

n e w w o r l d o r d e r s

millennialism in the western hemisphere

The Wonderful World Tomorrow: Herbert W. Armstrong's Vision of Life After the Apocalypse

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Little in Herbert W. Armstrong's early life suggested that he would devote his career to spreading the message of the millennial reign of Jesus Christ upon the earth. Born to middle class parents in Des Moines, Iowa on July 31, 1892, Armstrong was reared a Quaker, although he evidenced little interest in religion and stopped attending church at the age of eighteen. He made it his goal to become successful in the business world, choosing as his speciality the emerging field of advertising. Armstrong enjoyed early successes, but a national economic crisis in 1920 devastated his business, wounding his morale and leading to a series of financial reverses.

By 1926, the thirty-four year old Armstrong felt brutalized by the capitalist culture he idealized. The modern world proved treacherous and it appeared that despite his best efforts he could not compete. With his early dreams for material success tarnished, and his sense of self-worth undermined, he tapped into the forces that Jackson Lears identified as indicative of anti-modernism.¹ One year after the Scopes Trial, he looked to the fundamentalist subculture of the 1920's for answers to the modern dilemma. He quickly gravitated to the teachings of the apocalyptic Church of God, Seventh Day, a remnant of the mid-nineteenth century Millerite Movement that considered itself the end time vestige of the "true church" founded by Christ in the First Century.² Among this group, Armstrong soon discovered and further developed a belief system he considered an explanation to the perils of twentieth century American life. Utilizing his advertising skill, he eventually found success by spreading this message to others.

Ordained by the Oregon Conference of the Church in 1931, Armstrong organized an independent radio ministry, initially called *The Radio Church of God*, in Eugene, Oregon in 1934. Obtaining time on stations in Portland and Seattle, he warned that the Great Depression and the specter of warfare over Europe presaged the impending "Great Tribulation," the Biblical time of world troubles that he believed would occur at the end of the age prior to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. He held that at the "end-time" a consortium of ten nations in Europe, a revival of the Holy Roman Empire, would punish the United States for its disobedience to God. Armstrong

¹See T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), xiii; xiv-xv.

²See Paul K. Conkin, *American Originals: Homemade Varieties of Christianity*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 129-140. Conkin offers a solid, yet concise discussion of the formation of the Seventh Day Adventist Church from disillusioned participants in the Millerite movement. As Conkin recognizes, the Church of God, Seventh Day, which formed in 1858, was the only "enduring sect" to emerge from Seventh Day Adventism. The Church of God, Seventh Day's observance of the Saturday Sabbath re-enforced the idea that it was descended from the First Century Church. In this regard, see also A.N. Dugger and C. O. Dodd, *A History of the True Religion*. Jerusalem: Mount Zion Reporter, 1972, which offers a supposed history of the "true church" from its formation to the twentieth century. Dugger and Dodd were elders in the Church of God.

initially maintained that the ominous events on the eve of the Second World War signaled the beginning of the Tribulation and the removal of divine favor. There was, however, good news. This horrible time, the worst in human history, would be followed by the return of Jesus Christ and the establishment of his millennial kingdom on the earth. To Armstrong this “good news” was the heart of the gospel.³

Armstrong began broadcasting over a Los Angeles station in 1942 and re-named his program the *World Tomorrow* in an effort to make his message of Christ’s millennial rule more appealing to a secular, media savvy audience. When the Second World War failed to unfold as predicted, Armstrong described the end of hostilities as a “recess” similar to the period between the two World Wars. By the early 1950’s, the ABC radio network syndicated Armstrong’s program and congregations began to coalesce around the media centers that carried his broadcast. By 1960, Armstrong’s Radio Church of God contained roughly 12,000 members.

The social upheavals of the 1960’s appeared to support Armstrong’s premillennial interpretations of the “end time.” Interest in his movement grew as the *World Tomorrow* broadcast, which expanded to television in 1967, extended around the globe and as he suggested that Christ might return by 1975.⁴ By the beginning of the 1970’s the Church, re-named the Worldwide Church of God, contained 60,000 members and many more adherents. The mellowing of social conditions within the United States and the failure of Christ to return as suggested slowed the growth of the fellowship. Without a conducive social context in the late 1970’s and the conservative early 1980’s, Armstrong created the image of the end through the skillful use of rhetoric and he often employed state-of-the-art graphics on the *World Tomorrow* television program. In 1985, the year before Armstrong’s death, Arbitron ratings listed the *World Tomorrow* as the number one religious program in the United States in markets reached, while Armstrong’s periodical, *The Plain Truth*, neared eight million newsstand and subscription copies each month.⁵ Church membership peaked at 120,000.

