

Review of Medieval futures: Attitudes to the future in the Middle Ages, by John Burrow and Ian Wei. Woodbridge, UK: The Boydell Press, 2000 ISBN 0 85115 779 3. Published in *Futures*, Vol. 35, No. 10, December 2003, pp. 1067-1072.

If you have any pretense of being a futurist, or interest in futures studies, stop reading this review and immediately purchase the book being reviewed. This is as close to essential reading for all futurists as any book published in the last several years.

It is a collection of papers from a conference on Medieval Futures convened by the Centre for Medieval Studies at the University of Bristol, UK, in August 1997. Every paper is a jewel worth careful consideration by anyone interested in futures studies as an academic discipline and as an activity in the present aiming towards the creation of better futures.

The conference is also an activity that most certainly should be replicated around the world. The essays in this book focus on the European Middle Ages (dealing for the most part from around 1200 to 1500, with most focusing on the 12th and 13th centuries, but with some telling the story through the 15th century). What would a collection of studies dealing with futures in pre-modern China, or India, or Japan, or elsewhere in the world tell us? And how much better would such conferences be if futurists were invited to participate with the historians, as was not the case in Bristol meeting? Getting historians and futurists from various cultures together to think about futures studies should be high on the agenda of everyone involved in both fields, this book makes abundantly clear.

The opening paragraphs in the first essay in the book, titled provocatively, "Appropriating the Future," by Jean-Claude Schmitt, make the case well by implication: "Historians have strange relationships with the future. Sometimes they are tempted to endow their discipline with a prophetic function, as if they have only to project the changes of the past, which they know and understand, into the future in order to predict what will take place, and thus steer future actions. But history never repeats itself, and if thinking about the way past societies functioned helps us to understand our

own, it does not provide us with certain knowledge of what is to come. Sometimes, on the other hand, historians turn away from the future, and even from the present, claiming that the past alone is their area of expertise, as if our interpretation of the past could somehow be separated from all that we are today, from what we know, and also from what we hope for the future. More seriously still, they sometimes forget that we ourselves are the future of the past societies that, as historians, we study" (p. 3).

"But," Schmitt goes on, "we should also give some thought to their *futura*--the way these past societies projected themselves into their future, the future that we, at least in part, constitute." Schmitt then makes the point that clinches the deal: We must bear in mind "that the future of which our present represents a partial realisation is only one of the futures that were then possible: history is not a forward march along a single, straight track, a continuous and necessary thread that we have simply to unwind from the past to our present and then into a future that is certain and knowable. On the contrary, it is a succession of possible choices, of futures that are all available at any given moment, of which only a few are realized and which we cannot know in advance" (p. 3f).

But there is more: "In reality there is only the present, because the past no longer exists and the future does not exist yet. Of the past and the future only the *images* exist, and these only in the present in our minds. The future, like the past, is but an 'extension' of our minds" (p. 4 *Italics in original*).

Could any futurist say it better? Alternative futures instead of THE future? Yes! Created futures instead of predicted futures? Yes! Images of the futures as the key concept and reality, not "THE" future? Yes, yes, a thousand times, YES.

Several of the authors note that most people who know anything of the European Middle Ages associate attitudes towards the future then with certain eschatological, millennial, and prophetic ideas that the Church held and widely promulgated. These ideas are discussed in this book. But the main focus is not on these grand notions of "church time" but rather the popular beliefs about the future held by, or manifested in the behavior of, ordinary people which

eventually led to "merchant time" and then to our modern ideas about the futures, as well as how these popular images intersected and were reconciled with the theological ones.

This is where the book is of greatest use (and perhaps novelty) to futurists: to see how, as the feudal period slowly evolved into modernity, very secular ideas about the future began to arise which the Church initially had to identify, deal with, and adjudicate in ways that kept their eschatological beliefs and practices intact and supreme as long as they could. "The future is a matter of power" and the Church did everything it could to keep the future under its control.

