

16B CHRISTIANITY AND PROGRESS

Introduction

Progress is forward movement, usually towards an improvement or more advanced stage of development.

Progress is typically linked to continuous accumulation of knowledge. Aspects of progress include freedom, power, and persistence. Many link progress to improvement of the moral and spiritual condition of mankind, although this may be debated.

Types of progress:

- Scientific-medical advances, new materials
- Technical- efficient energy, increased mobility
- Economic- standard of living improves across society
- Cultural – art, music, stories
- Moral – are people actually getting better?

Robert Nisbet [1] has written that progress of a civilization involves certain themes:

- Value of the past
- Nobility of (western) civilization
- Worth of economic and technical growth
- Value of science and reason
- Importance of life on earth

The Christian idea of progress, he suggests, grew out of a combination of Greek thought (growth and development) and Jewish thought (sacred history), encompassing the ideas of optimism, linear time, a common history of mankind, a time frame to see progress, and a view of an ideal society.

Writing positively about technology in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Postman [2] provides the following analysis: "In every tool we create an idea is embedded that goes beyond the function of the thing itself. It has been pointed out, for example, that the invention of eyeglasses in the twelfth century not only made it possible to improve defective vision but suggested the idea that human beings need not accept as final either the endowments of nature or the ravages of time. Eyeglasses refuted the belief that anatomy is our destiny by putting forward the idea that our bodies as well as our minds are improvable. I do not think it goes too far to say that there is a link between the invention of eyeglasses in the twelfth century and gene-splitting research in the twentieth."

Two views of progress:

1. Unbridled human progress, due totally to human achievement in spite of the church. This progress will ultimately solve every human problem.
2. Overall progress of civilization over time, particularly western culture, and particularly as a result of foundations in the Christian worldview. Specific advances in health, agriculture, and communication are evident. Believers would say that we have significantly advanced with technology but not in morality.

Progress, in itself, is not always a desirable thing. The world has encountered

- New diseases
- New weapons
- New cults and philosophies
- New hatreds

Humanistic progress

A significant part of the mythology of optimistic humanism is the idea of inevitable progress, progress made possible by human effort alone without reliance on - or input from - a Creator.

Recent forms of the progress idea go like this:

- Humans can bring about progress, primarily through science and technology.
- God is irrelevant to human progress, and religion actually impedes progress.
- Science and technology hold all the answers, and the result of using their findings will be economic growth for all.

Progress became the basis of nineteenth-century common belief. The world was growing better and the human race happier through the multiplying technological advances. Travel was faster, cities were bigger, plumbing improved, diet and hygiene improved, people began to live longer and enjoy better lives. The future as promised by technological wizardry and advancement assumes greater and greater status in modern thinking until it becomes simultaneous with improvement. A raging optimism prevailed in popular thought as new technology promised and delivered on a brighter tomorrow for all who embraced it. A better tomorrow brought about by technological advance-saw our age as one that held the fulfillment to their hope in science and technology all designed to cater to our creature comforts and provide for our happiness. The future belonged not to believers, but to the ever-aspiring heights of technological progress. There is no need to resort to God when people had all their needs met by the coming cornucopia provided by science. [3]

Goheen writes-

The story that has shaped Western culture for several centuries is a narrative of progress that says we are moving toward ever-greater freedom and material prosperity, and that we are doing so by human effort alone, especially through science embodied in technology, and in the application of scientific principles to our social life, in economics, in politics, and in education....At this stage it is important simply to grasp that this cultural story is a narrative with

an understanding of the world and human life that lies at the foundation of Western culture. Even though the members of modern Western culture are often not conscious of this story, it nevertheless functions for them as a lens through which to see and interpret the world, a map to give direction, and a common foundation upon which to build social and cultural life. [4]

This myth of progress is engraved on our high school textbooks, proclaimed in corporate advertising, physically erected in our downtown bank and corporation towers, propagated in our universities, assumed by our political parties, and portrayed in the situation comedies, dramas and news broadcasts on the popular media. This myth idolatrously reduces human labor to the efficient exercise of power to produce maximum economic good. Serving the three gods of scientism, technicism, and economism, our work lives (in both the shop and the office) are subjected to scientific analysis by industrial engineers and a whole array of consultants, to determine the most efficient way to accomplish the task at hand using the best and quickest techniques to attain the highest possible economic good. [5]

Western Confession of Faith [6]

I believe in Science Almighty. I believe in the power of human reason disciplined by the scientific method to understand, control, and change our world.

I believe in Technology and a Rational Society, its only begotten Sons which have the power to renew our world.

I believe in the spirit of Progress. I believe that a science based technology and a rationally organized society will enable me to realize my ultimate human goal-- freedom, happiness, and the comforts of material abundance.

I believe in economism. I believe that the abundance of consumer goods and the leisure time to consume them will make me happy. To this I commit myself with all my money, time, energy, and resources. Amen.

