EXCURSUS I

Richard John Neuhaus on Herman Kahn's Religionless Religion

Signs are that Herman Kahn and his colleagues at the Hudson Institute will succeed once again in jolting popular consciousness by their unabashed advocacy of the unfashionable. *The Next 200 Years* (Morrow) is the first in a series of books to emerge from the "Prospects for Mankind" project, and projects a much more hopeful "scenario for America and the world" than we've been accustomed to in recent years. As a carefully constructed response to current ecohysterias and no-growth dogmas, *The Next 200 Years* is a welcome contribution to public debate about the kind of future we envision. In short, Kahn & Co. propose that in the year 2176 a world population four times its present size can be living at the level of affluence and comfort enjoyed today by North America. They are careful to say this happy prospect is by no means certain; it is, they contend, desirable and possible.

Stipulating for the moment the plausibility of the argument, it raises provocative questions about "how we get from here to there." In the study regular reference is made to the importance of "values," "attitudes," and "morale." The authors recognize that there are today widespread beliefs that tend to undercut the moral legitimacy, and thus the determination, their proposal requires. That is, religious certification has been withdrawn from the quest for prosperity through technological and economic growth. Yet the question of religion and belief systems is nowhere addressed directly in *The Next 200 Years*. At an early May symposium launching the new book Kahn allowed that "something like a religious revival is key to the whole enterprise." "But," he added, "if I said that directly and publicly, it would turn off 98 per cent of the audience [we are trying to reach]." One wonders.

Social scientists increasingly discount the force of the supposedly "secularized" mindset to which Kahn is playing. There is likely a greater openness to public discussion of basic beliefs—including religious beliefs—than is generally recognized. Certainly it makes little sense to call for a renewal of traditional belief in history, progress, and human hope, and then to relegate the discussion of what we believe to the realm of the private and subjective.

Kahn compounds the problem when he says, as he did at the May symposium, that the factor of justice is not included in the study's calculations because "justice costs too much." It's a good line, appealing to the resolutely hard-nosed, but it is egregiously offensive to a moral tradition that insists upon the priority of justice. What must charitably be called Kahn's confusion about the social role of religion was evident in his opening remarks at the symposium, in which he said that the attitudes necessary to achieve the desired "postindustrial world" are likely based upon the Judeo-Christian tradition. Yet later, in response to a question, he expressed the hope that we would learn from the Eastern religions a "reverence for nature" that is "entirely lacking" in Western religion. The two statements would seem to be incompatible, the latter reflecting the well-known thesis of Lynn White that Western religion is at the root of the ecological crisis. (For a critique of White's argument see Thomas Derr, "Religion's Responsibility for the Ecological Crisis: An Argument Run Amok," *Worldview*, January, 1975.)

Such conventional confusions aside, Kahn's basic instinct would seem to be sound. There is a connection between what a people believe about the world and its future and what they are prepared to do about it; and such beliefs are sustained or undermined by religious traditions. Seventy-five years ago Henry Churchill King expressed the then accepted rationale for foreign mission work by liberal Christians, claiming that human progress, in terms of Western technical civilization, went hand in hand with Western religious principles. There was great danger, King argued, that Eastern nations would "fail to realize how unified a thing, after all, Western civilization is; and how impossible, therefore, it becomes permanently to reap its fruits and reject its roots."

This argument is today roundly condemned as ethnocentric and even imperialistic. This does not mean it is entirely without merit. The excruciatingly delicate question that respectable opinion has agreed to avoid is whether the technological and economic progress desired by most of the world is not accompanied by some degree of "Westernization." The connection between "modernity" and operative worldviews—respecting, for examples, human nature and the purposiveness of history—cannot be evaded forever. Kahn is right: Such cultural and religious assumptions are "key" to the future he envisions.

At present the intellectual climate is implacably hostile to anything that might imply a manifest destiny, or even an opaque destiny, for Western civilization. The likes of Henry Churchill King stand little chance of getting a hearing today. At a more modest level, however, *The Next 200 Years* does challenge us to reconsider the moral and religious legitimations for the present mood of guilt and fear that has set so many minds against technological progress and its supporting cultural assumptions. In that reconsideration, Kahn and colleagues might be of greater help if their call for religious recovery did not evade the question of religion. As it is, their posture of secularized scientism is itself an obstacle "to getting from here to there." By accommodating to the divorce between hard-nosed science and spiritual values, they leave the hearts, and probably the minds, of the people to the Church of the Sierra Club and to other nature religions that demonize everything *The Next 200 Years* proposes.