The book devotes separate chapters to attitudes and behaviors towards the futures exhibited in the following matters:

-- Charters of donations that were to be followed for years to come--such as donations of land to a holy order. "Several different conceptions of the future could be contained within a single charter granting land: a personal future which ended with the donor's death, an indefinite human future which continued through the generations, a cyclical future in which the same rituals would be enacted every year, and an eschatological future in which the donor hoped to enjoy salvation." (xiif)

-- The masters of theology at the University of Paris in the thirteenth century were frequently asked to resolve various moral issues. Among other things, they engaged in a long-running debate about life annuities and perpetual annuities. "When they did so, they envisaged a future that stretched on endlessly. One master imagined generation succeeding generation, another conceived of payments stretching into infinity. There were no references here to the end of the world." "It was in 'merchant time' that churchmen could see the future and predict the probable" (p. 25).

The masters also engaged in "what if" scenarios, in which they tried to imagine what the actions of a person might be under different policy decisions, and then to make the decision on the basis of the most preferable anticipated outcome. "The holder should not make immediate restitution if he can predict that the owner would react in such a way as to cause harm. Second, the

holder should not make immediate restitution if he can predict that scandal would result, meaning that others would somehow be led into sin" (p. 27). "Solving problems in the present required predictions of the future. They were 'what if' predictions which were to be made by assessing present psychological condition and character, and with the help of confessors" (p. 28).

-- Bequeaths of wealth and property to children, grandchildren, loyal servants, and others in perpetuity, especially by kings--which immediately clashed with the claim that nothing from the past could prevent a king from acting as he wishes in the present. This doctrine put each king in a double bind concerning his own desires to obligate future kings for the benefit of his own descendants! (Elizabeth Brown, "The king's conundrum: Endowing queens and loyal servants, ensuring salvation, and protection patrimony in fourteenth-century France")

-- Contracts or other agreements concerning the use of property for a limited period of time and at a certain cost, which indicated not only that the future can be carefully measured, but also that time has a specific price that can be precisely calculated. Especially in common law regions, judicial decisions in these areas from the 13th Century onward led to modern commercial law and contracts. "Most of the time English medieval courts and their lawyers and judges (like lawyers, judges and courts anywhere) were thinking and arguing about things that had happened in the past.... But part of the time at least, they were thinking about past attempts to control and plan for the future, or what might be construed as such, and were making decisions about how far future expectations of various kinds merited current protection" (p. 112). "But English law by the fifteenth century did end up giving much greater weight to future expectations and much greater scope for grantors of entailed property at least to control its future devolution: a much closer fit between rhetoric and reality than had been the case in 1200" (p. 113). (Paul Brand, "*In perpetuum*: the rhetoric and reality of attempts to control the future in the English Medieval Common Law")

-- Intercessory prayers. For example, once the notion of Purgatory took hold, the question came up as to how long a soul's

suffering in Purgatory might last, and the ability of the prayers of people living in the present to speed to Heaven those in Purgatory.

-- "Apostles' lots" and "Saints' lots" were used for divination, even to choose bishops and cardinals. A book of the Bible was opened at random and read to determine an action or make a decision. "They were in fact attempting to know the future so as to be able to adapt their actions to it or even act on it, to transform it. Providence had not fixed the course of things once and for all: man was still free to better himself, to do penance, to convert so as to change the miserable future that was promised him and prepare a better future for himself, both in this world and, above all in the next. In Christian thought, man does not blindly submit to fate, as he does in Greek tragedy. He has the capacity to act on his destiny and transform his future, without this detracting in any way from the omnipotence and omniscience of God" (p. 11f)

-- The interpretation of various signs and marvels. For example, St. Thomas Aquinas wrestled with, and distinguished in his usual rational way, which predictions were legitimate, and which illegitimate: "First, there were causes which necessarily and always produce the effects." (29) So certain astronomical observations could legitimately be used to predict the future (eclipses, return of comets, the waxing and waning of the moon, and the rising of the sun). "Second, there were causes which, although they did not produce their effects of necessity and always, almost invariably did so" (so "doctors could predict future health or death"). Finally there were "causes which could not be relied upon to produce particular effects at all." So "if anyone attempts from the stars to foretell future contingent or chance events, or to know with certitude the future activities of men, he is acting under a false and groundless presupposition, and opening himself to the intrusion of diabolic powers. Consequently, this kind of fortune-telling is superstitious and wrong. But if someone uses astronomic observation to forecast future events which are actually determined by physical laws, for instance, drought or rainfall, and so forth, then this is neither superstitious nor sinful" (30 f, quoting St. Thomas' *Summa Theologiae*).

