WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

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It is a fluke that we live in a time of rapid technological change.

I have read that ancient Egypt hardly changed at all from 3100 BCE to 1000 BCE. Someone transplanted from the beginning of that era to its end would hardly have noticed. And while I do not want to be like that patent-office clerk around 1900 who prophesied that most patents had now been granted (no, it was not the patent-office clerk named Einstein), nevertheless, scientific discovery will some day slow. Maybe not for a thousand years, but eventually it will slow. Once it does, then we will settle into 5 billion years of slow to no economic growth. (The Sun is predicted to burn out in 5 billion years.)

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Think of the technological advances now in development: autonomous vehicles, AI, robotics, biotechnologies, nanotechnologies, fusion power. The world is going to look very different in a few decades (not necessarily for the better).

The white power structure erected on colonialism in the last 5 centuries is crumbling. White haves are fearful, and white have-nots are feeling aggrieved. Add to this the wealth inequality that has widened since the 1970s, and the world’s turn to populism (which, unchecked, tends to become fascism) is understandable.

(I haven’t seen it explicitly postulated that populism turns into fascism. But I base the statement on my observing authoritarian actions of populist leaders in Venezuela, Brazil, Hungary, Poland, India, the Philippines, and the US. Not to mention historical cases [Hitler in the 1930s, Péron in the 1950s, etc.]. I am not suggesting that populism inevitably turns into fascism; but, left unchecked, populism tends to become fascism.)

Of the seven traditional world-religious cultures—Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—those in decline appear to be Judaism (only 16 million\*), Buddhism (only 535 million), Confucianism, and Taoism (the latter two now under communism). The winners seem to be Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism.

(\* The Nazis killed 6 million Jews from 1939-45 [plus 5 million other prisoners]. Of the 16 million Jews [0.2% of humans], The US has the most: 7.6 million [as of 2020]. Israel is second: 7.1 million [as of 2022]. The US and Israel together include 92% of Jews.)

The next billion or so humans will likely belong to the latter three groups. In 2015, the Pew Research Center noted that Islam is the fasted-growing religion. It gave these estimates for growth in population, 2010-2050:

Muslims: 73%

Christians: 35%

Hindus: 34%

Jews: 16%

Buddhists: -0.3%

By 2100, Muslims will exceed Christians. For two reasons:

Muslims have a younger population. (The 2010 median age of Muslims was 23. The 2010 median age of non-Muslims was 30).

Muslims have more children. (Muslims have 3.1 children per woman; non-Muslims have 2.3). (In sub-Saharan Africa: 5.6 for Muslims, 4.5 for non-Muslims.)

In fact, it looks as if the world’s future will consist, not of 200 nation states, but of cultural (and largely regional) power blocks. Present-day populations and regions are:

Christianity: currently 2.4 billion: largely Europe, North and South America, and sub-Saharan Africa

Islam: 1.8 billion: North Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, some of Southeast Asia

Hinduism: 1.1 billion: India (1.37 billion Indians are only 13% Muslim and 2% Christian)

secularism: 1.5 billion: 1.4 billion Chinese (where Marxism has fused with Confucianism) and 145 million Russians

A clash of civilizations, à la Samuel Huntington, may be the dominant fact of life in the 21st century. Perhaps, in World War III, the religious blocks (Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism) will ally against the secular blocks (China and Russia).

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But differences seem inevitably to syncretize. Eventually there will be a major turning point in world history: the turn from regional cultures to a global culture. Eventually there will be one world culture with regional variations. I’m pessimistic in the short run (21st and 22nd centuries) and optimistic in the long run (23rd and beyond).

There are three possible outcomes of the turn to a global culture.

(1) A return to a world where culture will be ruled by a faith.

The Muslim world and the Hindu world both show signs of returning to a pre-modern condition, where one faith prevails. (Hindu nationalism is called Hindutva.) If Trumpism triumphs, it will ensure the dominance in America of white Anglo-Saxon Protestantism.

(2) A separation of church and state.

The Byzantine Empire opted for Caesaropapism, identifying (or at least allying) Church and state.

Western culture, by contrast, is based on “the Gelasian doctrine” (so-called because the doctrine appeared in a letter of Pope Gelasius I to the Byzantine emperor in 494 CE). According to this idea, the Church is superior to the state, since the Church is responsible for everyone’s permanent (eternal) condition, and the state is responsible for everyone’s temporary (earthly) condition. But the doctrine also “implies that the priestly authority is inferior to the secular authority in the secular domain.” (“*Famuli vestrae pietatis*.” *Wikipedia*)

European civilization developed the distinction between Church and state in the “doctrine of the two swords”: “two separate but co-equal powers . . .” (“Two Swords, Doctrine of the.” *The Oxford Dictionary of the Middle Ages*. Oxford: OUP, 2012. Web.)

The separation of church and state came to full fruition in the Enlightenment, upon which (along with the Reformation) American culture is based.

(3) A completely secular culture.

