

"It seemed like a good idea at the time."

Beginning-of-the-Third-Millennium ruminations on our ignorance of the future

In my circle of friends, the saying which forms this Thinksheet's title has of late become a trigger for laughter. Is it so in your circle? And is the laughter recent, or am I just getting up to speed on this one?

In the hope that it'll say something significant about human if not also divine nature, here's a list of what pops into my mind. You'll benefit more if you make your own before reading mine.

1 Arafat's on his way to Washington in desperate hope that Clinton can work a peace miracle in his fast declining White House days. To the Palestinians, *it seemed like a good idea at the time* (1948) for five Arab armies to try to destroy the UN-created State of Israel. It was so bad an idea that ever since, the Palestinians have had no realistic hope that their sufferings through all the subsequent years could produce a political territory as favorable as they could have had in 1948 with no struggle at all.

2 To the UN, *it seemed like a good idea at the time* (1947) to partition Palestine into two entities, in hope of (1) providing a "Jewish homeland" & (2) preventing inter-people violence in the political vacuum created by the collapse of the British Mandate. But even at the time, many thoughtful rabbis thought a Jewish state, no matter how good it seemed for some Jews, would be bad for rabbinism, the landless form of Judaism developed after the AD/CE 70 loss of Jerusalem and a Jewish sub-government under Rome. And some thoughtful Christians thought a racial state would inevitably become racist & both territories would become less favorable to Christians (who were, e.g., 85% of Bethlehem & now are less than 10%). In the light of the continuing power-impasse & justice-impossibility, many of us now feel that in 1947 the UN had a bad idea.

3 Iatrogenic tragedy ("medicine" being worse than nothing): Bloodletting to cure G. Washington *seemed like a good idea at the time* (1799), but it killed him. The genome project may project us into such health-control as by comparison will make much of today's medical practice seem anti-health.

4 Cloning *seemed like a good idea at the time* (till "Dolly"), but its threats are beginning to run ahead of its promises.

5 Explosive fission/fusion *seemed like a good idea at the time* (1943 at the U. of Chicago; I was there when president R.M. Hutchins called the first successful chain-reaction "good news of damnation"), but Einstein was wrong (we found out much later) when he persuaded FDR to war-purpose division of the "indivisible" (the literal meaning of Gk. "a-tom") on the ground of fear that Hitler might "get there first" (much later Einstein learned that Hitler was nowhere near splitting the atom). Conundrum: We were wrong to produce "the bomb" & (in my opinion) right to use it; but the cost in radioactive pollution continues to rise as does the threat of terrorist use (even if the threat of war use is declining). The argument that "Somebody else would have made 'the bomb' if we didn't" is not morally convincing or even technologically certain. The dogma that "What can be done will be done" is certainly an instance of defeatist immorality.

6 Genetic engineering *seemed like a good idea at the time* (1994), but the hidden costs & threats are emerging at an increasing pace. (Bio-engineering vis-a-vis religion will be the theme of the Craigville Theological Colloquy the second July week of this year.)

7 The medical reduction of infant mortality without effective parallel reduction of birth *seemed like a good idea at the time* (19th century on into the 20th); but escalating environmental degradation from population excesses is already, in many places, lowering the quality & therefore also the dignity of human life.

8 Egalitarianism *seemed like a good idea at the time* (the Enlightenment [esp. the French Revolution] down to the present), but it has spawned such horrors as Communism, radical feminism, the "multicultural" mania, & same-sex "marriage."

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7 Not building "19--" into computers *seemed like a good idea at the time*, but that's how we got the Y2K fright & the scramble to reprogram millions of computers. Just yesterday (12.31.00), all the electric trains in one country quit till the reprogrammers could get to them....A useless fact I just thought of: How is this year (01.01.01) like the year Jesus was 18 (I think, the year 11)? They are two of the only three digital (1+0) years in the history of the world (the first, of course, being Year One). But there I went again, dropping the first two numerals (20--) in the year. And yes, we do have one more digital day to come: 11.11.11.

8 Back to the French Revolution: Dumping religion *seemed like a good idea at the time*, but the religion that got dumped was the main support for the humane values without which the revolution deteriorated into the Reign of Terror. Further, when God goes the gods come. A press release today has science-fiction Arthur Clarke atheistically dreaming, as did atheist Carl Sagan, of "intelligent life out there," for which there's less evidence than there is for the Trinity. To me, that religion seems pathetically infantile, yet he calls traditional religion a "disease of infancy": it's become taboo in his "3001: The Final Odyssey." He can even come up with this nobrainer: "One of my objections to religion is that it prevents the search for God, if there is one. I have an open mind on the subject, if there's anything behind the universe. And I'm quite sympathetic with the views that there could be."

9 Haven't you said it yourself? Even though we can "understand" life only backward, we must live it forward: light on the past, blind to the future (though revelation gives biblical folk visions of the final resolution of history & cosmos).

10 Sometimes, when it *seemed like a good idea at the time*, it was. It was because what were being served were, in Fosdick's phrase, "abiding values in changing categories." It was because the Mystery beyond all meanings was being honored, as in the timeless music we saw-heard (in our own home!) as both the Philadelphia & the Boston Symphony lifted our New Year's Eve spirits. "What cannot be shaken will last" (Heb.12.27). "Some principle of being abides" (#3014). "Es wirt; regiert" (Karl Barth's last words, which I paraphrase thus: "God's kingdom will come: he already reigns!").....The hymn overreaches: "the future" is not "all unknown" to us Christians. With realism we warn against spiritualistic prognosticators, diviners, astrologers: with humility we confess, with Jesus (Mt.24: 36; M.13:32), that the future's details are unavailable to us by divine design; & with joy we sing in the liturgy about the Lord of time: "Christ died [past]; Christ is risen [present]; Christ will come again [future]."

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