within the darkness we face. [\[1\]](#)

The Cultural Positive Outlook

To be clear, this determined positive outlook has played out primarily for the affluent of the West. Other cultures, for instance Buddhism, see suffering as an inevitable part of the human experience. Many artists, too, see more clearly. Notice, for instance, how many movies over the past fifty years that look into the future portray an irredeemably bleak landscape, most recently *The Hunger Games*. Most importantly, those oppressed by the dominant culture know much more about suffering that can't be denied, which may, at least partially, be a saving grace for us at Eighth Day since many of us are intimately familiar with the suffering of the oppressed.

Nevertheless, even my pessimistic soul feels an unrealistic confidence. Somewhere deep inside, I have faith in our ability to invent, discover and otherwise make progress to save us. We always have, haven't we? We always will.

But now severe and irreversible climate change—that could very well devastate our

civilization—has already happened and much more is certain. Such recognition is irreconcilable with faith in progress. We can hardly let ourselves even imagine such devastation. In all my conversations about the inevitability of these crises, for instance, only one person has ever suggested that we might push the Earth's ecology so off kilter that it becomes uninhabitable for human beings, causing our extinction.

Okay, so that's the first point: A crucial piece of our way of looking at the world—a deep cultural commitment to progress and to a positive outlook—no longer works.

Problems

OK, so what? Why is this positive outlook so bad? Even if it's glossing over some things, doesn't it give us hope? Doesn't it spur us to action?

Well, maybe, but if it's a false hope, obscuring what might be a real hope, then our creativity and action may lead us in the wrong direction. And, then, when finally we can't ignore the reality anymore, our commitment to optimism turns frequently to despair.

Consider climate change again: it's too late to stop it; it's already happening, and millions have already suffered and hundreds of thousands died. Because of the carbon already in the atmosphere, further drastic climate change would be inescapable, even if we were to stop putting carbon into the air immediately. And we're not about to stop anytime in the near future. Individually, many climate scientists express outright fear and despair.

But even those of us who recognize the danger hold the false hope that we can avoid it if we just do such and so. So we try to busy ourselves with whatever such-and-so is (or feel guilty for not doing so). And when we finally realize that the disaster is happening anyway, the tendency toward despair is strong.

And vast portions of our population still deny it's even happening and remain bound to consumerism. As a nation we seem incapable of doing anything that might "hurt the economy."

The conflict between our positive outlook and our experience has paralyzed us. It prevents our seeing reality for what it is and acting appropriately.

Today is the tenth anniversary of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in which 3000 people were murdered. It was a terrible crime and the memorials to it this week show how deeply it affected many Americans. Perhaps the greatest impact has been to reveal to us how vulnerable we are to attack from elsewhere. Our response to that revelation has been extraordinary. It's difficult to estimate the total costs, but since 9/11 we've spent over 600 billion dollars on homeland security and over 1300 billion dollars on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, that is, almost two trillion dollars in pursuit of security. In addition we've willingly given up fundamental constitutional rights to privacy, freedom from unreasonable searches, due process, and much else.

It seems to me that at least some of this is a misguided response to what can't be fixed. In fact, it's not possible to assure 100% invulnerability, but we spend vast amounts of money trying because we can't face our own powerlessness. If we'd spent *reasonable* amounts on homeland security and spent the rest on the deeper security of infrastructure, education, anti-poverty programs, and so on, those huge sums could have saved tens of thousands of American lives (to say nothing of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi and Afghani lives).

That's the second point: Our commitment to a positive outlook keeps us from seeing reality and responding appropriately.

The Theocentric Image of Humanity

How did this official optimism—now so at odds with reality—become so powerful within our society?

The Christian church has had a lot to do with the change from medieval thinking to modernism. Six hundred years ago, as Western culture was beginning to move out of the feudalism of the Middle Ages, the basic Western understanding of humanity was in relationship to God: Humankind was utterly dependent, inherently sinful, and only God could make things

right. Humanity had been created in God's image, and the sphere of independent human influence was pretty small. God was in charge. To think that I (or even we) could be in charge was blasphemous hubris.

Now, there were significant problems with this arrangement. As the undisputed agent of God, the European church was extraordinarily powerful, and used that power to support the reigning political, economic, and social order, in which the very few dominated the many who lived in grinding poverty and forced passivity. Any incentive to improve their own lives was blunted by their worldview: If God allowed it, it must be God's will. So a new way of looking at things was long overdue.

The Anthropocentric Image of Humanity

The eventual historical response to this feudal image was the Enlightenment (or so-called "modernity"). Over several centuries, the ignorance and superstition of the Middle Ages was displaced by what I'll call "scientific rationalism" (for lack of a better term).

Scientific rationalism is the belief that reason is the final and only criterion of truth. Ultimately, only things that make scientific sense can be true.

We often critique Christianity or other religions for their claims to Truth with a capital "T." But the absolutism of religion pales in comparison with the absolutism of modern scientific rationalism, which is so much a part of our consciousness that — like the fish not recognizing the water—we don't even have a generally accepted word for it.

As a people we differ about whether about rationalism can be the basis of religion, but most of us see it as the proper basis for politics, economics and the structure of society. For us the opposite of rationalism would be irrationality: Who wants to live irrationally?

