1 The Christian hope and the scope of salvation in Christ

In the penultimate chapter of the Bible, in the opening statement of the very last speech God makes in the whole of the Christian Scriptures, God says: "Behold I am making all things new" (Rev 21:5). The prophet sees the old heavens and the old earth - the universe as it now is - passing away, and new heavens and a new earth, God's new creation of all things, coming into being. It is not that God replaces the present world with another one. God makes the old new. God makes all things new. The God who here calls himself the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end of his creation (21:6), the God who created all things in the beginning now brings all things redeemed and renewed into his eternal glory. This is how the story the Bible tells from Genesis to Revelation, the story we summarize in the Christian creeds, the story we live and take part in as Christians, the great story of all things that gives the world its Christian meaning, is to end: in the fulfilment of God's purposes for all things. "Behold I am making all things new": this is the happy ending of all happy endings, the happy ending beyond all the tragic endings, the happily ever after of all creation.

The language of making old things new is one of the ways the Bible speaks about salvation. Paul uses it of our own salvation as individual Christians: "If anyone is in Christ - there is a new creation" (2 Cor 5:17). But his use of the language in that way is to remind us that our own salvation as individuals is part of something very much greater. James makes this clear when he says that God has given us birth (the new birth into the new creation) so that we may be a kind of firstfruits of his creation (1:18). When people come to faith and find themselves in Christ, there is the new creation of all things beginning to happen. Salvation does not, as it were, single us out from the rest of God's creation. God's purpose is to save us in our solidarity with the rest of God's creation. So in our experience of the salvation we find in Jesus Christ we are discovering our place in the whole world as it will be when all evil and suffering, transience and death are over and done with, and all things live in the life of God eternally.

We might call this universal salvation, except that term tends to be used for the view (not the traditional Christian view) that every human individual will necessarily be saved in the end. That is a different issue, which I'm not discussing now: by using univerdsalistic language I'm certainly not intending to affirm the necessary salvation of every human individual. What I have described might therefore be better called holistic salvation. In other words, salvation encompasses every aspect of God's creation. Salvation is of whole human persons: body, soul and spirit. Salvation is of humans in our community with each other, not as isolated individuals. Salvation is of the whole of God's creation, not just of humans. We humans are saved in our inextricable solidarity with the rest of God's creation. God's renewal of all things is the redemption and fulfilment of human history and also the redemption and fulfilment of nature and the final reconciliation of the two. But
although this has always been the orthodox faith of the Christian mainstream, Christians have often had difficulty believing it. Various intellectual and religious tendencies within the church and outside the church have constantly inclined people to restrict the scope of salvation. Gnosticism and Platonism sowed deep suspicion of the bodily and material aspects of creation. Salvation must be of human spirits, freed from their temporary embodiment. And because our bodies are what obviously connect us with the rest of creation, spiritual salvation from bodies, leaving aside our bodies, has usually meant spiritual salvation from nature too. The material world, all God's non-human creatures, all their beauty and wonder, are considered disposable, serving their purpose merely as a temporary hotel for human spirits on their way to their true home in a non-material heaven. We need to ask ourselves whether this non-orthodox but very influential view of the natural world as temporary and disposable by God has not encouraged us to treat it as already disposable by us.

In the church's struggle with Gnosticism in the early centuries, it was the wholeness of Christian salvation, including the resurrection of the body and the redemption of all things, which had to be affirmed and was strongly affirmed by the church of that period. We need to recover it again today, when it is still the case that alternative views of salvation fall short of this all-encompassing Christ hope of the renewal of all things. For, although salvation is largely a Christian term, there are powerful secular myths of salvation which have shaped our society in the modern period and still exercise influence. Without exception such secular myths offer salvation only of a considerably restricted scope. They aspire to replace the God who makes all things new, but prove incompetent to do so. And for this reason they also prove more destructive than salvific.

