

HOPE IN TROUBLED TIMES

A NEW VISION FOR CONFRONTING GLOBAL CRISES

BOB GOUDZWAARD, MARK VANDER VENNEN,
AND DAVID VAN HEEMST

Foreword by Archbishop Emeritus Desmond M. Tutu
Nobel Peace Prize Laureate


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To

Gerald Vandezande, C.M.
tireless advocate for public justice for all

and

Ellie and Maggie Van Heemst
two of God's precious children

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FOREWORD

During the darkest days of apartheid, when so many of God's precious children in South Africa were being brutally dehumanized, tortured, and murdered simply because of a biological irrelevance (their skin color), I used to say to white South Africans that they should join the winning side. I used to tell them that we had already won, that victory over the injustice of apartheid was assured.

At the time you would have been forgiven if you had thought me more than a little nuts or even that I had lost my mind altogether! So little seemed to support the view that apartheid's days were numbered. Legally sanctioned separation of married couples and families, crippling restrictions on education for black children, enforced deep poverty, tear-gassing, bombing, arrest, banning, detention, imprisonment, torture, and murder were rampant and getting worse. Apartheid's cruel reach extended even beyond South Africa: later we were to learn that from 1980 to 1988 the South African Defense Force, in pursuit of so-called terrorist bases outside of our territory, caused the deaths of 1.5 million people and created four million refugees in neighboring countries. South Africa was then in the grip of a deadly racist ideology, one that controlled virtually every institution and every aspect of life. The apartheid ideology was an all-pervasive set of values, judgments, and perceptions of reality, and it was pressing its crushing reign of terror on so many of God's vulnerable people.

So you might have called me crazy for saying that we had already won, when all the evidence said that apartheid was winning. Yet I was expressing my real conviction that God has created a *moral* universe, that God cares deeply about justice and injustice. Unjust regimes ultimately always fall because they seek to deny something that cannot be denied.

In God's precious world, there is no way that injustice, oppression, racism, hatred, and dehumanization can have the final word! At the end of the day, "in the fullness of time" (to use the apostle Paul's marvelous phrase), God's higher laws would prevail. To top it off, the prayers of so many people around the world upheld us. How could we fail?

Even at that dark moment God was already transfiguring the darkest evil into a shining good. Nelson Mandela was released on February 11, 1990, a man who after twenty-seven years of harsh imprisonment emerged without bitterness but full of compassion and forgiveness. Then came the historic election of April 27, 1994, the first democratic election in South Africa, when at age 63 I voted for the first time. Though powerful forces had aligned with the intent to disrupt that event violently, astonishingly, to the surprise of so many, especially the cynics, none of the predicted violence happened. And on May 10, 1994, a day of national celebration, Nelson Mandela was inaugurated as the first democratically elected president of South Africa. Apartheid had been defeated!

Many people, not just in South Africa but throughout the world, anticipated an orgy of violent reprisal and retribution in postapartheid South Africa. The world held its breath, waiting for the almost certain bloodbath. Miraculously, it didn't happen. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established, and a wrenching but exhilarating national reconciliation process began. Confounding the skeptics, South Africa found a third way, rejecting the options of retributive justice and general amnesty. Amnesty was offered for politically motivated human rights abuses under the strict condition that perpetrators reveal the whole truth of their actions. Dark secrets that otherwise would probably never have been told were disclosed, making possible sometimes astounding moments of repentance, forgiveness, and restoration. Critics called our process the "Kleenex commission," but this was not "namby-pamby social work," as some would have it; this was the stuff of hardcore realpolitik. We learned that peace is not a goal to be achieved but a way of life to be lived.

As the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission moved ahead, I wondered if the downfall of apartheid and South Africa's subsequent process of national reconciliation could serve as a message, a lesson for the world.

As I have traveled since to some of the most conflict-ridden areas of the world, including Northern Ireland, the Middle East, Haiti, and various parts of Africa, I have met intense interest in South Africa's story, and I have come to see, amazingly, that the answer is yes.

Hope in Troubled Times affirms a resounding yes again, and I am delighted to commend this book to you.

In our troubled world, apartheid is not the only ideology that has programmed the thinking and the behavior of people. Ideologies of identity, materialism, and security undermine development and progress in so many parts of the world. Yet at the center of this book is a message of hope. The authors are inviting us to join the winning side. Contrary to all the evidence, *Hope in Troubled Times* makes the audacious claim that ideologies of identity, limitless materialism, and absolute security have already been defeated. Bob Goudzwaard, Mark Vander Vennen, and David Van Heemst are not optimists but realists. Their specific proposals are the stuff of political realism. In God's world, where each of us is God's precious child and where the risen Jesus is reconciling all things, the last word does not belong to vicious ideologies but rather to the One who tenderly holds our history in his hands. God's justice, forgiveness, truth, mercy, and love—they shall overcome.