This will result if communism (China and Russia) prevails. The purging of faith perspectives from a completely secular culture can be previewed in China’s treatment of the Muslim Uyghurs (over one million now “concentrated” in “re-education centers”):

The demolition or “rectification” of mosques and shrines is being ramped up across China, with 16,000 damaged or destroyed in Xinjiang alone, according to the ASPI. Cemeteries have also been bulldozed, leaving bone fragments protruding from the russet earth. In Linxia, Gansu province, a city once nicknamed Little Mecca, the elaborate dome and minarets of Tiejia mosque were demolished last year for seeming too “Arabic,” say locals, and the call to prayer forbidden as a “public nuisance.” Although the elderly can still worship, police bar children from entering the mosque. In the Silk Road oasis town of Hotan, the main mosque has been razed and cabbages now grow in its place. “It’s a wretched thing,” says a passing neighbor. AI-powered facial-recognition cameras enable predictive policing in what Amnesty International calls a “dystopian hellscape.” Wearing a slightly longer dress, or forgetting to shave, is enough to flag the surveillance algorithm, according to recently leaked internal files, possibly resulting in detention. (Campbell, Charlie. “How Beijing Is Redefining What It Means to Be Chinese, from Xinjiang to Inner Mongolia.” *Time*.*com*. 12 July 2021. 17 July 2021. Web.)

Tibetan Buddhists fare little better.

. . . there’s been a renewed focus on separating “religion from life.” Tibetan society is divided into a “grid system” of five to 10 households, each with a nominated representative responsible for political activities forced to keep track of individuals via an integrated electronic system. Cadres are installed in every monastery or religious institution, while “convenience police posts” at road junctions track the populace. Across Tibet, “transformation through education” facilities targeting monks and nuns for “correction” have produced reports of torture and sexual abuse that mirror testimony from the Xinjiang camps. Inmates are forced to denounce the Dalai Lama and learn CCP [Chinese Communist Party] propaganda by rote in a bid to obliterate memory of a time before party control. (Ibid.)

Because of advances in science and technology from 1600-2000, current Western civilization is at the forefront of the turn from regional cultures to a global culture. The global culture a century from now may well be predominantly Western culture. I certainly hope so: I want human rights and democracy to prevail. But surveillance and tracking technologies developed in the last 30 years increasingly favor a totalitarian state.

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This would not be the first time in world history that a technological change destroyed the established order and replaced it with something worse. Here is an example.

By the 1200s BCE, the Greeks had established a bronze-age culture. Each major city had a palace for the local king, and the king and his nobles controlled the surrounding countryside; so the bronze-age culture was a network of city-states. Wars were fought based on bronze weaponry. Since bronze is an alloy of copper and tin, and tin was scarce (it had to be imported, for example, from mines in Cornwall), only the aristocracy could afford such weapons.

Then iron smelting improved, so that iron weapons were almost as good as bronze. Moreover, tin imports were disrupted, so that bronze weapons became too costly. There was thus a shift from weaponry in the hands of the few to weaponry in the hands of the many. Huge infantry armies with iron weapons overwhelmed the chariot-based aristocratic armies with bronze weapons.

The result was a collapse of civilization—not just in Greece, but throughout the Near East, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Balkans. This initiated the “Greek Dark Ages.” Palaces were razed, cities shrank, literacy became rare; the population reverted to living in small, independent villages. The Greek Dark Ages lasted for centuries, from 1100-750 BCE. (The Trojan War was fought in the late Bronze Age, the 1200s; but its story was committed to writing at the end of the Greek Dark Ages, around 750, in Homer’s *Iliad*.)

Analogously, technological developments in the last 40 years—computers, social media, drones, 3D-printed weapons, surveillance technologies (like facial recognition), AI, nanotechnologies, genetics editing, etc.—threaten the established Western world order and may usher in another type of dark age: an era of totalitarian control. It is difficult to see how complete surveillance by the few, with all privacy eliminated, could ever be overturned by a populace wanting to foment revolution. (China now has technology that allows it even to read the emotions that its citizens are experiencing.) Hence, a coming totalitarian order may last for thousands of years.

As a Christian, I believe that God is good rather than indifferent or evil, and that good will ultimately triumph. Jesus gave the assurance that, against the church, the gates of hell will not prevail (Matt 16:18). But that does not preclude the possibility that, for a time, life on earth may be hell on earth—for thousands, or hundreds of thousands, of years.

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Estimates are that 47% of current jobs will be replaced through automation by 2050. Once manual-labor jobs are eliminated, the move to a leisure economy will be just another stage along the spectrum:

 agriculture → manufacturing → services → leisure.

Will we, at some point, all live like philosopher kings, reclining while our robots serve us?

And what will happen in a few years (some estimate 15; I hope I live to see it) when fusion reactors come online? They, as “controlled suns,” will provide such a superabundance of energy that energy will essentially be free. Why not at that time subsidize philosophy, music, theater—what was that other one? Oh yes: theology. (Whether economists will still be useful is to be determined.)

When will increases in productivity no longer be the end goal of our efforts? Think of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (proposed in 1943):



self-fulfillment needs

self-actualization (achieving one’s full potential, including creative activities)

psychological needs

esteem needs (prestige, feeling of accomplishment)

belongingness and love needs (intimate relationships, friends)

basic needs

safety needs (security, safety)

physiological needs (food, water, warmth, rest)

Once we’ve provided the basic needs for everyone, won’t life consist of meeting our psychological and self-fulfillment needs? Look out along the timeline: a hundred years from now? A thousand? Ten thousand? I can imagine humans, at some point, being born, living pleasant lives worshiping God, then dying. Generation after generation. World without end. Amen.