2 The decline of progress

We live at a critical juncture in the history of western society. As the third millennium approaches, western society finds itself bereft of a story to live by, lacking a worldview which can give meaning and hope for the world and the future. From within the churches, most of us are probably most conscious of the rapid decline of religious belief. But there is another kind of belief which has declined as steadily during this century as religion: the belief in progress. By that I mean the myth which reads human history as a progressive advance from barbarism to utopia. This is the myth by which the whole modern age, from the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century onwards, has lived. It is the myth which has fired all the great projects of modern western humanity: education, science, technology, imperialism, democracy, unlimited economic growth. All the continuous and constantly increasing changes of modern western society over two hundred years have been sustained by this myth. We have lived with them and lived through them, optimistically, enthusiastically, taking the rough with the smooth because we believed them to be the route to utopia. This myth I think we can, with some confidence, pronounce dead, though its influence persists.

Modern secular society - though for this reason postmodern society is a better description - now lives not only after the death of God, but also after the death of the myth of progress. The ghost of progress still haunts us, especially in the corridors of power and, disturbingly, in the laboratories dedicated to biotechnological research, but it is the ghost of a dead ideology. It lingers in people's minds - not least Christian
people's minds - more as an unexamined assumption than as a working faith. Celebration of the millennium, the year 2000, might, one could have supposed, have given it a new lease of life, but as far as I can see this has not happened. We shall ask in a moment why the myth of progress has declined so much in our century, and consider also the significance of the year 2000.

First we should consider how, as a myth of salvation, it compares and contrasts with the Christian one. I will make two points. (1) Progress is a myth of immanent salvation. This means that salvation emerges from the process of human history. It is history itself which contains the dynamic and the resources for a steady advance towards utopia, and the goal of the process, whether it is envisaged as a final utopian condition, a posthistorical age, or as simply endless improvement without limit, is a product of the process itself. By contrast, the traditional Christian view placed its hope for eschatological salvation in the transcendent God, who is beyond the world and its history as well as within it, the God from whose transcendent possibilities the world was first created and whose power to renew his creation far transcends the immanent capacities of creation itself. In the Christian view the new creation in which all things will find their goal will not be the product of human history, but the fresh creative act of the transcendent God, who, of course, fulfils the possibilities inherent in creation but also far surpasses them.

(2) If, for the myth of progress, human history is the sole vehicle of salvation, the principal means of salvation is the technological domination of nature. Progress means (not only but especially) humanity's progressive liberation of ourselves from nature and the progressive refashioning of nature into a world we have made to serve our ends. The whole scientific-technological project of the modern age has been a kind of new creation, a re-creating of the world by its godlike human masters. What happened in the development of the myth of progress was really that the Christian hope for all-encompassing salvation was reduced to human history, with its limited scope and capacities, while at the same time the historical process was invested with much of the transcendent expectations of the Christian hope. Human history was burdened with the impossible dream of achieving a new creation. Such a dream was always bound to founder fatally on the real limits of the present creation, which is all it has to work with.

Why has the myth of progress declined from its heyday in the nineteenth century to its slow death in the later twentieth century? The course of events in our century has simply refuted it. There are above all the horrors of twentieth-century history - 'the most bestial period in human history,' as George Steiner calls it. The two World Wars, the Holocaust, Stalin's reign of terror, Vietnam, and the killing-fields of Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda, and Kosovo are merely the better known, representative instances of the massively unprecedented scale of human violence in which literally hundreds of millions have died. These horrors do more than demonstrate the lack of progress. They make it impossible to view the evils and sufferings of history as justified by history's goal. If these horrors - children burned alive in Auschwitz or buried alive in Cambodia - are the price of progress, then progress is not progress. What utopia could ever compensate for these?

But there is more. Not only has the technology on which progress depends been deeply implicated in these horrors - as well as even worse in prospect: nuclear
weapons and ever more sophisticated biological weapons. Not only has the myth of progress itself been the justification for some of the horrors, justifying the eggs broken for the sake of the utopian omelette to come. Even many of the changes which seemed most unequivocally beneficial for human life have come to threaten human life, not to mention the rest of life. Coming up against the ecological limits of life on this planet, for which the modern project with its godlike aspirations never sufficiently allowed, progress has turned against us. Yet its momentum - technological and economic - seems unstoppable. The myth of progress has worked its way so deeply into the warp and woof of our society - and more or less the whole world now - that whether we believe in it or not seems to make little difference to its now destructive course. It is the idol that once created holds its creators in thrall.