-- Trying to influence dice (through prayer or incantations) during games of chance. The Church was more worried about that aspect of gaming--namely blasphemy--it seems, than it was about the other consequences of gambling including impoverishment, fighting, and murder. As Rhiannon Purdie puts it at the end of her intriguing article on "Dice-games and the Blasphemy of Prediction," "Prayer was an acceptable means of attempting to influence one's future; dicing, the inverted form of prayer, was not" (p. 184).

As you can see, none of these notions of time and the future derive from the Church's theological positions on eschatology and divine time, but often did intersect with them: "Apparently contradictory ways of thinking could co-exist within society and sometimes within individuals who both believed that the world was going to end, and planned as if it would not." (p. xii)

The chapter by John Burrow on "The Third Eye of Prudence" was especially informative to me. Somehow, though I long knew that prudence was one of the cardinal virtues, I always thought it primarily meant behaving properly--in fact, being a prude--perhaps because one of my early girlfriends, named Prudence, was anything BUT. However, for the record I also had a girlfriend in my youth named Faith and another named Hope. It seems that virtues always appealed to me. I did not know that prudence primarily signified foresight: if one is prudent, one is futures-oriented. According to the arguments in Burrow, prudence is the queen of the cardinal virtues, the one that guides all of the others. This is well revealed by the fact that the medieval personification of Prudence has three eyes: one that looks towards the past, one towards the present, and the third--the most powerful of the three--looks towards the future. Prudence consists of "memory, which remembers, and learns from, the past; intelligence, which judges of, and acts in, the present; and foresight, which anticipates, and provides for or against, the future" (p. 38).

I nominate Prudence to be the patron saint of futurists. Her image should become our icon. Or at least, Prudence in association with her fellows from other, nonwestern cultures.

There are equally interesting chapters on the extremely complex and novel way Dante dealt with time, as well as the various uses that

were made of the murder of Thomas a Becket by successive generations in England, but I will end this review by noting what the authors tell us about language and the future in medieval Europe:

"One may be surprised to discover, for instance, that the dictionaries give no datable example of the word 'future' in English before the 1380s, when Chaucer used it...; and the term for many years thereafter achieved only a very restricted currency in English. More common in Middle English are derivatives of the word *providentia* in its prudential sense 'foresight', either as 'purveiaunce' or later, as 'providence'" (p. 42).

" There is not just one future tense, but several, or, rather, several grammatical modalities that express the future"--at least, Schmitt says, that is true of the Indo-European languages influenced by Latin. That is another futures research project for us: what are the "modalities that express the future" in other languages? Are there significant differences or overall commonalities?

Importantly, he reminds us that "in medieval Latin, 'future' is usually a plural noun: *future*. Perhaps we should see in this plural a recognition of the future's complexity." "Equally noteworthy is the noun, also in the plural, that designates the end of time: *novissima*" (p. 5). "We might thus venture so far as to posit two historically opposite concepts of the future. The older of the two is represented by the word *futur*: the future, the *future*, cannot be fully known, but it is located within a framework of understanding, foresight and action that is fixed above all in the case of the eschatological time of religion or the cyclical time of ritual and liturgy. To this we might oppose the modern notion of time-to-come (*avenir*) which designates a future that is open, completely unforeseeable, and irreversible, a time without God, the product of the 'disenchantment of the world.' It is this division between the *future* and the *avenir* that the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, from religious thought to modern rationality, is played out" (p. 6).

To which the postmodern, postrational futurist can only ask, so, what's next? It once could be said that "time is what keeps everything from happening all at once." Is the internet, globalization, and the world of 24/7 compressing time again into

the instantaneous singularity of a new Big Bang, an eternal Now with made-up, hazy, fleeting beliefs about the past melding into no thoughts about the futures at all?

Or not?