That is South Africa's message to the world, one that affirms the claim of this book. South Africa's victory over apartheid is living evidence that deadly ideologies do not in the end carry the day. Remarkably, humorously, through us (of all weak, wounded people) God is saying to the world, "See, they had a nightmare called apartheid. They had what many thought was an intractable problem. They were not exceptionally smart, they lacked power and expertise, and they were more of a hopeless case. But because of them, no longer can anyone say, 'We have an intractable problem.' If apartheid can fall in South Africa, then ideologies of identity, materialism, and security can end too." God is dreaming of a world where all people, black and white, rich and poor, clever and not so clever, are drawn into one family, a world where all of us participate as agents in God's inexorable transfiguration of evil into good. How can we lose?

I accept the invitation offered by the authors to join the winning side, and I wholeheartedly invite you to do the same.

Desmond M. Tutu
Archbishop Emeritus
Nobel Peace Prize Laureate

PART 1

// *SETTING THE STAGE* //

/ 1 /

IN THE SHADOWS OF PROGRESS

A Parable

Our world seems to live under the curse of scrambling for solutions but not finding them.

The disturbing upshot is that most in-depth international reports now express the resounding conviction that today's most pressing, implacable problems—dilemmas like global poverty, environmental devastation, and global violence—really can deteriorate no further without catastrophic consequences.

A story from an unlikely time and place may shed some light on our own situation. In the eighteenth century, a European explorer happened upon an island in the South Pacific almost completely denuded of vegetation, trees, fresh water, and animal life. The island, named Rapa Nui by its inhabitants and Easter Island by the explorer, was populated by only a few unwell people and by hundreds of gigantic, spectacular stone-sculpture idols. Even now the best engineering minds have scarcely grasped how the islanders could have sculpted and positioned the colossal statues. According to the few survivors, though the island had been fertile and had supported thousands of inhabitants, the chiefs and priests had promised that stone gods would deliver prosperity the likes of which had not been seen before. "The people had been seduced by a kind of progress that becomes a mania, an 'ideological pathology,' as some anthropologists call it."¹ Caught up in that mania, the islanders gradually off-loaded their practice

of caring for each other and the island to their stunning stone creations, the perceived source of their prosperity. But the stone idols, spectacular marvels of human engineering, exacted a punishing revenge instead. Chillingly, their insatiable demands for resources consumed their makers and the island's once abundant life.

This book argues that, in a vastly different environment, contemporary "ideological pathologies" not unlike the one that ravaged Easter Island lie at the foundation of some of today's seemingly most irresolvable global problems. We suggest that many of the spectacular forces of Western progress today—unprecedented marvels of human achievement such as contemporary market forces, technological development, scientific progress, the state, and power unleashed—have become elevated to a status not unlike the position of privilege occupied by the stunning stone idols on Easter Island. Most basically, against this backdrop we seek to help build the capacity of all of us, from all walks of life, to participate in implementing actual solutions. But we do so inspired by a deep hope, for it is our unwavering, enduring conviction that there is real hope for our troubled, mired world—genuine, concrete hope that deeply engages global poverty, environmental destruction, and widespread violence.

This chapter introduces the approach that then serves as the foundation for the remainder of the book.

Missing Solutions

The opening statement, "Our world seems to live under the curse of scrambling for solutions but not finding them," would sound overly dramatic, not to mention tinged with fatalism, if it were not for the fact that over the last three years a number of researchers have sounded new alarm bells. Strikingly, however, the solutions proposed in almost all their reports do not sound convincing. The medicines prescribed do not correspond with the depth of the ailments. Consider three examples.

The Environment

In 2005 the United Nations published a compelling report entitled "Millennium Ecosystem Assessment."² More than 1,300 scientists from 95 countries collaborated over a period of four years to produce this study. Its primary conclusion, supported by numerous investigations in various disciplines and by reams of empirical data, is that the collapse of a number of natural systems is imminent. The belching of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere is accelerating climate change, while the overuse of natural resources is causing irreversible damage to the environment.

Never before, argues the report, has the destruction wreaked by people on the environment been as pronounced as it is today.