Did it have to be like this? In a very important sense, yes it did. There have been more and less benign versions of the myth of progress, more and less promethean versions. Perhaps the real benefits of the modern project could have been had with fewer of its calamities. But the disastrous error lay in the concept of a salvation immanent in human history. The critical question is: Can human history be itself the source and vehicle of salvation? Can human history in and of itself overcome the experienced evils of life and fulfil the aspirations of humanity for qualitatively better life? A negative answer is required if we take on board the following three criticisms of the modern myth of progress, essentially criticisms made from postmodern and green (not necessarily Christian) perspectives:

(1) In practice, the myth of progress, despite its association with egalitarian and democratic ideologies, turns out to be elitist. It identifies progress with particular cultural projects - those of the modern west - and benefits only those in the vanguard of historical progress so defined. The dead are forgotten. Those who suffered the evils of the past have paid the price for a possible utopia only their descendents can enjoy. Even those whose suffering now is beyond help must be left aside. The myth of progress takes a necessarily hardhearted view of the dead and the wretched of the earth, turning resolutely away from them lest its bright-eyed optimism be dimmed. If human history is the source and vehicle of salvation, this must be the case.

(2) Therefore the myth of progress has functioned as an ideology of domination. This is the postmodern critique, sometimes exaggerated but unquestionably true to a significant degree. The myth of progress has served to legitimate the exercise of power: imperial and communist regimes until recently, now primarily the west's economic domination over the third world, the power of the affluent over the poor, even the power of men over women. Since progress is identified with the values of some, the domination of these over others is justified. Progress is an ideology justifying history's victors, neglecting history's victims. If human history is the source and vehicle of salvation, this must be the case.

(3) Finally, the myth of progress has also meant the destructive domination of nature. Nature is subjugated and absorbed into history. Its only role is to be the raw material from which human history fashions its utopia. Again, if human history is the source and vehicle of salvation, this must be the case.

These are the fatal flaws in the ideology by which the modern age has lived. Pointing them out does not mean withdrawing sympathy for the highest ideals of the
progressivist dream. The three goals of the French Revolution were "liberty, equality and fraternity" are also Christian ideals, drawn indeed from the Christian tradition. But note what has happened to them: fraternity and equality went the way of Marxist regimes which claimed to achieve them by brutal suppression of liberty. The poor are now getting poorer while the rich get richer, and fraternity has little place in the progressive individualization of humanity that freedom has come to entail. Of course, the modern age has produced real benefits which hopefully can survive it: political democracy, human rights, a new sensitivity to human suffering, medical and technological developments of real human worth. But these must be detached from the ideology of progress, undergirded and promoted on other grounds, if they are to survive the demise of progress.

3. Intimations of the decline of progress: (a) the year 2000

To plot accurately the contemporary status of what has been a centuries-long and civilization-wide ideological influence, as the myth of progress has been, is a delicate and difficult matter. In order, in some sense, to gauge and to illustrate the contemporary sense of the decline of progress and its gradually emerging, shapeless aftermath, we shall offer two very different approaches, each no more than a revealing fragment.

The first is the arrival of the third millennium. The churches in Britain, at least, have worked hard to highlight the supposedly Christian meaning of the year, but with little success, it seems. In truth, the real significance of the year, if there is one, has always been secular - more precisely progressivist. It was the Enlightenment myth of progress which made measuring our progress in centuries appealing and the ends of centuries irresistible occasions for celebrating progress, taking stock, and looking with eager optimism into the dawning century ahead. Such things depend, of course, on counting our years in Anno Domini dates and the passage of centuries since Christ. But although of Christian origin, thinking AD was appropriate, perhaps even necessary, to the modern myth of historical progress. In place of the reigns of kings or the passage of generations or the other ways in which people used to measure and divide historical time, the AD era allows us to think of the history of the whole world measured in regular, quantitatively equal periods: decades, centuries, even millennia. With AD dating it became possible to situate one's own time within a sequence of regular periods marking the forward march of history into an unlimited future. It is no accident, surely, that the dominance of AD dates in western consciousness of time and history occurred coincidentally not, as one might expect, with the christianization of western society, but rather with the beginnings of its modernization.