Armstrong successfully instilled in the minds of his followers the vision of a New World Order, the “World Tomorrow,” a largely agrarian but progressive age characterized by justice and fairness that would supplant the vicissitudes of modern life, especially the competitive capitalism and moral decay he believed characteristic of modern America. The Twentieth Century provided a fertile context for Armstrong’s message as the Great Depression, the Second World War, the nuclear threat of the Cold War, and social upheaval during the 1960’s led many Americans to search for an escape from the troubles of industrial society. Many Armstrong adherents experienced a psychological release from the pressures of everyday existence as they focused their vision on the utopian world to come.⁶

³Armstrong’s emphasis on the literal reign of Jesus Christ on the earth instead of a more ethereal conception of the “kingdom of God within you” is but one more manifestation of the age old struggle between Augustinian and millenarian visions. For more on this see Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800-1930*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 4.

⁴During the 1960’s and much of the 1970’s, Armstrong turned the primary duties of broadcasting over to his son Garner Ted Armstrong, a gifted orator. After a falling out over doctrinal and administrative differences, Herbert Armstrong excommunicated his son in 1978 and resumed all broadcasting.

⁵The Arbitron ranking of the *World Tomorrow* as the number one religious program in the United States in terms of markets reached appeared in the August 19, 1985 issue of the *Worldwide News*, a newspaper sent to members of the Worldwide Church of God. In May 1985, when the Arbitron report was released, the *World Tomorrow* was aired on 290 United States stations in 196 markets, reaching 98.8% of the population.

⁶See Barry Brummett, *Contemporary Apocalyptic Rhetoric*, (New York: Praeger, 1991), 9. Brummett argues that apocalyptic rhetoric “. . . empowers its audience to live in a time of disorientation and disorder by revealing to them a fundamental plan within the cosmos.”

But Church members did not have to wait until after the apocalypse to experience the benefits of the New World Order.⁷ It could be realized, albeit imperfectly, in the present through the observance of religious convocations. Like the Church of God, Seventh Day, the Worldwide Church of God observed the seventh-day Sabbath, which was believed to represent the seventh millennium of human history, that would correspond with Christ's reign from Jerusalem. From sundown Friday evening until sundown on Saturday, Worldwide Church of God members ceased from their labors in anticipation of the millennial rest. They gathered for worship services, often followed by lengthy fellowship, shared meals, and Bible study or contemplation.

Armstrong also introduced into the Worldwide Church of God, the observance of the annual festivals outlined in the Hebrew Scriptures, such as Unleavened Bread, Trumpets, and Tabernacles. While recognizing the historical origin of the festivals, Armstrong nonetheless re-interpreted them to indicate an ultimate fulfillment in the future. They therefore came to represent the annual re-enactment of a cosmic drama, mapping out a path of linear progression that helped to anchor believers in an insecure world.⁸

In particular, the Feast of Tabernacles, originally a fall agricultural festival, was believed to portray the "World Tomorrow" and for most members it was the highlight of the liturgical calendar by offering adherents a foretaste of the millennium. Believers gathered at regional sites in the United States and around the world, staying in temporary dwellings such as hotels, and worshiped for eight days in eager anticipation of Christ's return and the establishment of his earthly kingdom. This festival, like the weekly Saturday Sabbath, reassured Worldwide Church of God members that Christ was preparing them to rule in the coming age when the land would "flow with milk and honey" and the desert would "blossom like a rose."

Armstrong's most comprehensive treatment of the "world tomorrow" appeared in *Tomorrow What It Will Be Like*, a full length, hardcover book published in 1979 by Everest House, a church subsidized publishing house located in New York City.⁹ An examination of this work reveals why some Americans were attracted to an interpretation which Armstrong described as certain as "the rising of tomorrow's sun."¹⁰

Armstrong set the stage for his argument by contrasting what he considered the two most widely accepted views of humanity's future.¹¹ On the one hand, he portrayed an earth racked by environmental pollution and an ever-threatening population explosion, with, hostile, warring nations proving incapable of resolving their differences. Prospects for forming a world government to address these problems appeared bleak indeed.