The report makes an invaluable contribution by thoroughly documenting these realities. However, if its readers are looking in it for concrete ways of slackening the pressure on the environment, they leave disappointed. The report merely comes to the “overriding conclusion that it lies within the power of human society to ease the strains we are putting on the natural resources of the planet.”³ Beyond that it makes only the all-too general observations that “acquiring this will require radical changes in the way nature is treated at every level of decision-making” and that nature’s value “[should] be taken into account for all economic decisions.”⁴

Terror and Technology

Our second witness is the internationally esteemed astronomer Sir Martin Rees of Cambridge, England. In 2004 Rees published a fascinating book entitled *Our Final Century: Will Civilization Survive the Twenty-first Century?*⁵ In Rees’s estimation, the odds of humanity surviving this century are not high. The nature of technological development causes him grave concern:

Science is advancing faster than ever, and on a broader front: bio-, cyber-, and nanotechnology all offer exhilarating prospects; so does the exploration of space. But there is a dark side: new science can have unintended consequences; it empowers individuals to perpetuate acts of megaterror; even innocent errors could be catastrophic. The “downside” of twenty-first century technology could be graver and more intractable than the threat of a nuclear devastation that we have faced for decades. . . . The theme of this book is that humanity is more at risk than at any earlier phase in history.⁶

Rees raises alarm, for example, about the prospect that some of the remaining stockpiles of Russian long-range nuclear missiles, still capable of destroying the world many times over, could fall into the hands of criminal states. Yet he does not go beyond issuing incisive warnings. In his view we cannot stop technological development as such; only here and there, at the most, have people successfully been able to alter its course or slow it down.

Global Poverty

A third example is *The End of Poverty*, an outstanding study done by Jeffrey Sachs, the tireless director of the United Nations’ well-known

Millennium Project.⁷ The Millennium Project originated in official agreements made in 2000 by government leaders from 189 countries. By 2015, among other commitments, leaders agreed to provide at least basic education for all children, reduce the number of people who live in extreme poverty by at least half, substantially cut child and maternal mortality rates, and reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS and malaria. Achieving these objectives is desperately needed, particularly in Africa. However, meeting them is not going well.⁸ By 2005, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) had already expressed doubts that the goals would be met. The concern explains the passionate appeal issued by Sachs and by “One: The Campaign to Make Poverty History”: the project can work and must work, but it will not work without large sums of money. “The big money is what the year 2005 is about,” Sachs declared in the March 14, 2005, issue of *Time*. In as short a period as possible, the wealthy countries need to increase their development assistance to 0.7 percent of their gross domestic product.

Sachs’s impassioned appeal is well-intentioned and essential, and it represents only one of numerous recommendations. But consider two observations. First, this is not the first time that experts have proposed to combat world poverty by dramatically increasing development assistance. That very proposal launched the United Nations’ so-called Development Decade in 1970. The initiative failed (partly because of the oil crisis of 1973).⁹ Moreover, at that time the approach included an appeal to renew the distribution of labor around the world, an issue we hear nothing about today; now money alone will do the job. The second observation involves the length of the time frames adopted. The deadline for achieving many current environmental objectives (the Kyoto Protocol) is 2012; the date for the Millennium Goals is 2015. Why do decision-makers not adopt at least a few more limited objectives in the short term? It is difficult to suppress the suspicion that government leaders have wanted to make a good impression; perhaps in the background lurks the thought that by 2012 or 2015 they personally will not have to bear responsibility for meeting the objectives. Making promises is easier than keeping them.

Political Will

These examples illustrate that the concern is genuine. Further, never have experts voiced the concern more articulately and forcefully than today. But the solutions are either stereotypical or even simply missing.

Critics often claim that today’s impasses do not become resolved because of a lack of political will. They argue that politicians in the wealthy

countries have their hands tied because the majority of their constituents now belong to the content majority, voters who do not want anything to interfere with their economic interests. No doubt this plays a role. But in our view lack of political will does not sufficiently explain why we do not put real solutions into practice, especially now, when so much is at stake not only for the world's poor but also for the inhabitants of the wealthy countries—even their very survival. Is the answer then that most politicians today simply give in, capitulate to the current problems? That seems hard to believe. On the contrary, today's world seems more and more gripped by the urgency of finding new ways out, because the existing remedies hardly work. But we have not yet found new ways.

Why then has the ability to find new solutions, and to build the capacity to implement them, proved to be so elusive?

Endings

Perhaps a first clue to an answer lies in a striking new development, one that may discourage people from becoming engaged in redirecting the current crises. More and more commentators use the word “end” to describe our time. Book titles such as *The End of History*, *The End of Ideology*, *The End of Faith*, *The End of Nature*, and *The End of Science* point to a gathering awareness that the world is deeply changing.¹⁰ So profound are the changes that people can make out something like a fissure or a break in time. Taken together, titles like these seem to suggest that as a society we do not know what lies ahead, but we do know that the future will not unfold according to the patterns and certainties of the past. Though the predictions of experts have reached new levels of sophistication, what the future holds may be less clear than ever because the future lies on the other side of the divide. It is therefore not surprising that the standard approaches have begun to fail and that, as a result, the public at large is now grappling with heightening anxiety about the future.