The fact is that until the seventeenth century few people noticed the year-date Anno Domini. Few seventh-century people, for example, knew that they lived in the seventh century. It is true that there was, as we have often been told recently, some anxiety and excitement accompanying the end of the first millennium AD, but only because ordinary people heard of the special significance some scholars attached to this date. Even when dating by the Christian era became common in official usage, ordinary people did not think in such terms. They did not use AD dates in letters or conversation. Our sense of living in a particular period defined as the umpteenth century probably only began in the sixteenth century, while it was the growing use of calendars in the seventeenth century that spread the typically modern sense of AD
time. And still only gradually did transitions from an old to a new century come to be treated as appropriate points at which to look backwards and forwards, taking stock of the point reached in humanity's temporal advance. And it was only at the end of the nineteenth century, the great century of progress, at the apogee of the modern grand narrative of historical progress, that the approach of a new century provoked a nearly obsessive assessment of the progress.

For an ideology that found such potent symbolism in the transition to a new century, the arrival of a new millennium ought to be an event of extraordinary excitement and significance. Indeed, the lure of the third millennium was already felt at the end of the nineteenth century, when a columnist for the Spectator wrote:

The fact that we are approaching the end of another century of our era, strongly affects the popular imagination. It is supposed that, in some undefined way, we must be better or worse merely because of this chronological fact. Were it the end, not of the nineteenth [century], but of the twentieth, we should be still more excited. Even now, the idea of that Annum Mirabilis, the Year of Grace 2000, begins to affect us. We feel that if we could live to witness its advent, we should witness an immense event. We should almost expect something to happen in the Cosmos, so that we might read the great date written on the skies.¹


The author's tone is a little ironic, but the mood he reflects is the famous fin de siècle mood of 1890s Europe. If fin de siècle - the end of the nineteenth century - created such an outpouring of angst and excitement, what, he not unreasonably wonders, would fin de millénaire - the approach of the third millennium - be like?

The fin de siècle mood of the 1890s entailed a process of assessment of the progress of civilization, at the end of a century whose elite, at least, considered it indisputably the century of progress, when civilization had advanced more than in the rest of human history. The mood was an unstable mixture of optimism and pessimism, the assessment a kind of weighing of progress and decadence in the balance. On the one hand, Max Nordau lamented the feeling of imminent perdition which he detected among intellectuals (‘vague qualms of the Dusk of Nations, in which all suns and all stars are gradually waning, and mankind with all its institutions and creations is perishing in the midst of a dying world’²), while, on the other hand, Frederic Harrison expressed the more prevalent, upbeat anticipation of a twentieth century propelled by the accelerating momentum of the nineteenth into a qualitatively better era:

We are on the threshold of a great time, even if our time itself is not great. In science, in religion, in social organization, we all know what things are in the

air.... It is the age of great expectation and unwearied striving after better things.\textsuperscript{3} Enthusiasm was not uncritical: there were end-of-century failures which required to be surmounted in the better future. So, rather in the spirit of new year resolutions, some writers offered new century resolutions.

Alfred Russel Wallace assessed the past century in a book called *The Wonderful Century* published in 1898 (notice, incidentally, how unlikely it is that a book published in 1998 could describe the twentieth century in such a title). He catalogued the extraordinary technological advances of the century, but castigated his contemporaries for neglecting hypnotism and phrenology while taking up the harmful practice of vaccination.\textsuperscript{4} More significantly (so it seems with hindsight), he deplored the militarism which harnessed technological advance to the development of ever Deadlier machines of war.\textsuperscript{5}

But the dogmatic optimism of the century was not easily crushed. Alexander Sutherland, writing a year later under the title 'The natural decline of warfare,' argued that a trajectory of progress over recent centuries pointed to the elimination of warfare in the not too distant future. At the end of the century, he pointed out, it was already the case that absolute peace reigned among civilized nations, though not yet on the borders of the civilized world\textsuperscript{6} (the Anglo-Boer war began that same year, 1899). This is the kind of thinking which lay in the background to the devastating effect which the First World War was to have on progressivist optimism just a few years into the new century on which so much expectation had so recently been focused.

If the sense that the turn of the millennium ought to be a *fin de siècle* to the power of ten is what accounts for the rather synthetic excitement we saw in the run-up to it, it is clear that it has not in fact turned out to be of any such significance. There have been some books which took the turn of the millennium as a cue for a back-and-forth-looking assessment of where we are and how we should be aiming to get where we wish have been appearing steadily,\textsuperscript{7} but even the optimists are highly chastened, while secular pessimism focuses not merely on decadence, as in the 1890s,


\textsuperscript{4}Townshend, 'The Fin de Siècle,' 202.