Hopper adds-

Clearly in the twentieth-century world, God is no longer looked to as the source of human dignity and worth – not substantively, in the culture at large; nor are the values of freedom and equality grounded in bold sweeping philosophical declarations, in a doctrine of “natural rights” as in the eighteenth century. Rather, in the twentieth century, freedom and equality, the values of democracy, are increasingly viewed as somehow natural emergent out of a long historical process; and, by some, they are claimed to be offshoots of the history and technological advance. [7]

The secular view of history and progress holds that

- (1) Technology is the primary driver of progress
- (2) Technology is the measure of progress, and
- (3) Christianity impeded progress because its focus was “other-worldly.”

Even Egbert Schuurman, a believer, wrote: “After the fall of the Roman empire, Christians opposed material technology. From Augustine they had learned that their attention should be directed not to this world but to the other world. Given this attitude, it was a long time before technological development could get underway.” [8]

Technology and Progress

Human progress has often been linked to advances in science and the development of technology, with some even suggesting that in the coming future technology will eliminate all of our problems of disease, conflict, and scarcity (the myth of technicism).

This new secular religion is, of course, Progress. Almost a half century ago philosopher Richard Weaver, in The Ethics of Rhetoric, noted the central religious position that “progress” has taken in the modern technological state: “. . . ‘progress’ becomes the salvation man is placed on earth to work out; and just as there can be no achievement more important than salvation, so there can be no activity more justified in enlisting our sympathy and support than ‘progress.’” Our faith in technological progress may be obvious, but I think it is more difficult, and not completely fanciful, to see that it has a governing trinity. The secular “cold trinity” of Progress apes the Christian trinity in a tragi-comic way: Science will let us know everything; Technology will let us do everything; the Market will let us buy everything. Science takes the place of God the Father in this new trinity. Mysterious and unknowable to all but the cognoscenti, science has its own objective, unemotional laws and rules, which define the universe. To find “the Truth” it has its own unwavering impersonal process (ritual), known as “the scientific method.” Any statement that begins “Science tells us . . .” has the imprimatur of unquestioned truth.

Technology plays the role of the incarnated God, the Son. Science incarnates in our daily lives as technology. It is an admittedly inhuman, cold, mechanical incarnation, yet it manufactures miracles. Technology saves lives, allows us to fly and to speak to others who are thousands of miles away, and creates so many other everyday wonders. Our belief in the Father (Science) is bolstered by the acts of the Son (Technology), which appear to be devoted to making our lives a “heaven on earth.” Technology also has its impersonal, unquestioned commandments based on its mechanical nature, the aforementioned “laws” of efficiency. Importantly, Technology takes on the mysterious nature of its progenitor Science. After all, few of us understand how even the most basic technologies (telephone, television) actually work. So Technology is in this world but, at least to our consciousness, not wholly of this world. It is a kind of incarnated magic.

Our adoration of Technology, despite its dominance over our lives, is not with us at all times, nor does it fully motivate our daily lives. Although we do not understand our technologies, we soon tend to take them for granted, so an animating, ever-visiting third member of the trinity is needed: the Spirit (the Market). We wake every day, go to work, and make money—with a deep desire to buy. Just as in traditional theology the Holy Spirit gives us access to the Son, so too the Market gives us access to (the ability to purchase) Technology and brings it into our lives. It is

this spirit of acquisition that brings us fully to the trinity. The Market also takes on the numinous quality of Science and Technology. As noted, its “laws” of supply and demand and competition are unquestioned dogmas that control public policy in virtually every sphere of our national and global economic lives. They are laws to which almost all of our economists and politicians genuflect on a daily basis. [9]

Did technology, in fact, give rise to concepts of progress?

Technology did not give rise to the idea of progress any more than it established the American republic. It certainly helped to broaden support for the idea by providing an abundance of material goods in the nineteenth century, but the formulation of the idea itself was another matter. It is important to consider the origin and development of the idea of progress in order to understand better where American society currently stands in relation to it. [10]

Hopper presents a case (based on an earlier study by J. B. Bury) that the concept of progress was foreign to the minds of the Greek thinkers, who saw change as a negative thing and valued pure essence above matter. Early Christian thought emphasized a “linear concept of history” and the value of all persons, but created obstacles in its otherworldliness and its “concept of Providence, the belief that a divine agency, not a human one, was the controlling force in history.” [11] The primary advance, then, was a result of the Scientific Revolution.

But did scientific knowledge actually drive the Industrial Revolution?

The invention of textile machinery by men like Arkwright, Hargreaves, Coniah Wood, Crompton, and many others, was totally independent of science. It is true that mechanical philosophy may have had some very general and indirect influence on the process of invention in the textile field but to all intents and purposes these inventions belong to the category that we have designated empirical and non-science based. [12]

Other cultures had fabulous technologies long before the West began to develop. The difference is that those technologies were never used to develop labor-saving devices or to benefit the working class. The Romans, for example, knew about water wheels but never deployed them because they had slaves to do the work. The difference was worldview: Christians recognized the dignity of work and the equal dignity of each person. This and this alone provided the motivation for harnessing technology to benefit the workers, not just the elites, and in the process laid the economic foundation for the rise of the West. [13]

Christianity and Progress

Some authors have suggested that scientific and technological progress began after western civilization got past Christianity and its “other-worldly” emphasis. Biblical Christianity, however, is both “this-worldly” and “other-worldly”. God called His Creation “good.” God cares about our lives and actions here and now. To suggest that nature or our bodies are somehow meaningless or evil is Greek dualism, not Christian understanding. Recognizing God as Creator of all, we can use, enjoy, and study the Creation, giving thanks to the Father for all.