The advent of globalization and the rising complexity of our postmodern society do not adequately explain that anxiety. Mingled with it are elements of loss of perspective, helplessness, and even despair. Indeed, many people in today's society feel they no longer have a significant impact on the events that most influence their lives. Sometimes people even admit to a baffling sense that the future does not belong to them as much as it once did, as if the future itself decided to embark upon its own self-determined course. But that is a most disquieting, even paralyzing feeling, one that could cause people to enter zones of distraction (such as with iPods and other amenities of modern technology) and dissociate

themselves from the grave crises of our time. If the future to a certain extent seems to be setting off on its own, dislodging itself from our influence, then where will it bring us? And what might it do to us?

The Solution Paradox

Add to this a second, possibly related clue. Remarkably, not only have terrorism, global poverty, and environmental destruction become unresponsive to current approaches, but also the solutions themselves often either intensify the problems they were intended to solve or create new and even more serious problems. Too often the cure is worse than the disease. Four examples serve to illustrate this “solution paradox.”

The Distribution of Global Wealth and Poverty

In today’s world, deepening impoverishment and increasing enrichment appear to go hand in hand. In 1969 the incomes of the wealthiest 20 percent of the world’s population were 30 times higher than those of the poorest 20 percent of the earth’s people. By 1990 that gap had doubled: the incomes of the wealthiest 20 percent were 60 times higher than those of the poorest 20 percent. The difference factor is now 83.¹¹ Jeffrey Sachs reports that not only does half of Africa’s population live in extreme poverty, but also “this proportion has actually grown worse over the past two decades as the rest of the world has grown more prosperous.”¹² How could this grim reality have come about precisely on the heels of the 1970s, the decade designated by world leaders to “end world poverty”?

The solutions implemented during the “Development Decade” centered on transferring more money and technology to the South. Strikingly, however, that solution triggered a powerful boomerang effect, one that has operated since the beginning of the 1980s. Capital still flows from the North to the South in the form of development aid and so-called direct foreign investments. But each year since 1982, the total combined amount of official capital flows to the South, both multilateral and bilateral, has been substantially lower than the amount of capital the South has had to send back to the North in the form of interest payments and amortization on debts.¹³ In 2000, debt payments made by the so-called developing countries to the rich nations and their banks equaled 6.3 percent of their gross domestic product (GDP); in that same year direct foreign investments totaled 2.5 percent of their GDP, while official development assistance (ODA) accounted for no more than 0.6 percent.¹⁴ Margaret Thatcher, the former prime minister of Great Britain, once accurately

described this “negative net transfer”—the net outflow of capital from the poor countries of the South to the rich countries of the North—as the exact opposite of development aid.¹⁵ And it is partly this reality—the fact that the reverse net transfer of capital carries on unimpeded—that causes a number of experts to voice skepticism that the Millennium Goals will be achieved. Regrettably, the hard-won debt cancellation agreement arrived at in June 2005 by the G8 finance ministers does not alter the boomerang effect: the debt canceled represents only 2 percent of the total external debt owed by the developing countries, and the initiative leaves altogether untouched the conditions that create indebtedness among the poor countries.¹⁶

Security

Global poverty is not the only area plagued by the solution paradox. Tragically, mounting evidence—including the violent deterioration of civil society in Iraq and the terrorist bombings in Bali, Madrid, and London—shows that terror and homeland security have also worsened in the face of the current remedies. Clearly, preemptive war, curtailing civil liberties for the purpose of preventing further attacks, increasing armament levels through the application of more advanced technology and increased expenditures, and enhancing the destructive capacity of the military for strategic purposes—these have not solved terrorism. Even as world government military expenditures exceeded US\$1 trillion in 2004, the number of serious international terrorist attacks, according to official US government figures, more than tripled (from 175 to 655) from 2003 to 2004.¹⁷ The wealthy countries try to guarantee their security by vigorously expanding their arsenals of destruction, yet it is largely this escalation that threatens peace. Even a child understands that if countries all around the world, particularly neighboring ones, adopt arms escalation as the primary prescription for security, then global insecurity increases rather than decreases. Moreover, the alarming pressure that arms escalation is now putting on the world’s increasingly scarce resources, especially oil, causes further destabilization. The winning of wars now occupies such prominence that the winning of peace seems less and less conceivable.