\textsuperscript{5}Townshend, 'The Fin de Siècle,' 208-209.

\textsuperscript{6}Townshend, 'The Fin de Siècle,' 207-208.

but on truly apocalyptic danger. One these stock-taking books, called *The Age of Anxiety* (1996), aimed to encounter the 'millennial anxiety,' the fear of the future which its authors felt characterized British society in the 1990s. The book's authors themselves offer varying degrees, none too extreme, of optimism and pessimism. They take the anxiety seriously, and none proposes a return to the ebullient optimism of the nineteenth-century myth, on which the editors comment: 'For perfectibility read corruptibility, for belief in progress read naïveté.' It is no accident that the scientist among the authors retains more than his co-authors do of the nineteenth-century's faith in progress, science-based as that was to a large extent. He ends by exhorting us, 'if the going gets really anxious,' to try to believe that science reassures. But he would probably not be surprised if most of his readers failed to believe this. Anxiety about science - focused on the potentially Franksteinesque aspects of biotechnology - has surely never been greater. Much of the media attention to the millennium has in fact been backward-looking, in the postmodern style of history-as-heritage for educational entertainment, rather than in the old progressivist mode of tracing past progress from barbarism to modernity in order to draw inspiration and direction for future advance.

The difference from the 1890s resembles a paradigm shift. Then it was a matter of drawing up a balance sheet of successes and failures of the century: credit for building the railways, debit for stockpiling armaments, and so on. The difference now is not just that many find our balance sheet to be more or less in overall debit. Nor is it just that people disagree about the evaluation of many changes (is the decline of the traditional family progress or regress?). The most disturbing thing is that progress itself has turned threatening. The exponential continuation of the line of nineteenth-century progress is putting the future of the planet itself in the balance. The dominant myth of the whole modern age - the idea of historical progress - has not only failed us but turned against us. The more this is recognized, the more the fin de millénaire ought surely to be a time to assess not progress, but the myth of progress itself. Instead we have seen neither an optimistic celebration of twentieth-century progress nor a search for a serious alternative to the failed myth of modernity, merely a postmodern and consumerist party, whose transient delights never quite lived up to expectation and have already, before the end of the year, drifted out of most people's consciousness almost entirely. The damp squib the millennium has proved illustrates how far we have already come from the ideology of progress, how far contemporary culture is a world of the present without meaningful past or future.

4. Intimations of the decline of progress (b) a story of the approaching end of time

Novelists are sometimes better than social scientists or theologians at discerning the condition of contemporary culture. So let's consider John Updike's novel, *Toward the*

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*End of Time* (1997), a richly imaginative exploration of the contemporary sense of time in the aftermath of progress.

The novel is set in the year 2020, a few years after a nuclear war between China and the USA has devastated large parts of America and even larger parts of Asia. Its effect on the area north of Boston where the narrator, Ben Turnbull, lives in retirement is largely indirect, as in the breakdown of law and order owing to the collapse of central government. But the sense that human civilization has gone, perhaps irrevocably, into steep decline pervades the book. Its symbol is the huge abandoned space satellite that hangs in the sky like a second moon. It was put up before the war, but after the war governments were unable to maintain the shuttle ships to and from it. By means of its surviving television link with earth, the deaths, one by one, of the members of the space colony were viewed on earth. The fate of this second moon perhaps presages the fate of humanity on earth itself (36). From the narrator's perspective it seems that the decline of humanity should come as no surprise. Already in the twentieth century the Holocaust had 'ended forever Europe's concept of itself as civilised and of the Western world as proceeding under a benign special Providence' (20). In place of providence there is biology - not the optimistic, anthropocentric evolutionism that accompanied the rise of the idea of historical progress, but the evolutionary process that owes the human species no particular favours and is more likely to ensure its replacement than its survival. Once 'the hominids were just a two-footed furry footnote lost amid the thundering herds of perissodactyls. Why does the thought make us happy?' (53). *Homo sapiens* took over the world by wholesale slaughter of other species, including other hominids (27-28, 211); now that humanity is in decline through turning its slaughtering instinct on itself, it is only natural that other species should move in again (53). Nature is resilient, but human beings only a phase in its aeonic process. As the dinosaurs were dominant once, then the mammals, and humanity recently, so perhaps the future belongs to the metallobioforms. The evolutionary process favours the continuance of life but is indifferent to the fate of humanity as such. Flushing a dead millipede down the toilet, Ben asks: 'Until the flush toilet, did men have any true concept of the end of the world?' (163).

