



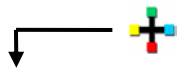
The End of History

(92eh)

J.E. Lesslie Newbiggin

The Gospel and Our Culture (U.K.), 13 (Summer 1992): 1-2.

All material is reprinted with permission from the Newbiggin family, the Newbiggin Estate and the publisher. All material contained on the Newbiggin.Net website, or on the accompanying CD, remains the property of the original author and/or publisher. All rights to this material are reserved. Materials are not to be distributed to other web locations for retrieval, published in other media, or mirrored at other sites without express written permission from the appropriate parties. The material can be used for private research purposes only.



A former official in the US State Department, Francis Fukuyama, has written a book entitled 'The End of History and the Last Man'. Its thesis is that, with the collapse of Marxism as a world-power, history as we have known it has come to an end. Of course the human race will go on, but the age-long battle between civilizations and ideologies is over. There is now only one civilization: liberal democratic capitalism. The only future is the onward march of this form of human life. Of course there will be pockets of resistance to be dealt with in due course – Islam, and old style dictatorships for example. But from now on the whole human race has only one goal: the progressive enlargement and perfection of this form of society, equipped with ever more sophisticated technologies to ensure its smooth working.

This is, of course, not the first announcement of the end of history. Hegel, who is in the background of this new form of realized eschatology, saw the end of history in the rise of the Prussian state. What is interesting is not this nonsense in itself, but the question why it is taken so seriously. A conference of 1000 intellectuals in London has gathered to hear the guru in person. Why should anyone take this seriously? One can understand how an official of the US State Department, living for years in the midst of the battle against 'The Evil Empire' might feel that the drama has ended. We have won, and there is no more to fight about. But why should the rest of the world take this seriously?

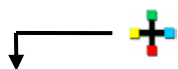
Is it that we cannot live without a story, without some myth that tells us where we have come from and where we are going? The post-modernists tell us that the days of the great 'meta-narrative' are over. They reject the story which sees the world-wide expansion of the civilization developed in Europe as the master-thread of history. As in this year we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the voyage of Christopher Columbus to 'discover' a world which was already the homeland of peoples with their own stories, there are the angry voices which see only the genocidal crimes of our 'civilization' and wish to make 1992 a year of mourning. People cannot live forever without a 'meta-narrative', without a story that defines the track we have to travel.

The Gospel is narrative. The ecumenical creeds are narrative in form. The Bible is narrative. This narrative also speaks of the end of history. But it is unique among the stories which human beings have told over the ages to explain the mystery of these short years between birth and death in that it places the end of history beyond history. The most powerful and pervasive of all the narratives has been the cyclical one. Human life, like the rest of the natural world, moves in an endlessly repeated cycle of birth, growth, maturity, decay and death. Religion is then a matter of release from this wheel continuously kept in motion by our karma – the deeds (good or bad) which must have their fruit in the next rotation of the wheel. The ‘meta-narrative’ of modernity has been linear, the onward march of human mastery over nature. With this master-story it is easy to understand how those who see themselves as the vanguard of the human march can claim to embody the goal of history. The rival narratives have been eliminated.

The Christian narrative has a shape which is neither cyclical nor linear. It is U-shaped. The creed is U-shaped, from the source of all being, down into the depths of hell, and back to the glory of the new creation. Every human life must follow this pattern from the sheer gift of being, a gift from the hand of God, down through manifold trial and struggle to death itself, and, even in death, the assurance and the foretaste of the new being. Christ, and Christ alone, is the end of history, because in Him, the crucified and risen Lord, the new creation is already present. Christians, of all people, have been warned to recognize bogus messiahs.

It is, of course, true that the collapse (temporary or permanent) of Marxism as a world power creates a new situation. It is a situation which, as Charles West of Princeton has pointed out, makes the responsibility resting on Christians heavier than before. Only two serious powers now stand in the way of the relentless expansion of the capitalist ideology, Islam and Christianity. The former is a far more formidable power than Fukuyama seems to recognize. As far as I know, he does not discuss Christianity as a factor in the situation. The power to which history now belongs is described by Fukuyama as liberal democratic capitalism. It is useful to look at each of the three words.

We have to distinguish between the free market as a mechanism and capitalism as an ideology. The former, which has existed from the dawn of history, has been proved to “be the most flexible way of continuously adjusting supply and demand. Capitalism as an ideology is the belief that if everyone pursues self-interest, the outcome will be common good. But Adam Smith, often regarded as the founding father of this doctrine, was clear that it would only be so if society was permeated by certain moral sentiments. He was a moral philosopher before he was an economist. In 18th century Scotland he could still take for granted the ‘moral sentiments’ which the Church had instilled into every member of society from the first words they learned to speak. It has become obvious now that, uncontrolled by these ‘moral sentiments’, capitalism has the consequences which any student of the Bible would recognize as the consequences of unrestrained greed - the development of vast discrepancies in wealth and the disintegration of society since a growing number find themselves alienated from a society which acknowledges no responsibility for the common good. No one can question the astounding achievements of capitalism during the past forty years in raising the material wealth of the affluent sectors of ‘developed’ nations



to levels unimaginable two generations earlier. But it is precisely these affluent communities which require a huge and ever increasing quantity of drugs to cope with the meaninglessness of life and which witness an ever-rising level of violent crime and the disintegration of the most basic element in any healthy society, namely the family. To see no future for the human race except the endless global expansion of this kind of human existence would surely be enough to explain the increasing rate of suicide in the affluent world.

The second word in the formula 'democratic' still has a very honourable ring. But, as with capitalism, we have to look beneath the surface. Democracy as it has developed over many centuries in Europe has deep roots in a Christian culture. One of the main roots of British democracy was in the spiritual struggles of the men of Cromwell's army. The question was how to come to a common mind about what the will of God is. Democracy can only work in the long run if those who are elected to power know themselves to be responsible before God to the whole community and not just to those who voted them into power. If democracy is only the right of a majority to enforce its will on a minority, it is bound to break down, as it has done in so many parts of the world. Like the free market, democracy cannot serve human well-being unless there are 'moral sentiments' which pervade the community. It depends absolutely upon much deeper elements in the culture. In truth the Church must have the boldness to affirm that democracy must necessarily break down unless those who exercise power know that they are responsible to God.

And, once again, the adjective 'liberal' has an honourable ring. It has been the watch-word for many heroic battles against tyranny. But there are good reasons why 'liberalism' as a secular philosophy has become deeply discredited. The rhetoric of liberty is the common currency of all political parties, but true human liberation cannot be the fruit of any political order. The Enlightenment model of the autonomous human agent, disconnected from any acknowledgement of the reality of God, can only lead into the jungle of competing self-interest and the disintegration of society.

Marxism and capitalism, twin children of the Enlightenment, have fought a long battle, and one has been defeated. But that is not the end of history. It creates a new situation in which there is a more urgent need than ever before for the Church to unmask the illusions and deflate the hubris of modernity and to affirm the true end of history which is offered to us now in the person of the one who is both Alpha and Omega and is Lord of all.

All material is reprinted with permission from the Newbigin family, the Newbigin Estate and the publisher. All material contained on the Newbigin.Net website, or on the accompanying CD, remains the property of the original author and/or publisher. All rights to this material are reserved. Materials are not to be distributed to other web locations for retrieval, published in other media, or mirrored at other sites without express written permission from the appropriate parties. The material can be used for private research purposes only.