An almost unlimited faith in the power of increasingly advanced arms technology is thriving today. That faith animates the US Space Command’s report *Vision for 2020*, which proposes to “dominate the space dimension of military operations” by deploying advanced space-based laser weapons technology, technology that can, in principle, link with nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons. It was therefore not an accident that the United States, without whose efforts the long-standing

treaty banning space-based weapons would not have come into effect, recently withdrew from its provisions.

The Environment

News media reports today portray increasing disruption in the environment. Stories document melting ice caps and glaciers, a rise in the number and severity of tornados and hurricanes, serious flooding, rapid desertification, greater temperature extremes in the summer and winter, possible rerouting of ocean currents, and an accelerating decline in animal and plant species.

But the solutions proposed sound one-dimensional. They rely largely on either market forces—such as the trade in emission or pollution quotas, which in fact amounts to the East and the South “selling” their environment for use by others—or developing and deploying new environmental technologies. Of course, efforts to put a price tag on current environmentally destructive activities and to apply technologies to lighten the human footprint on the earth are most welcome. But far too few decision-makers recognize that, at best, solutions like these help only temporarily. They merely postpone rather than resolve the dilemma. Deploying market forces and more advanced environmental technologies do not help if, at the same time, the volume of mass consumption expands relentlessly. Mass consumption, which is increasingly highly energy- and environment-intensive, is rising sharply not only in the wealthy North but also in countries whose economies are rapidly expanding, such as India and China. Again and again this cumulative effect cancels out the conservation effect of the accepted solutions. Conserving the environment is then like trying to drain a flood without first shutting off the tap, as the global conferences on environmental issues in Rio de Janeiro, Kyoto, and Johannesburg only partially admitted.

Casting market forces and future technological development as the ultimate solution to present-day global environmental problems therefore creates a contradictory effect because it allows us to sidestep almost every painful measure needed now. And insistently hammering away only on solutions such as these, in the context of decision-makers’ ongoing, renewed faith in what technology and the market can do, merely aggravates rather than eases the predicament. Sooner or later, solutions portrayed as panaceas turn against their users.

The consumption effect means that well-intentioned measures to curb the decline of plant and animal species around the globe are rarely effective. In 1989 one species disappeared each day; by 2002, despite widespread adoption of the Treaty on Biodiversity, that rate had reached one species each hour.¹⁸

Financial Markets

Finally, perhaps the most intriguing solution paradox involves the unpredictability and volatility of today's so-called financial markets. Traditionally, decision-makers have viewed money and finance as means that enable the "real" economy of goods and services to function properly. But indications suggest that the world of finance now enjoys an unprecedented degree of independence or autonomy, to the point where its relationship with the real economy is more that of master than of servant. Financial markets, with their products and derivatives, have expanded far faster than real markets. They have largely become global markets (currency markets, share markets, option markets, and so forth) through which financiers channel immense flows of capital. As a startling sign of how much these markets have assumed center stage in our international financial system, consider that every day and a half the amount of capital that circulates around the globe in the so-called pure financial circuit roughly equals the total debt of the developing countries. Every six hours more money is exchanged in this circuit than has been disbursed by the World Bank in its entire fifty-year history.¹⁹

The order of dependency has actually been reversed. To a large extent, the world's real economies have become dependent on the financial markets, not the other way around. These markets decide whether the currency of a country rises or falls, and they determine which companies and countries receive capital assistance and which do not. For most such markets, the decisive factor is maximum short-term profitability. A number of countries today are therefore deeply plagued by real concern, if not outright fear, over what global speculative capital and the financial markets will do to their economies. Global capital can leave a country almost overnight, and fear over possible rapid losses of huge sums of capital might be called the new Big Brother syndrome.

What explains this transfer or reversal of power? Why do nations and the world as a whole make themselves so dependent on the so-called autonomy of modern global financial markets, so much so that even today governments lower their taxes on capital and burden their economies with huge expenditure cuts just to remain acceptable in the eyes of this new, ever-watchful Big Brother?

The answer aside, one commentator observes: "Financial capital enjoys a privileged position, . . . [but] financial markets are inherently instable."²⁰ The instruments that have assumed the captain's seat and now largely steer the real economy are by nature unstable and unreliable pilots, contributing to the reality that the world's future course is becoming harder and harder to discern.

The Shadow Sides of Progress

Let us now draw together these two clues—the emerging dividing line in time and today’s solution paradox. Clearly, they converge. Unexpectedly, more money, technology, science, and market forces—solutions that until recently seemed self-evident—often cause global poverty, global insecurity, environmental ruin, and the tyranny of financial markets to deteriorate even further. The solutions themselves lead to stalemates or deadlocks, to a number of specific, discernible end points in our time. The presence of such end points suggests that, to some extent, the means people use have begun to take control, with the result that the end of history, science, and nature as we now know them is approaching.

