

# EDITORIAL

## ON ALTERING PAST AND FUTURE

Isaac Asimov's *The End of Eternity* describes a futuristic human society ruled by "The Eternals" — an elite class trained to travel outside Time (i.e., in "Eternity") to make alterations in the Past, Present, and Future. The process would begin with the Observers — individuals who would travel from the Past to the Future and collect data which would be analyzed by a computer. The "All-when Council" would examine the results and determine the Minimum Necessary Change to create the Minimum Desired Response (e.g., both natural and man-made catastrophes would be removed from the past or prevented in the future). A Technician would then travel to the designated time and place to effect the "Reality Changes."

The motivation behind these manipulations was the creation of an idealized human history in which there would be no genocide, famine, or disease. Although the alteration of time lines would unfortunately eliminate some "innocent bystanders" from existence, the changes would supposedly benefit society as a whole. However, according to Asimov's story, humans eventually became extinct because the systematic selection of time lines offering the best options for security and moderation also removed all impetus for advancement and exploration. The deletion of aberrations destroyed the option of experimentation, as well as the potential for triumph over adversity. In such a society, individuals were no longer burdened by personal responsibility for the consequences of their decisions or actions; they could settle comfortably for mediocrity, knowing that the Eternals would erase any mistakes — along with any potential growth that might develop through learning from those mistakes.

Asimov's story was published in 1955, before the advent of our "Space Age"; and his futuristic society seemed totally imaginary. The capacity to travel through time remains an accomplishment only in the realm of science fiction, although the concept is being published in respectable scientific literature. The reader's initial horror over the possibility of his or her time line being eliminated by an impersonal council for the greater good of present-day society or "future history" is quickly replaced by the comforting realization that this potential has not yet been fulfilled.

Upon further reflection, we must ask if a bright future for humanity is guaranteed, so long as time travel cannot be achieved. Is this the only way in which human history can be altered? We are aware that it is not necessary to travel forward in time in order to create the best-possible future; our present choices certainly determine our futures. We are told so continuously through a variety of media, e.g., chain letters threatening

the receiver with bad luck if the chain is broken; advertisements claiming that health, beauty, popularity and happiness are impossible without certain products; and political candidates who warn of the gloomy future that will arise if their opponents are elected.

Despite such widespread emphasis upon our choices and their possible consequences, have we made, and are we making, choices that will jeopardize our future? Apparently the answer is yes. Doomsday forecasting is not a specialty of science-fiction writers, marketing specialists, and politicians. We are also being bombarded by warnings based on intellectual premises. Sociologists, philosophers and educators<sup>1</sup> have expressed concern for an impoverished educational system in the United States, fearing that if the present trends continue, the result will be a nation of illiterates. What has caused this present crisis of ignorance? Is it possible that our "past" is being altered by some culprit which is destroying our chances for a hopeful future?

According to the group which has been collectively termed the "Religious Right" by the public media, intellectual decline is equated with the yielding of Christianity to secularizing influences. Adherents to this viewpoint deplore the decay of moral values, a trend which they believe will lead to the inevitable downfall of civilization.<sup>2</sup> In response, opponents such as philosopher Paul Kurz, editor of *Free Inquiry* and architect of the Humanist Manifesto II, cite the resurgence of dogmatic authoritarian religious (i.e., irrational) groups which thwart the potential for secular humanism's greatness.<sup>3</sup> The tension between the extremes of religious fundamentalism and secular humanism seems unresolvable, with each blaming the other for stifling investigation and limiting the availability of information.

A cursory examination of the arguments apparently favors secular humanism. It seems plausible that religious groups, given their preoccupation with eternal time lines, would be more concerned with censoring (limiting) information that does not support their worldview. For example, legislative attempts during the 1980s to ensure the inclusion of creation-science in public-school science classes (reported in previous issues of *ORIGINS*) were portrayed by their opponents as attempts to impose intolerant (i.e., one narrow viewpoint) religious convictions upon society. Warning that the creation of a "theocracy" would necessarily hinder academic freedom, they proposed that religious ideas, while inappropriate for science classes, should be presented in the context of "history of religions" or the social-studies curriculum. Thus far the U.S. judicial courts have agreed with such reasoning by striking down "creation-science" legislation.