⁷See David G. Bromley, "Constructing Apocalypticism: Social and Cultural Elements of Radical Organization," in Robbins, Thomas and Susan J. Palmer, eds. *Millennium, Messiahs, and Mayhem*. (New York: Routledge, 1997), 34. Bromley posits that "Socially the apocalyptic response is to distance from the existing social order and create an alternative order that models social relations on a vision of the new world to come." By observing convocations, such as the Feast of Tabernacles, which was believed to celebrate Christ's millennial kingdom, participants were upholding in the present world a festival that was held to be a fixture in the world to come (See also Zech. 14:17-19).

⁸Briefly, the seven annual festivals were the Passover or Lord's Supper which denoted the Savior's death, Unleavened Bread which recognized the putting away of sin, represented by leaven, Firstfruits, or Pentecost, which signified the founding of the Church and the coming of the Holy Spirit, Trumpets, which foreshadowed the Second Coming of Christ, Atonement, which looked forward to the binding of Satan, Tabernacles, which celebrated the millennial reign, and the Last Great Day, which corresponded with a period of judgement on the unsaved following the millennium.

⁹Herbert W. Armstrong, *Tomorrow: What It Will Be Like*. New York: Everest House, 1979.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 1.

¹¹See Stephen D. O' Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 4. O' Leary notes that ". . . when a prophet or prophetic interpreter proposes that the world is coming to an end, or that a period of millennial peace is about to begin, he or she is offering an argumentative claim that must be supported by reasons and proofs." Armstrong used contemporary conditions in society as the "proof" to support his rhetorical positions.

Yet Armstrong suggested that this seemed the most realistic descriptor of humanity's future given the contemporary conditions in society. For instance, Armstrong depicted Western education as decadent, infiltrated by German rationalism, and devoid of any spiritual insight. In what could be termed a "postmodern" approach, he questioned the theoretical underpinnings of science, suggesting that it was inherently unable to explain the purpose or meaning of life. Meanwhile, commerce and industry thrived on greed and corruption, exploiting the worst in human behavior in a desire for profit. Government was filled with people who sought office out of a desire for power and ego-inflation rather than to broaden the public good. The social order, across nations, but more prominently in the Western World, was divided between rich and poor, or between an elite and the poverty-stricken masses. The religions of the world had done little to produce tranquility and prosperity across the planet. Even Christianity, which heralded itself as the true religion, had obscured God's true message with an uninspiring gospel about the person of Jesus Christ.

Yet on the other hand, Armstrong acknowledged that the world of science and technology promised a future that he characterized as a "fantastic, push-button dreamworld of 'the three Ls—leisure, luxury, and license.'"¹² Referring to futurist Herman Kahn's 1976 work, *The Next 200 Years*, Armstrong demonstrated that Kahn foresaw a world of increasing prosperity as advances in science and technology forged a more enviable environment for human civilization.¹³ Armstrong also noted that in an earlier work, Kahn portrayed a more exciting future for the United States by 2000 A.D.¹⁴ It would be a world of leisure living, although some, albeit limited, social upheaval would occur as conditions would not be completely equalized. After presenting Kahn's depictions, Armstrong asked his readers, "does this kind of world sound good to you?"¹⁵

Perhaps afraid that some might respond in the affirmative, Armstrong pressed the point, reminding his readers of the utter impracticability of this scenario given the contemporary conditions in society, such as pollution and overcrowding. He continued by describing other possible features of such a technologically advanced world promoted by secular futurists including choosing the sex of children before they are conceived, human cloning, brain transplants, and genetic engineering, progress which, whatever its potential, likely seemed frightening to the average reader. After reading Armstrong's depiction of the forecasts of scientific progress, it is doubtful that few in his audience remained staunch supporters. But that is where Armstrong wanted them.

By discrediting any worthwhile future arising from the materialistic world of science, Armstrong skillfully pushed his readers into an acceptance that humanity would destroy itself. His rhetoric aside, it is a tenable position. Armstrong's readers could see that the conditions he described were true. Environmental pollution, overcrowding, and nuclear weaponry threatened civilization. Meanwhile, humans could not seem to get along. Race hatred and violence, including brutal murders, were regular features on the evening news and in the morning papers. Therefore, it made sense when Armstrong wrote:

¹²Armstrong, 4.