The metallobioforms are species of inorganic life which have been evolving, unnoticed until recently, since the early stages of the industrial revolution, when the chemical and radioactive conditions produced by some industrial processes gave rise to minute metal species. Since then they have been 'biding their time as did our own mammalian ancestors during the long age of the dinosaurs' (110), growing larger and perfecting their ability to destroy any organic creatures, shredding them like chain saws. The metallobioforms lurk in the background of the novel, a menace to the human future resulting, ironically, from humanity's own technological progress. As an image they combine the sense that human technological development has turned against humanity with evolution's indifference to human survival. Unlike the superhumans of the future often depicted in science fiction, the metallobioforms are not super-intelligent post-humans into which humans have intentionally evolved or even artificial mechanical intelligences of human creation. They are an accidental by-product of human technology, primitive, mindless and destructive, as human technology itself has become.
Ben, who reads the *Scientific American* rather than novels, preferring scientific cosmology with its utter lack of human meaning to the no more meaningful triviality and repetitiveness of human experience, scatters his narrative with scientific and pseudo-scientific speculations about time and the cosmos. He plays with the quantum theory fantasy of a time line that is constantly branching into other possible worlds in addition to our own (16-17). He knows about the anthropic principle (151-152) and Frank Tippler's bizarre vision of a kind of meta-technological general resurrection at the end of cosmic history (101). Ben is the twentieth-century man for whom such scientific myths and meta-narratives substitute for religious ones, offering not meaning but the dismal substitute for meaning that is all there is to be had. They serve to set the mere year of his life that the novel records in its temporal context of the many billions of years of cosmic history from the Big Bang to the Big Crunch, as well as against the background of the evolutionary history of life on this planet, and of recorded human history, which is evoked in a series of historical flash-backs to events around the three turns of the millennium from 1000 BC to 1000 AD. The novel succeeds in thus ranging over all time while keeping its egocentric focus on Ben's close observation of his own decaying life. The time of the novel is cosmic, natural, historical, but scarcely at all the organizational clock time which Ben left behind when he stopped commuting to work.

The dominant image of time in the novel is of senescence, decay, entropy and futility. Ben's own aging parallels that of 'our dwindled, senile world' (40), and the decay of the world anticipates the entropic process of collapse to which the whole universe is ultimately destined: 'The very short view alone is bearable' (329). Ben's 'unfocussed dread of time' (3), with which the novel opens, dominates the mood of the whole book. Time is the arrow whose unstoppable and irreversible course leads inexorably from Big Bang to Big Crunch (214). But on the other hand, another image of time is the annual cycle of the seasons, with its recurrent evidence of nature's fecundity and resilience. The novel takes place over precisely a year, whose passing is meticulously and beautifully described in the constant observations of changing nature, especially in Ben's garden. There are glimpses of hope in this: 'Men die, but mankind is as tough and resilient as the living wood that groans and sighs outside my window.' Perhaps in this new dark age, new technologies will develop as they did in the so-called Dark Ages of Europe (278). But Ben is little cheered even by his ten grandchildren, who represent his biological after-life. They are no real substitute for lost religious hopes of personal immortality (74), and he fears in any case a future unimaginably worse than the past for them: 'The doughboys who swarmed out of the trenches into clouds of mustard gas had geniuses for generals by comparison' (78).

Ben had retired to his country home 'to get back to nature and to my own human basics before saying goodbye to everything' (5). He does appreciate the intricate beauties of nature now that he feels his time for observing them is fast diminishing. His own human basics turn out to be his carnality. His one escape from the relentless process of senescence is in the exercise of his sexual potency, intimately described in self-indulgent detail resembling the rich descriptions of nature in which the novel abounds. It is the way he shares the tough resilience of nature. And so the turning-point of the book is the prostate operation that robs him of it. It is 'my own disaster' (283), his individual version of humanity's nuclear holocaust. In the mere sense of being still alive, he experiences a 'pitiable but delicious reprieve from timelessness' (299). Biological time, in which all things pass away, is all we have. In
the closing pages of the novel Ben seems to reach some reconciliation with this all that there is: next year's buds already in place on the lilac, his eleventh grandchild expected in the new year (333-334). But the final image is of small moths which in this unseasonably warm November have hatched too early: 'In the early dark they flip and flutter a foot or two above the asphalt, as if trapped in a narrow wedge of space-time beneath the obliterating imminence of winter' (334).