Because of its “otherworldliness,” Christianity has been accused of being a major obstacle to human progress. Such analysis neglects history, particularly the role of believers in the development of science and mathematics.

Christianity is intertwined with human progress in two major ways:

1. Positive - The growth of Christianity parallels the progress of several primitive cultures (as superstitions give way to science and development).
2. Negative - Human progress as measured by economic or technological growth does not necessarily imply moral progress or advancement in the knowledge of God.

Christianity has rightly been linked to the progress of Western civilization. A linear (as opposed to cyclical) view of history and an emphasis on the value of persons, ideas that accompanied the growth of Christianity, are two key factors in human progress. In general, progress should be expected to accompany the spread of the Gospel, particularly as people are liberated from poverty and from limiting superstitions.

The concept of human progress actually had its roots in Christian thought:

- God has given us intellects and a world to explore.
- Meeting human needs and improving the lives of others are proper tasks for a Christian.
- Scientific discovery and innovation are valuable human endeavors (and should point us towards God.)
- As the Gospel is proclaimed and people are transformed, the world should improve.

North links human progress specifically to Biblical concepts: [14]

- Common grace is bestowed on all mankind.
- From Noah’s day to the present we see cultural progress.
- All of our wealth, knowledge, and power come from God.
- “Progress culturally, economically, and politically is intimately linked to the extension and application of Biblical law.” [15]
- God shows favor to His people.

Progress and its Curses

Steven Garber writes-

There is no golden moment historically. Pre-modern, modern, postmodern: every age is marked by graces and groans. If there were curses in the pre-modern world-little access to medical care and education, inadequate housing and plumbing, no electricity-then there were gifts too; in sum, a world of much less fragmentation. If there were strains built into the modern world-the disruption of our relationship to people and places being one of the most far reaching...

Then there were advantages too, such as life-saving medicines, near-universal education and widespread religious freedoms. The Enlightenment's crowning achievement is what we have known as the modern world; again, tragically and poignantly called "that murderous, mechanized 20th-century" by Percy. Scientific advances? Yes. The experiments of Nazi doctors, no. Electricity? Yes. A neon culture, no. Freedom of speech? Yes. The pornographic world, no. [16]

In his wide-reaching book *The Ascent of Humanity* [17] Charles Eisenstein explores the idea of human progress in terms of increasing technology being linked to an increased separation from nature. The goal of science and technology is to provide increasing understanding and control of nature.

Eisenstein identifies a series of progressing Ages: The Age of Unification, the Age of Science, the Age of the Machine, and the Age of Separation.

Eisenstein is correct in identifying our separation from nature and from each other, but links the cause to technology instead of to the Fall. Eisenstein's goal would be a unification of all things in nature, a New Age style oneness. He urges a return to nature and to a basic animistic religion.

Conclusions

When we talk about the progress of civilization we examine technical advances and economic improvement. This is different from a narrative of *human progress*, which suggests that humans are continually becoming better, particularly through science. This view of humanity is all-encompassing and totally inconsistent with the story given in the Bible (creation-fall-redemption).

The humanistic version of progress suggests that human effort alone, particularly as it is aided by science, will bring about human betterment in every area, but social progress without spiritual progress is not what society needs, nor is it glorifying to God.

Walter Anderson suggests two different "scenarios" for progress: [18]

The first kind of progress is the kind most people think of today when they use the word: continued expansion of the world economy with increasing output of goods and services, rapid development of all kinds of new high-tech wonders...

The second kind of progress...is progress along the psychological lines we have explored...movement beyond the modern self toward more multifaceted, changeable, or decentralized identities and personalities, or even toward the no-self consciousness sometimes called enlightenment or liberation.

Human progress grew out of the Christian worldview. Progress, in general, is a good thing, moving towards better health and communication. It becomes a problem when

- We don't consider the consequences of our development;
- We think our human efforts alone can create all necessary advancement;

- We make progress itself our goal or our idol.

How do we keep the right balance, particularly as technical people who value progress?

1. Don't get distracted. We're told to seek first the Kingdom of God, not the progress of civilization. An earthly utopia, a futuristic Jetson's world (old animated tv show) is not our goal. Unless we suffer a devastating war or an economic collapse there will typically be some kind of technical progress from year to year.
2. Focus on people: Make sure that everyone gets to hear the Gospel. Heal the sick. Feed the hungry. Meet real human needs. Progress should benefit everyone.
3. Be faithful in your own work and ministry. Look for human flourishing, rather than nifty gadgets.

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