¹³Kahn, Herman, William Brown, and Leon Martel, *A Scenario For America and the World*. New York: William Morrow, 1976. Armstrong mentions only Kahn and does not refer to the other authors.

¹⁴Presumably either Kahn, Herman, *The Year 2000: A Framework for Speculation on the Next Thirty Years*, New York: Macmillan, 1967, or Herman Kahn and B. Bruce-Briggs, *Things to Come: Thinking About the 70's and 80's*. New York: McMillan, 1972. Armstrong's book does not contain a bibliography and the work is not named.

¹⁵Armstrong, 6.

Let's face it. Right now there are two alternatives. Either there does exist a living God of Supreme mind and total power, who will very soon step in and intervene in the affairs of the world, and save humanity from itself, or else the threatened extinction pictured above must inevitably soon occur.

There is no other alternative.¹⁶

If Armstrong had wanted to merely instill eschatological anticipation, he would have likely succeeded by this point, at least in the minds of most of those who would have been attracted to his book.¹⁷ But Armstrong wanted more. He wanted to offer a positive construction of a New World Order, a future which would make the endurance of the present world worthwhile. Before outlining his agenda, Armstrong offered a teaser of newspaper headlines that would characterize this new world including "Crime Rate Drops to Zero," "No Wars During This Year," "Disease Epidemics Disappear," and "Thousands of Hospital Properties Up for Sale."¹⁸ How would this be possible? Because Jesus Christ would supernaturally take over, banish Satan the Devil who, Armstrong contended, broadcasts his evil messages to humans who willingly accept them as an impetus to perform evil works, and establish a world government at Jerusalem. As foretold by the prophet Isaiah, the word of God would go forth from Zion, covering the entire earth (Isa.2:3) According to Armstrong, the 6,000 years of human civilization apart from God, inaugurated by an act of disobedience in the Garden of Eden, would at last end.

Armstrong outlined the general structure of this utopian world to come:

- 1) **A new world government.** Because humankind has proved incapable of self-governance, God would assume complete control.¹⁹ It would not be a government by the people, but a government for the people. Government appointees would be glorified beings, the firstfruits of God's harvest, who during the 6,000 years of human civilization, from righteous Abel to the "end time" generation, had submitted themselves to the rule of God. Humans, that is those who survive the Great Tribulation and the supernatural events surrounding Christ's return, and those born during the millennium, would be guided by these glorified kings and priests. This government would put down all rebellion and Christ would set out to re-educate and convert the world. These humans would observe the annual festivals, for instance the Feast of Tabernacles, as Armstrong argued was foretold by the prophet Zechariah in Zechariah 14:6.

Perhaps most intriguing, Armstrong offered a very detailed portrait of this world government, including suppositions of who would hold what positions. Armstrong suggested that it seems "very plain" that Abraham would be directly under Christ. Abraham, along with Isaac and Jacob would serve as a top-flight team. Furthermore, based on the vision of the transfiguration, Armstrong then concluded that Moses, an Israelite trained in the gentile court of Egypt, would direct government activity under the patriarchs; while the prophet Elijah, who restored worship of the true God in ancient Israel, would oversee all religious activity. A resurrected King David would rule over all twelve tribes of Israel, with each of the twelve apostles ruling a tribe under him. Under

¹⁶Ibid., 23.

¹⁷Barry Brummett demonstrates that apocalyptic rhetoric attracts those with a high sensitivity to events who are seeking an explanation to the world in which they live. But the sense of anomie is subjective, existing largely as a result of the audience's perceptions rather than an objective assessment of events. See Brummett, *Contemporary Apocalyptic Rhetoric*, 27-28.

¹⁸Armstrong, 26.

¹⁹For more detail on the "New World Government" see Armstrong's fourth chapter, pp. 40-60.

the apostles would be rulers over districts, states, shires, counties, and cities. Many of these presumably the members of the Church from the first century to the end-time who were rewarded according to their works as indicated in the parable of the pounds and the parable of the talents.