The world of this novel is one in which technology and science have put an end, both in theory and in catastrophic fact, to the historical optimism of the modern world, with its confidence that providence, evolution or sheer human power and ingenuity ensured a utopian future. This is the world reduced to biology and cosmology, both indifferent to human survival, let alone human flourishing. Human history collapses back into nature, and time's irreversible arrow points only to nothingness in the end. Even the cycles of nature, though they are all we have, can no longer console us with the image of eternal renewal, both because the individual is not content to be lost in the transmission of his or her genes, but also because we know that they are overridden by the ongoing time of historical decline and cosmic entropy. Only if we stay with 'the very short view' that alone is bearable (329) is our being part of nature a transient consolation. The present is all we have, not here in some radically postmodernist sense, but in a sense that certainly reflects something significant about the contemporary sense of time: the fascination with popularized scientific cosmology and Darwinianism, the turning from technology to nature, the obsession with the sheer biological vitality of sex, and the retreat from a world without future to the small consolations of a private present.

5. The New Age alternative

In tandem with the decline of the myth of progress in recent decades, and in clearly causal relationship with it, there has emerged an alternative myth of salvation: that kaleidoscopic mixture of beliefs, rituals and fads known by the umbrella name of the New Age. The New Age has emerged from a sense of the failure and bankruptcy of the modern project of technological domination of the world which is part and parcel of the myth of progress. If we are to avert the disasters to which this is propelling us, some new stage of human understanding or way of being in the world is required, and to this end the New Age offers a wide range of carefully marketed creeds, techniques and alternative therapies, all designed to facilitate personal, spiritual, social and finally cosmic transformation for an otherwise doomed world. Utopia is indeed coming, but not as modernity envisaged it. Instead of the failed dualism of modernity, the distinguishing of humanity from nature, of human history from nature, of human technological dominance over nature - instead of all these we must see reality as a potentially harmonious whole. We are one with nature, which means both that we are one with the physical world, and also that we are one with the spiritual world that permeates it. God is not transcendent, but within: a vast spiritual internet of energy which is the mesh around which the cosmos is woven. Thus if, instead of struggling with and plundering nature, we tune into its natural patterns and forces, if we learn to cooperate with nature, to live within its flow, then nature itself will furnish the route to our salvation. In this sense we must grasp our own divinity, our access to the divine energies inherent in the world, and so produce the spiritual revolution that the Age of Aquarius requires. This then is a different kind of myth of immanent salvation and eschatology. While the modern myth of progress placed its
trust and hope in human history, the New Age places its faith and hope in nature. Both in their different ways seek to replace the transcendent God, the Creator of all things and the Lord of history, with human beings, whether as raised above nature in godlike control or reconciled with nature in the role of cosmic wizards. It remains to be seen how far the New Age will replace the role that modern progressivism has hitherto played in western society. The extent to which it has succumbed to commercialization, becoming the consumerist religion of a consumer society, suggests its influence may survive in assimilation to postmodernity rather than in challenging it.

6. Christian transcendent hope and its present possibilities

It has been suggested that, whereas (traditional) societies gave priority to the past and modern (progressive) society gave priority to the future, with the decline of the idea of progress a postmodern society is emerging in which priority is given to the present. In contemporary western society, with its throwaway culture, its emphasis on the immediate and the instantaneous, its feverish drive to squeeze as much as possible into time as a limited commodity, its fragmentation of time into allocated quantities, and its obsessive organization of time, we live increasingly in the present and its prolongation. More than one observer speaks of the ‘compressed time’ in which we live. But nevertheless the constantly accelerating juggernaut of change that has been the modern age still hurtles on. No one who cares for humanity or the world can live without thought of the future. We cannot leave the future to the whizzkids of Silicon valley, the dangerous visionaries of biotechnology, or the callously blind economics of globalization. Nor can we be merely resigned to ecological or economic catastrophe, likely though they look. But to do anything worthwhile human beings need hope. Whether in promising or threatening situations human beings can only be drawn out of hedonism or apathy by hope. Action for a positive future must be both sustained and guided by hope.