And yet, one wonders if the dominance of secular humanism in the educational process has led to an open forum of ideas which will ensure our best-possible futures. Is it possible that secular humanism also restricts

freethinking? Are some “past time lines” being removed? Investigation reveals that, as social studies have been revised to harmonize with current popular opinion, religion has been determined to be inappropriate also to this curriculum. For example, Catherine Millard<sup>4</sup> has compiled an awesome list of instances in which America’s historical records (especially those which deal with the Founding Fathers and indicate a Christian foundation which does not support the current secular views) have been rewritten, reinterpreted, or removed. In its examination of elementary-school-level textbooks, the Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship<sup>5</sup> describes one series:

*Man is always at the center of the picture the authors paint. What this picture reveals is more than just an absence of God or the Christian religion. It asserts an optimistic faith in the ability of man to both create and shape the world he lives in and to solve his own problems. Like the adherents of naturalistic humanism, the authors seem to believe that man is autonomous.*

Another analyst of socio-religious trends<sup>6</sup> reports that:

*Writers and publishers of textbooks on American history have systematically excluded information about religious motivations, for example in the founding of this country, in the campaign against slavery, in the civil rights struggle, and in the opposition to the Vietnam War. One book on world history omits all mention of the Reformation. A textbook that lists 300 important events in American history includes only 3 related to religion, the last of which was in 1775.*

As can be seen by the above examples, the secularization process has nearly succeeded in erasing the religious “time line” from history. Some would protest that religion has not disappeared and insist that traditional Christian views have merely become transformed into new manifestations. According to this viewpoint, because of humanity’s innate need for the “sacred,” society has created new saviors through the process of “sacralization.”<sup>7</sup> Among these alternative paths to “salvation” are materialism, technology, sociopolitical revolution, and psychology.<sup>8</sup> The British sociologist David Lyon<sup>9</sup> observes. “People, things, events and processes are bestowed with ‘sacred’ status, even as the tide of Christian influence ebbs from Western societies.” Unfortunately, these idols, in which mediocrity and ephemeral values are glorified, are inadequate, dissatisfying substitutes, and the specter of a gloomy future continues.<sup>10</sup> In the words of Allan Bloom<sup>11</sup>:

*Our old atheism had a better grasp of religion than does this new respect for the sacred. Atheists took religion seriously and recognized that it is a real force, costs something and*

*requires difficult choices. These sociologists who talk so facetiously about the sacred are like a man who keeps a toothless old circus lion around the house in order to experience the thrills of the jungle.*

In Asimov's scenario, as noted in the beginning of this editorial, attempts to create the best future by altering the past led to total disaster for humanity. There is a danger of creating a foreboding future; not through the manipulations of time-travelers, but through diluting, withholding, or misrepresenting information in order to appease a secular bias. The worldview created by traditional Christianity, in both personal application and public policy, has shifted from an influential, enriching factor to a sociological curiosity that is no longer necessary in today's world. The spiritual/religious dimension has vanished or been diminished to the role of an atavistic aberration. This situation is deplorable. Our best decisions are based upon complete, accurate information. Without adequate knowledge about our past — including our beginning —, we shall indeed impoverish our future.

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## ENDNOTES

1. See for example: (a) Bloom A. 1987. *The closing of the American mind*. NY: Simon & Schuster; (b) Hirsch ED (Jr). 1987. *Cultural literacy*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.
2. This view is expressed throughout the writings of the late Francis Schaeffer. While his books are too numerous to be listed here, see especially his: (a) 1976. *How should we then live?* Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co.; and (b) 1984. *The great evangelical disaster*. Westchester, IL: Crossway Books. Others who express the same themes include: (c) Lindsell H. 1987. *The new paganism*. NY: Harper & Row; (d) Lyon D. 1987. *The steeple's shadow: on the myths and realities of secularization*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; (e) Schaeffer F. [son]. 1981. *Addicted to mediocrity*. Westchester, IL: Cornerstone Books.
3. Kurz P. 1983. *In defense of secular humanism*. Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books. Isaac Asimov would agree with Kurz; he was a lifelong secular humanist who viewed any belief in the supernatural as a hindrance to the realization of humankind's potential.
4. Millard C. 1991. *The rewriting of America's history*. Camp Hill, PA: Horizon House Publishers.
5. McCarthy R, Oppewal D, Peterson W, Spykman G (coordinator). 1981. *Society, state, & schools*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., p 132.
6. Averill LJ. 1989. *Religious right, religious wrong*. NY: The Pilgrim Press, p 169-170.
7. E.g., (a) Ellul J. 1986. *The subversion of Christianity*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; (b) Stark R, Bainbridge WS. 1985. *The future of religion: secularization, revival, and cult formation*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press; (c) Wilson B. 1976. *Contemporary transformations of religion*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
8. Killinger J. 1973. *The salvation tree*. NY and London: Harper & Row.
9. Lyon, p 96 (Note 2d).
10. See for example: Corwin N. 1983. *Trivializing America; the triumph of mediocrity*. Secaucus, NJ: Lyle Smart.
11. Bloom, p 216 (Note 1a).