Armstrong then indicated that the prophet Daniel would govern, very possibly under Christ himself, or maybe under the patriarchs (Armstrong admitted that he was not sure), the Gentile nations. He then indicated that the Apostle Paul might direct all Gentile nations under Daniel. Armstrong suggested that Barnabas, Silas, Timothy, Titus and other of Paul's associates might work under him over the Gentile nations.

Armstrong also postulated that Noah would direct racial relocation while Joseph would govern the world's economy, including agriculture, industry, technology, and commerce. Under Joseph's likely direction, all poverty would be eliminated. Since Job was apparently a noted builder, Armstrong suggested he would direct urban renewal, "rebuilding the waste places and destroyed cities," possibly assisted by Zerubbabel. Armstrong's somewhat detailed and elaborate orchestration, although inferred from certain Biblical passages, was almost complete supposition. Yet the detail made the vision seem real. Through his rhetoric, Armstrong was able to offer a realistic, albeit supposed construct, for a world which existed in the minds of his readers.

- 2) A second structural component of this world is its **educational and religious system**.²⁰ Education, Armstrong noted, would at last be cleansed of the theory of evolution. In the "world tomorrow" the basis for education would be revelation. Moreover, the educational system was inseparable from the religious structure. From Jerusalem, the "headquarters church," would re-educate the whole world. Curiously, Armstrong used the message to the church at Philadelphia in Revelation 3 to suggest that the headquarters church would be at least partially staffed by those in the "Philadelphian era" of the Church founded by Christ in 31 A. D. Although this concept was not developed in this volume, members of the Worldwide Church of God, or long-time "co-workers" knew that the Philadelphian era was supposedly analogous to the Worldwide Church of God. Therefore, devotees could instantly recognize where they fit into this scheme, a recognition likely generating an intense feeling of excitement.
- 3) Third, all of the human inhabitants of this world would "**speak the same language**" (Zeph. 3:9), thus removing, in Armstrong's estimation, one "of the major barriers to mutual understanding and cooperation between peoples. . . ." ²¹ With a shared language, this would allow for the free and easy transmission of ideas, thereby assisting the goal of the knowledge of the Lord covering the earth as the waters cover the seas.

But Armstrong also provided other details as well. He invited his readers to

. . . glimpse into a world of no illiteracy, no poverty, no famine and starvation, into a world where crime decreases rapidly, people learn honesty, chastity, human kindness, and happiness -- a world of peace, prosperity, abundant well-being.²²

²⁰For more on this characteristic see Armstrong's fifth chapter, pp. 60-74.

²¹Armstrong, 89; chapter eight contains a discussion of the one pure language that Armstrong believed would serve as the conduit for verbal communication in this world.

²²Ibid., 75.

Furthermore, God would solve the world's most pressing problem, the pollution explosion, by reducing the "bare, snow-capped, craggy mountains," and making inhabitable vast expanses of land such as Antarctica, Greenland, Siberia, and the Kalahari, Sahara, and Gobi deserts. The oceans would be reduced in size and land beneath the sea would be reclaimed, thus increasing the usefulness of the earth's surface (Curiously, Armstrong failed to mention that he elsewhere predicted that only one-third of the earth's inhabitants would survive the Great Tribulation and enter the "world tomorrow.")

During an evangelistic career that spanned five decades, Herbert W. Armstrong successfully exploited the media to bring his concept of the "wonderful world tomorrow" to the attention of millions of people in the Western hemisphere. Only a small fraction of those who listened to the *World Tomorrow* or read the *Plain Truth* became members of the Worldwide Church of God. But for those who did, there was a future and a hope.

This provocative vision of a New World Order gave Herbert W. Armstrong and his followers a sense of security in an uncertain world. Things would become better, but not before they became worse, much worse. Yet no matter how bad they became, even if it meant losing one's life, the contours of history were predetermined, and, in the end, the Christian would triumph. Through the skillful use of language, Armstrong created in the minds of his audience a persuasive vision of a better world: a society without war, crime, disease, hatred, bitterness, and pollution. This utopian ideal was nothing less than a return to the paradise of Eden, when humankind enjoyed an innocence and intimacy with God, and reveled in the pristine beauty of an unpolluted world. For most of those who shared Armstrong's vision of this New World Order, their lives in the present world became immeasurably richer, less burdensome, and filled with a greater sense of anticipation than the lives of their counterparts. For at last, thanks to Herbert W. Armstrong, the world made sense.