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THE FUTURE: PROMISE OR THREAT?

People spend a lot of time thinking about the future. Our highly developed pro-social skills include our ability to mentally simulate others' mental states and anticipate their various possible behaviors. This same ability allows us to discover and exploit the regularities of the natural world. It is not for nothing that we call them "Laws of Nature," as they seem much more dependable than human behavior. This has driven technological progress, for, as Francis Bacon put it:

"Nature, to be commanded, must be obeyed."

Technological progress has, in turn, transformed humanity and its preoccupation with the future. Thousands of years ago our ancestors worried about the outcomes of violent clashes with other tribes and where their next meal may come from. But the modern idea of history unfolding was then unknown. As the writer of Ecclesiastes – attributed to the biblical King Solomon – put it:

"What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which one can say, 'Look! This is something new?' It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time. No one remembers the former generations, and even those yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow them." [Ecclesiastes 1:9-11]

For tens of thousands of years the world looked little different from one year to the next or even from one millennium to the next. Even if King Solomon could have been brought forward to the 8th Century of Charlemagne, the world would have been understandable. But by the 17th Century – only 1000 years later – many changes would have been apparent to someone from the 10th Century BCE, especially the existence and colonization of the Americas by the European powers and the technologies which enabled that. Within another century or two,

as the Industrial Revolution got underway, Solomon would have had to agree that there was a great many things that were "new under the sun." And by the time of the 20th Century it would be clear that there was little that was not "new under the sun." The pace of scientific progress and technological innovation is today such that few people on the planet have not personally experienced transformative changes in their lives. Continued rapid progress has become expected. Many look forward to these things but, at the same time, the pace of change and its nature is such that there is good reason to consider some of it threatening.

The German philosopher and socialist revolutionary Karl Marx was perhaps the first person to seriously consider how the Industrial Revolution would alter human society. He might have been vindicated but for his failure to foresee the innovations that led to entirely new industries. Yet some of Marx's concerns remain at issue, especially as robotics and AI seem likely to continue to displace humans.

On the one hand it seems hard to believe that continued progress will not lead to the "overproductivity" that Marx feared. Will being freed from "wage slavery" be a welcome alternative? Or will subsisting on whatever handouts can be gotten from the government be better? Everything will depend, as is so often the case, on how such changes play out and what adjustments are made to accommodate the stresses placed on the people who must contend with them. And, as always, on politics.

Besides transformative social and economic changes directly affecting people where they are implemented, in the early 21st Century there are, in addition, trends that affect everyone on the planet. Some of these represent existentialist threats. Since the end of World War II, the continuing potential of nuclear destruction, possibly unleashed by terror

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groups or rogue states, is one of these. Another is rising atmospheric greenhouse gases, melting glaciers, rising sea levels and climate change. People living in coastal and other low-lying areas including remote island nations will likely have to go live elsewhere. Others will have to change their agricultural practices or deal with other ecological alterations.

Advances in biotechnology and/or robots and machine learning may turn minor mistakes into disasters or allow criminals to do far more damage than they ever could have with prior low-tech methods. Some also worry about a “singularity” in which technology, artificial intelligence specifically, will escape humanity's ability to control it. There has not been so much focus on nanotechnology but here, too, there are concerns that microscopic self-replicating machines could pose dangers beyond anyone's ability to anticipate.

Undoubtedly, many fears about the future will never be realized. CERN's Large Hadron Collider, for example, has obviously not yet produced any black holes that destroyed the planet. Nor has genetic engineering yet produced any Frankenstein monsters or the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence yet brought any alien invaders. It is of course wise to consider and plan for all the ways something can go badly. There have been enough disasters – the sinking of the Titanic and the loss of the Space Shuttles Challenger and Columbia among many dramatic instances – to teach us that this is not an easy task. But as the 20th Century British mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead put it:

“The art of progress is to preserve order amid change, and to preserve change amid order.”

This seems the sort of “profound truth” that the 20th Century physicist Neils Bohr meant: a truth whose opposite is also true. For order is destroyed by change, and transformative change, almost by definition, gives rise to new order. The Great Seal of the United States on the back of US \$1 bills features the words (beneath the pyramid) “Novus Ordo Seclorum.” It means “New Order of the Ages” and reflects Thomas Paine's calling on the American colonists, in breaking away from the English crown, to “begin the world over again.” Or, as Alfred North Whitehead observed:

“The major advances in civilization are processes which all but wreck the societies in which they occur.”

All NTCOF events can be found through our website calendar, or our meetup page, from which you can RSVP, at: - www.meetup.com/church-of-freethought - JOIN THE NTCOF MEETUP GROUP !!!

Social Luncheon: Today, immediately after our Service, join us for lunch and discussion at the Jason's Deli on MacArthur Blvd just south of I-635, at 7707 N MacArthur Blvd, phone (972) 432-0555.

Freethought Salon: Discuss today's service topic or other conundrums on most non-first Sundays of the month, over breakfast/coffee (or not), in the atrium of the Embassy Suites DFW Airport North – on Bass Pro Drive in Grapevine beginning at 10:00 AM.

Game Night: Most Friday nights at the IHOP on 2310 Stemmons Trail (I-35), near Northwest Highway (Loop 12). Plan to arrive at about 7:30 PM, and stay late playing Imperial 2030, Dominion, Evolution, Le Havre, Ticket To Ride, and other fun games!

Have Another Idea? Email or call! Read bulletins & presentations and post on the FORUM at www.churchoffreethought.org LIKE US at www.facebook.com/northtexaschurchoffreethought/ and sign up for our Twitter feed at www.twitter.com/ntcof !

**PLANNED FOR NEXT MONTH:
“24 YEARS LATER – STILL ASKING QUESTIONS”**

**> Sunday, February 3, 2019 <
HERE at the Hawthorn Suites
by Wyndham Hotel
DFW Airport North 10:30 AM**

**THANK YOU !!
FOR YOUR GENEROUS
DONATION OF TIME & FINANCIAL
SUPPORT to the NTCOF !!
It is needed, appreciated and
Tax-Deductible !**

**The North Texas Church of Freethought
The Fellowship of Unbelievers**

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