Where is hope to be found in the failure of the secular hopes of the modern age? In my view, the Christian answer lies in retrieving the biblical and traditional hope for a transcendent future to come from the transcendent God. Let me repeat what I said much earlier about the decisive difference between the immanent hopes of modern progressivism and the transcendent hopes of Christian eschatology. I said that the traditional Christian view placed its hope for salvation to come in the transcendent God, who is beyond the world and its history as well as within it, the God from whose transcendent possibilities the world was first created and whose power to renew his creation far transcends the immanent capacities of creation itself. In the Christian view the new creation in which all things will find their goal will not be the product of human history, but the fresh creative act of the transcendent God, who, of course, fulfills the possibilities inherent in creation but also far surpasses them. The Christian God is the constantly abundant source of hope because he is not confined to history or nature, but is in process of redeeming history and nature, out of his own creative resources.

Let us be clear that I am very far from advocating that caricature of the Christian hope which consists merely of a destiny for individuals in heaven after death, and leaves the rest of creation, this world of nature and history, to its natural fate. That was the kind of pie-in-the-sky—when-you die eschatology that the modern project to transform
the world was in part reacting against. But now I'm talking about the holistic view of salvation and eschatology that I outlined at the start. God's purpose is to gather all things into his kingdom. The world as well as the dead have a future with God. But in fixing Christian hope on the new creation of all things that only God can achieve, am I not depriving us of hope for the immediate historical future, the future to which our own actions contribute now, the future in which the poor may die or survive, the future in which thousands more species may become extinct or be protected? Quite the contrary, I believe that the ultimate hope for the future of all things with God inspires and sustains the proximate hopes for God's creation here and now. Ultimate hope does not exclude but includes all such hopes, for God is at work not only in the end but through his Spirit on the way to the end.

Firstly, ultimate hope provides a very necessary awareness of human limits. What we ourselves do cannot achieve the kingdom of God or the new creation. We must stay within the proper limits of our own createdness, and not reach for divine mastery over all things, as the modern project in its more visionary forms did. Christian hope lacks the prometheanism of the myth of progress, the attempt to achieve utopia. It offers instead a sense of the properly human limits of human life in this world. But therefore it inspires the hopes and actions appropriate and possible within the limits of this world.

Secondly, Christian hope offers a utopian vision - the kingdom of God which is coming - which can both critique the present and entice the present towards it. In critical interaction with the fears and aspirations of every present, the Christian hope of God's kingdom exposes what is wrong by contrast with what might have been, and at the same time inspires with visions of a better world. In our life in this world we seek whatever approximations to such utopias are humanly - properly humanly - possible, while utopia itself remains beyond human and historical reach.

But thirdly, very importantly, Christian hope, because it is in the first place ultimate hope for the kingdom of God, hope in the God who raises the dead, and only secondarily hope for the possibilities of our historical future - Christian hope does not leave behind those who have no historical future. Unlike the myth of progress, in the transcendent hope of Christian faith there is no danger that people in the past or the present be considered mere means to the greater good of people in the future. The countless victims of history, those whose lives were torture and those who scarcely lived at all, are not to be forgotten, but remembered in hope of the resurrection. And not only the dead, but also those of the living for whom there can be no more hope in this world, those who can neither assist nor benefit from the onward march of progress - the desperately and incurably sick, the dying, the wretched of the earth - must not be left behind, but cherished with the special care God has for the most hopeless. The future we cannot give them is promised them by God.

Thus Christian hope is neither promethean nor quietist. It neither attempts what can only come from God nor neglects what is humanly possible. Sustained by the hope of everything from God, it attempts what is possible within the limits of each present. It does not overreach itself in striving for a post-historical goal. It does not value what can be done only as a step in a linear progress to a goal. It does what can be done for its own sake, here and now, confident that every present will find itself, redeemed and fulfilled, in the new creation.
For a fuller account of the themes of this lecture, see Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart, *Hope against Hope*.  