Perhaps then the current sense of a threatening future has surfaced not just in response to external events, such as the shocking, hideous attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. It has also arisen internally within Western society as a result of the failing forces of progress, failures intimately related to the four illustrations just sketched. In one way or another each example centers around what the forces of progress—such as economic growth, capital, and technology—are capable of doing, not just for us but also *to us* and *against us*.

In short, the arrival of a better society by means of ongoing economic and technological progress has not lived up to expectations. As members of Western society, we do still value any number of important technological breakthroughs, and we embrace the positives of economic growth. But economic growth and technological development have not solved the gnawing problem of rising poverty, despite the fact that we live in an age of unprecedented wealth. Never before has society witnessed such high numbers of addicted and overfed people living next door to millions of underfed people, even as people on both sides fear losing everything. Technological development and economic growth have even cast frightening shadows over us by increasing our power to destroy the earth and to manipulate people’s minds and tastes, not to mention genes. Indeed, though we usually see ourselves as the movers and shakers of science, economy, and technology, in the end we too often find ourselves in the vulnerable position of feeling like objects that are themselves in the process of being moved.

Of course, advanced technologies still do improve health, enhance crops, clean the environment, increase modes of communication, and develop faster means of transportation. But the problems they often leave in their wake—genetic risks, an overabundance of information, rising addiction, more stress and burnout in the workplace, the poor without access to agricultural production, and enormous growth in the means

of mass destruction—are often more serious and more obstinate than the problems they solve.

Yet despite the fact that the processes of progress exhibit such damaging shadow sides, leaders today insist that their further implementation is simply inevitable. They rule out resistance or protest in advance. Subscribing to the dictum “There is no alternative” (TINA), they recommend them to us as the inescapable consequences of our changing world.²¹ Apparently, then, sometimes forces of growth and progress can become more powerful than the groups or institutions that set them into motion. Ironically, that seems to be the case especially where such groups or institutions fully embrace them.

Stated differently, on one hand a number of problems today are becoming increasingly immune to the tools and instruments of progress. And on the other hand those same tools and instruments weigh more and more heavily on us because we view them as inevitable manifestations of the very progress we simply cannot miss out on.

Perhaps, then, progress itself has become our problem.²² Is the issue, as Karl Löwith once lamented, that “progress itself goes on progressing; we can no longer stop it or turn it around”?²³ Or is it that we, to a greater or lesser extent, pay homage to the forces of progress, and they in turn, to varying degrees, paralyze us, freezing us into inaction?

Engaging the Crises of Our Time

Against this backdrop, this book attempts in a somewhat new way to engage entrenched global poverty, worsening environmental destruction, and rising insecurity—the grievous, stubborn dilemmas that now plague our world. Its goal is to help all of us, concerned citizens and decision-makers from various walks of life, retrieve the capacity to participate in turning these major predicaments around.

How do we go about doing that? Having highlighted the shadow sides of progress, we propose a thesis: perhaps, as decision-makers and citizens, we have become more or less trapped inside the cocoon of an extremely narrow, reduced view or perspective that considers acceptable only the solutions that fall in line with the way Western society defines its further “progress.” Indeed, key actors in Western society expect to overcome virtually all the stubborn, intractable obstacles thrown up by global poverty, environmental ruin, and violence by further deploying the means of progress (such as money, economic growth, and technological development) and the mechanistic institutions of progress (such as the market mechanism, the plan mechanism, and even the democratic mechanism). Moreover, the means and mechanisms of progress have

become elevated to such a prominent place that they now, to some degree, chart their own course, as if independent of us. They therefore display aspects of autonomy, of a relative immunity from our influence, and thereby gradually shut down or in key respects foreclose our future.

No doubt this is a formidable thesis. But if it has some validity, then it confirms our feeling that almost every current diagnosis of the crisis of our time lacks something fundamental. Many observers neglect how deep desires can coalesce into a modernist perspective, orientation, or worldview that, despite its claims to the contrary, is capable of contributing to, sustaining, and even entrenching global poverty, environmental devastation, and widespread violence. They forget or ignore the roles played by people's deepest longings, dreams, and commitments and how those profound aspirations become inscribed in the dynamic forces, interactional patterns, and institutions of contemporary Western society. Assessments usually miss altogether what goes on at the deepest level in people's hearts and minds, what engages and moves them, what captures their imaginations, fills their hearts, and satisfies their expectations. We call this the "spiritual" or "religious" dimension, understood in its broadest sense, of contemporary events.²⁴ In a moment, using the issue of structural unemployment, we offer a concrete illustration of this dimension in action. In our view, neglecting this dimension deeply hampers the ability to break through the solution deadlock and find responsible solutions to the world's most complex, pressing problems.

