

Response

Future as Existential Present

by

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It is a common question throughout history: “Which comes first, the chicken or the egg?” Does essence precede existence or is it the other way around? Keen’s challenge is not so much to consider this question again, as it is to own the consequences of the only answer that is yet plausible while the stone rolls into place at the tomb of modernity. Existence does not merely precede essence, it supplants essence — it’s all there is.

If Keen is correct, then his is indeed a radical challenge to the Church as we face the new millennium, for we face a future that is not yet written. We face a future that is radically open, ripe with possibilities, and fresh out of that which can be known. Of course, modernity and the West have never been able to accept this. We — and I say “we” because many of you are with me in Keen’s crosshairs — have embraced the *Tractatus*, but failed to read it to the end. And, ultimately, we have come to accept our own limitations, only to sneak a definitiveness into the equation, through the mind of an omniscient God.

I disagree, however, that all moderns do this. David Hume, for example, does not capitulate to “fundamental constancy.” His withering and decisive critique of causation and induction — the foundation of modernity’s chief monument to human progress and reason, modern science — can be understood as nothing less than an early death knell, heralding modernity’s demise. But Hume is conflicted. He serves as modernity’s pallbearer, even while he is relying on those same principles to reject the miracle of Jesus’ resurrection. Here Hume, too, falls prey to Keen’s critique, for Keen rightly notes that the “resurrection is a future that could not have come out of this past.” And so Hume, like Heidegger, Marx, Nietzsche, and so many others, has one foot in the grave with the rest of the West and one foot outside.

It is in the midst of modernity’s death-rattle that, according to Keen, the Church now stands to face the future. And as the Church peers into the murky, temporal beyond, it finds no hope there. No bright promise of a coming, golden age. No return to the Pollyanna vision of a socio-political utopia on earth. Not even a rough and ready course mapped out for its future in accordance with the will of God. Nothing. In the face of this lack of proleptic justification for the present, a present overflowing with strife, hunger, oppression, imperialism, death, and all manner of inexplicable evil, we cry out with Job, “Violence!”, and our prayer echoes off the walls as it fades to silence.

That is where Job, and we, would remain — terrified and motionless before an opaque future — were it not for the in-breaking of the risen Jesus. It is the power of the resurrection that enlivens the message of the One who walked among us. And it is the power of the resurrection that ultimately empowers the Church, you and me, to step out and face an uncertain future with certain hope. It is not a hope, however, that is founded in some coming promise, whether that be heaven or the final triumph of good over evil. Such a promise would become the end to which we aim, and the future would, sadly, become the means to that end. Rather, it is a hope in the One who walks beside us as

we leave the comfortable confines of the present, Jesus the Christ.

Whether or not this claim still appears radical to our sensibilities long dulled by trite, Sunday School answers and a fixation with the omni-qualities of God, the matter is clear: the future hope in which we put our trust is a Person who is with us now. A Person who propels us into a future that we cannot bring about in and of ourselves — a future that is given. A Person whose resurrection empowers us to expect the unexpected — to expect that we might feed the hungry, clothe the poor, empower the unempowered, free the oppressed, and live out holy love in a world where such love cannot come from our past, save for the power and grace of God. A Person who refuses to allow us to see the future as anything other than an end in itself — a momentary present from which we are always moving on, but where we are also always, and fundamentally existing as one made alive by the gracious empowering of the Spirit of God. A Person who reminds us that existence supplants essence, that our hope is founded in One who has been crucified and raised again, and that the future we face is to be lived out, moment by moment, in the present and for its own sake.

Of course, there are certain questions that arise from this discussion and which, it seems to me, are in need of being addressed. First, is the view that the unexpected is to be expected anything more than an overly naive optimism or pious sentimentality? If not, how do we convince a skeptical Church and / or world of this? Second, how do we, as Wesleyans, best address the data, biblical or otherwise, which suggests that Christian hope is appropriately associated with eschatological events? Third, is the death of modernity and the emphasis on existence over essence meaningful at all in contexts in which modernity has never been born and existence is all that is known? That is, are the concerns that Keen addresses here concerns that, finally, only the West faces? However we respond to these and other questions, Keen has done us a service by beginning a dialogue that we would do well to continue as our Church steps out in faith into the new millennium.