How did the change from a Medieval Christian point of view to the Enlightenment point of view take place. While there were many other factors, one influence was Christian doctrine itself. The medieval image of God always assumed divine providence, the doctrine that God directs

everything toward human welfare and growth. With the coming of the Enlightenment, however, the church allowed the doctrine of Providence to morph gradually into a confidence that humanity was essentially guaranteed to move toward the goal of perfection. The Enlightenment easily reconceived Providence as Progress with the same goal: the perfection of man. The essential difference is that in the world view of Providence, mystery always hung over this perfection: What was God moving us toward? We weren't sure, but God would surely bring us there. But When Progress becomes the power that moved us, however, the end is clear: mastery of nature. Mastery replaced mystery.

While most of the early Enlightenment thinkers maintained a belief in God, God was gradually pushed to the edges. They believed not so much in Christianity as in Deism: God had created the world, set it in motion and then withdrawn. Scientific progress would ultimately explain the rest and move us forward. Modernism was based on the faith that humanity would come not only to understand nature (including human nature) but also to master it. The image of man no longer had God at the center. Humanity was now the center. God's role was increasingly restricted to the spiritual; God was no longer needed to explain the natural world ... if, indeed, God existed at all.

So that's the third point: Christianity had a critical role in pushing us into our faith in progress even as it pushed traditional Christian faith aside.

Progress

Within Enlightenment faith, rationalism leads us to science, science gives us technology, technology offers increasing mastery of the natural world, and mastery leads to progress, indefinite progress.

And initially our faith in progress seemed well placed, for there was important progress. Nobody wants to go back to an oppressive, Medieval world view without vaccinations or antibiotics, the freedom from starvation, the ideals of equality and democracy, trial by jury and so on. We can't imagine burning witches or reflexly rejecting deeper understandings of the universe ... at least most of us can't. Modernism with its technology has created unparalleled abundance. So the conversation is not about discarding reason but about recognizing its dark side. The mismatch between modernist thinking and reality is killing us.

In the United States—even more than in other Western countries—progress is a creed rooted in our particular history ... at least within the dominant culture. European immigrants came to the New World as a place of hope and opportunity, and many found a prosperous new life here. An unlimited frontier ready to be tamed offered almost anyone new beginnings and the chance for prosperity. Democracy developed, giving at least some the freedom and power to succeed and leading to the myth that anyone could pull themselves up by their bootstraps. The power of capitalism and our growth into the world's foremost economic, political and military power made our faith in Progress almost indomitable. We have come to believe that technology can ultimately solve our problems, conquer our setbacks, and move us forward.

The Lights of Modernity Grow Dim

But—and this is the last point this week—we're discovering the inescapable tension between this positive view of the world and our real-life experience. Human moral progress no longer seems so inevitable. The future seems pretty dark, actually. Historical events have been inconsistent with our faith in progress:

- the utterly senseless killings of millions in World War I;
- the deliberate, pointless obliteration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki;
- the persistence of nuclear weapons despite their potentially catastrophic dangers;
- the starvation of many amidst a civilization of abundance, and much, much more.

My loss of faith in progress started in the 80s when I came to Washington to provide medical services at a small clinic for the poor. Having grown up in the 60s, I believed the country was committed to eradicating poverty but was losing faith that it could be done. I thought that if we could just demonstrate that it was possible to give good medical care to the poor, then people in the country would jump right in. That was, to say the least, naïve; with more experience in the inner-city black ghetto, my positive outlook started crumbling.

And now, the epitome of rationalism, capitalism, continues to aim for indefinite growth despite the obvious limitations of Earth's natural resources. The climate has already been tipped dangerously off balance. Researchers report that we're on the verge of emptying open-sea fisheries. We transform an area of farmland the size of Nebraska into desert every year. We pour fertilizer into the oceans to create dead zones and other consequences we can't foresee. We pollute air and water with thousands of untested chemicals, many of which are demonstrably dangerous to humans. Any of these could become a threat to humanity.

We can't seem to recognize that no system can use natural resources and excrete its waste indefinitely in a limited world. Resources will run out and waste will choke the system. It's not even theoretically possible to continue as we are. But, at least in this country, the number of people who recognize that simple logic is small. And even if we do recognize it, virtually none of us lives on his or her appropriate share of the planet's resources; certainly Marja and I don't.

Our faith in rational scientific decision making is being shaken to the core. Rationalism's theoretical propositions are colliding with their outcomes—our experience of a violence-prone world using up its resource base. Underneath it all is a growing sense of despair.

It's time we recognized our commitment to progress and optimism as dysfunctional and looked for alternatives. Although the American church has, for the most part, been a cheerleader in our optimism, it could offer alternatives! The opposite of the Enlightenment definition of rationality is not irrationality; it's, rather, the understanding that there are other, much deeper, kinds of truth. We don't have to jettison reason to understand that scientific rationalism can't be our only option. As a people, we need to reclaim the non-rational aspects of our nature and embrace the truths they have to offer. We need to reposition ourselves properly, not as Masters of the Universe, but as children and servants of God, who transcends the merely rational. The church could lead us.

So next week we'll look at the usual Christian theology of glory and then see how an alternative theology of the cross might lead us out of despair and allow us to respond with appropriate hope to the dim light that God offers to us within the darkness.

True Christian hope is not about things turning out okay. It's about how we find the source of life in the midst of suffering and evil. It's about faith that God is still with us in the darkness even when we can't see even a glimmer of light.

For Part 2 of this sermon, [click here](#).



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[1] Much of this comes from the book *Lighten Our Darkness* by Douglas John Hall.