This book seeks to add this missing element to the debate. In no way do we pretend to possess a simple way out, as if we could produce a magic key that would put an end to insecurity and open the door to a better future for all. But searching for approaches from outside a rigid, compulsive fixation on further implementing the instruments of progress may open doors to alternative, perhaps unforeseen solutions, genuine solutions that could actually help turn around rising insecurity, global poverty, and environmental degradation.

Have the Gods Betrayed Us?

How has the expanding autonomy of technology, science, economy, and finance come about? It is highly improbable that it has occurred on its own or that somehow a fate called progress brought it upon us. We therefore dare to think the almost unthinkable, that a pattern similar to the "obsession" or "possession" that often structures the social order of so-called primitive societies actually operates today in our so-called modern civilization.

What do we mean by that? In brief strokes we sketch the possibility explored in subsequent chapters. As persons and societies, it is entirely legitimate to set our hearts on ends like prosperity, health, cultural or group identity, and protection. But a point of desperation may arrive where we slip into reaching for these goals regardless of the cost. Then we become obsessed by our ends (goals). We conscript every available object or force into a tool or means for reaching the all-encompassing objective. From that moment forward, the means to our ends function as idols or gods; we enthrone them as the developmental powers that will deliver us the promised end. As cultural anthropologists have found in various cultures, when obsessed by health, identity, prosperity, and/or security, both persons and societies tend to put their faith or trust in things or forces that their own hands have made. And in a kind of trade-off or exchange, they then become dependent on their own creations.

But we also know from many practices around the world, both current and past, that gods never leave their makers alone. As soon as people put themselves in a position of dependence on their gods, invariably the moment comes when those things or forces gain the upper hand, when they begin to mold the lives and thoughts of their adherents. Humanly made things or forces begin to control their makers even to the point where they become powers of domination. Against them the human will weakens or even vanishes, while the initial goals tend to become bleak, obscured, or forgotten, building to the moment when the gods' betrayal becomes transparent. But by then it could be too late.

In our view this old cultural and religious insight deserves more exploration in our time. We may not simply dismiss the possibility that the means of progress that our own hands have made have become forces that increasingly display autonomy and domination in Western society today, dynamically moving toward the point at which their betrayal becomes evident, much like the activity of the gods on Easter Island.

Of course, comparing Westerners to the inhabitants of Easter Island might seem far-fetched. Surely modern and postmodern people have roundly rejected all forms of superstition! Yet it would be irresponsible simply to reject out of hand the prospect that a similar devotion and betrayal surround the means and institutions of Western progress today.

Consider an example. If we examine an issue like structural unemployment, we quickly realize that the problem of unemployment today is tied to the pattern and rate of economic growth. For years in Western society we have seen unhampered, maximum economic growth as *the* prescription for achieving greater material prosperity. This pursuit has

made us wealthier but also more vulnerable. The unquestioned necessity of economic growth means that our production factors—land, labor, capital, organizational processes—must be of maximum efficiency and must lead to the highest possible productivity. Intensive global competition now almost compels industrialized societies to pursue the vigorous, uninterrupted growth of their gross domestic product.²⁵ Consider the analogy of the cyclist: as long as the cyclist maintains her speed, she remains balanced on her seat, but if she tries to stop, she loses her balance. The same can be said of Western economies: they remain in balance only as long as economic growth persists.²⁶ But that implies that if technological innovations can make the workplace more efficient, then we eliminate jobs. If unbridled competition obliges us to pursue the cheapest possible production costs regardless of the consequences, then we shift production overseas to places of cheap labor and inadequate standards for employees and the environment. Structural unemployment and further environmental damage are then the inevitable price, or sacrifice, that economic expansion exacts of us. As citizens we pay this price in the name of what once became and still is, to some extent, our ultimate goal or end: greater material prosperity. Obsessed by an end (rising material prosperity), we have off-loaded our responsibility and allowed various forces, means, and powers in our society (such as untrammelled economic expansion) to become gods who dictate their wills to us.

Setting the Stage

In the following chapters we explore the possibility that similar goal obsessions or ideological pathologies continue to lie at the foundation of at least some of our society's most urgent problems. We test the hypothesis that, driven by such ideological pathologies, our own age is familiar with the pattern of following idols that human hands have made, a pattern that hampers our ability to find structural solutions.

But supporting this argument requires more than providing a few concrete examples for empirical verification. We first need to understand how ideological obsessions and the idolatry they set in motion might arise in a thoroughly secular, irreligious society, perhaps even as a fruit of Western secular thought itself. In that vein, the remainder of part 1 (chaps. 2–3) addresses the interrelationship between myth, classical ideology, and the birth of modern idolatry. In chapter 3 some of the great ideologies of the recent past, such as Communism and Fascism, serve to illustrate the developmental phases of modern ideologies. Then in part 2 (chaps. 4–6) we explore contemporary ideologies of identity,

material progress, and guaranteed security in action, keeping our eyes focused on the risks they may pose, which can be global in scale. And part 3 (chaps. 7–8) explores the ominous, deadly spirals created by the collisions of various overpowering ideologies today.

Ways of Love and Justice for All

We write this book for all who are concerned about the crises of our time. As authors we approach the issues from our deep commitment to the way of Christ. Yet our aim throughout is to stimulate and contribute to the broadest dialogue possible, a dialogue that invites and includes many different perspectives. At most points, therefore, we address all concerned citizens. At others, we engage members of various faith communities in dialogue. At still others, we speak specifically to members of our own Christian faith community. You as a reader are invited to listen in and contribute to the discussion at any of these junctures from your own vantage point and perspective. All of us are searching together for new ways, new approaches. And all of us—most decidedly we ourselves—bring only a partial view. Under no circumstances may Christians claim at the outset that they possess better insights than others, nor do they have the right to equate their own partial insights with the unique message of the gospel itself.

What then is the value of adopting a specific vantage point or perspective? Let us describe two ways in which the Christian faith is inscribed in the reflections we make in this book. First, when it comes to analyzing the concrete problems of society, contrary to the Western rationalism of the Enlightenment, biblical faith suggests that ways of justice, solidarity, love of one's neighbor, reconciliation, peace, and care for the earth are not human constructs. Rather, their origin lies in a loving Creator and in the Creator's design for life in all its fullness. They are life-affirming, inclusive ways, paths for people to walk down, liberating ways that broaden and widen.²⁷ Because they have a "reality" value, merely casting them aside is simply imprudent.

Second, biblical revelation suggests that, especially in a climate of fear and uncertainty, individual persons, groups of people, and even societies as a whole can fall prey to a self-made world of illusions, a world that gradually loses its hold on reality. Both persons and societies can become spiritually enchanted; they can fall under the powerful spell of self-spun illusions. They can become entrapped in a world of illusion, in a disengaged universe of unreal infatuation, and the resulting narrowing of consciousness can make it extremely difficult to discover possible ways out. We must therefore be open to the possibility that all people—whether they profess a faith or not, or whether they are Chris-

tians or members of other faith communities—are susceptible to this religious or spiritual seduction in the public life of society.

Slinging the Suitable Stone

Finally, let us introduce the issue we take up in part 4: hope. In the face of seemingly autonomous forces, or powers of domination, we can feel helpless and our hope can easily disappear. Where then is hope to be found today?

In our view, hope does not lie in overthrowing technology, the economy, science, the market, the state, or even the corporation as such. The real enemy has deeper roots. The enemy's deepest power, as we try to demonstrate, lies in the stubbornness of the human heart. It is a power vested in people like us, people who are tempted again and again to elevate human-made powers or institutions, enthroning them as forces of liberation and deliverance, and thereby paving the way for their gradual development into tyrannical idols. Campaigns that seek to eradicate the structures of society therefore almost always miss the mark. They can even pull people into the very force field they wish to oppose. The enthusiasm of a new revolution easily disappears in a new iconoclasm. Full-scale, radical revolution often amounts to a prostration before perpetual violence, an idol even more tyrannical and merciless than the forces of progress.

Some in our society have lost all hope. Deathly afraid of possible escalations of violence or falling back into poverty, or feeling helpless in relation to the ongoing ruin of the environment, they have become pessimists or fatalists. Such calamities may indeed come, but they will strike only if we continue to sustain the forces threatening to make them realities.

When tyrannical powers, with their absolute claims and powerful temptations, come into focus, our courage may sink down to our toes. But let us remember the lesson of the stone. Centuries ago a young, unarmed shepherd boy named David found a way to conquer a seemingly unbeatable giant, Goliath, by accurately throwing a small stone. Like Goliath, today's awful powers and belief systems also have points of vulnerability. Let us never underestimate what ordinary people can do today when confronting oppressive powers, as David did against the vicious warrior Goliath. But that means we must first discern the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of the giants taunting us before we sling the suitable stone. And let us always be mindful that, to some extent, the real enemy resides within ourselves: within our own thoughts, hearts, imaginations, and lifestyles.

Times that deserve the label "a world possessed" are not times without hope. Helplessness, expertise, and mass revolution threaten to extinguish hope. But genuine hope is deeper than these threats. It flares up just when the night is at its darkest.