

Hope in Troubled Times

Bob Goudzwaard, Mark Vander Vennen, David van Heemst
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Review by David Thistlethwaite

There has never been a time in history when governments have been better advised. Gone, for the most part, are the soothsayers and astrologers, diviners and magicians who helped such as Nebuchadnezzar make decisions of state. Instead we have armies of statisticians, committees, think tanks, Royal Commissions and a deluge of information on which rational judgments can be made. And so, in our simplicity, we see the photos of world leaders arriving at conferences in their limousines, and like to believe that most of what is decided will follow technical and economic logic. The glass-walled buildings in which these decisions are made contain no altars, no prayer chambers. The only exit from such buildings is via wireless and cable to the world of facts – and usually by car to more glass boxes. The cage of logic appears to be complete.

And then you have a decision made like that of going to war with Iraq, which appears to have been made on emotion backed up by imagination and lies. The army of fact-smiths did not predict its outcome, though millions of observers had deep forebodings. In a movement of grand tragedy, the armies of the world's most powerful nation were summoned to execute a vicious slaughter and then, almost as if the page of a book had been turned, were sacrificed, to suffer retribution from the defeated enemy.

Meanwhile, on the sidelines (and it very often is the sidelines), Christian commentators have wondered what to make of it all. From the world of logic, their beliefs appear to be excluded. If they function in that world, it is as economists, or scientific advisers, albeit honest and humane ones. But it is tempting to believe that their world picture, of Christ and salvation, has no place in solving this world's (technical) problems. But then, more perplexingly still, they find it is their own religion that is going to war, crusading in Christ's name, and it is genuine believers like George W Bush and some on his team who have made Christianity the totemic symbol for their misguided decisions. The leader who believed himself divinely appointed to the White House, who has sought God in his decisions, has not had the wisdom of Solomon.

So there is the modern picture: religion has been excluded from decision-making: and when it tries to enter, it does harm. Christianity is irrelevant, except for trying to create ethical restraints – but which it appears are ruthlessly cast off, by Christians such as George Bush, when torture, or economic bullying, appear to suit them.

And yet – the modern picture is not the whole picture. We do not live in an essentially technical, logical world, with strange emotional and religious anomalies. Our world is not, after all, as unlike the world of the Bible as we might have believed. And the Iraq decision was not some strange quirk, as if everything else America did was rational and

in its own best interests. In fact the world that Enlightenment rationality and logic has produced is shot through with quirks and paradoxes: irrationality, indeed, for which the only explanation can be religious. But we are not talking good religion, but bad religion.

This is the argument of **Hope in Troubled Times**, a new book by the Bob Goodzwaard, Mark Vander Vennen and David Van Heemst. Bob Goudzwaard is Professor emeritus of economics and social philosophy at the Free University of Amsterdam, and a former Dutch MP, while the others are Canadian and American respectively. The tone of hope is set by an inspiring foreword from Archbishop Desmond Tutu (which is worth reading for itself). The authors come out of the Dutch Reformed philosophical tradition (which has still only had a limited impact on the British Christian scene); the great strength of which is in showing that the world of the Bible is our 'real world', and that every explanation for life and culture that excludes Christ is an incomplete explanation. In this book they range across the 'big crises' of our times, poverty, environment, and terrorism, and ask themselves why it is that despite science, freedom, and every kind of 'enlightenment', we live with such paradoxes. Then, in a final, Biblical, paradox, they show us that not flinching from a deep, spiritual diagnosis actually opens a door of hope.

The paradoxes affect every area of modern policy. On the environment (perhaps the most obvious), why is it that we expect to exhaust nature's resources and still think this will improve the standard of living? Why do we systematically deplete the only world we live in? In economics, how is it that we've talked ever since the 1970s about eradicating poverty in the South; and yet we have organised things so that more money flows from the poor countries to the rich than they receive in aid? How is it that the United States is both the world's richest nation and the most in debt? How is it that it harbours 36 million so poor that they 'experience hunger, or the risk of hunger' [p 87]? In security, why is it that the peacekeepers of the world, the UN security council members, manufacture nearly all the weapons (86% in 2004) that sustain conflict? Why would the United States supply arms to 92% of the world's conflicts, sometimes to opposing sides [p 179]? Over terrorism, why would both sides override their own religious principles for an elusive gain, whereby only their own populations suffer? How could Islamism revoke some of Islam's deepest principles? Why would the Western nations provoke it into being?

The examples multiply in the book, and there are quite enough to show the deep vein of irrationality that flows through decision-making. Most irrational of all, the authors suggest, is the mental captivity that believes, with Margaret Thatcher, that 'There is no alternative (TINA)'.

So what are we to make of this? Without wanting completely to spoil the plot, the authors trace the roots of irrational beliefs back to the growth of 'ideology' in the Enlightenment, the attempt to deliberately engineer society through ideas as a replacement for Christianity. This is one of those decisions that seem harmless enough at the outset, when the goals are 'good', but has repercussions further down the line when the good goals have become ultimates (displacing God) and everything and everyone is sacrificed for them. The task of the book is to show that wherever there is paradox, there is some goal or even means to a goal that has become master. Something we want then starts to control us.

The argument then takes on a spiritual dimension, because ideology in its late stages turns into fully-fledged idolatry. This stage gives its adherents all the benefits of a religion; a sense of significance, of being part of something, of sacrificing themselves and others to a greater good, but it is false, because the good (e.g. 'a fair society') vanishes as the means (e.g. state control) is institutionalised. This is the deep root of 'There is no alternative'; the belief that certain means to achieve 'good ends' have become so supreme that everything (even, or especially, human well-being) must fall down before them. One such modern idol is the free market, a useful servant, but a cruel owner.

This is the sense in which modern decision-making turns out to be religious. The religious energy given to God-substitutes is just as great as that desired by God himself, but because its idols are abstract entities like 'freedom' and 'the market' and 'national security', their religious nature is disguised. Only when the idols turn and create consequences opposite to those intended does the idolatry become exposed. This takes some realising. We had thought the religion of the current US administration was 'evangelical Christian', but it turns out that many of its strongest religious impulses have been from Enlightenment libertarianism. As a British politician has recently said, we now know 'you cannot drop democracy fully-fledged from 40,000 feet'. We know now, but earlier, it was enlightenment optimism that caused many to believe otherwise.

Most of the book is, of course, diagnosis, and the strange thing is that this produces not despair but a sense of relief. There is nothing as frustrating as seeing things that ought to work – like expensive international conferences – not working, and not understanding why there is so much intransigence and blindness to the obvious. One can talk about selfishness and other manifestations of sin, but what is perplexing is not human weakness but the strength of belief that leads people in the wrong direction. Here idolatry is in fact the best explanation: it explains why it is that people's 'good' beliefs (like Osama's idealism) are the things that do most harm.

The front cover of the book lists 'environmental degradation', alongside 'worldwide poverty' and 'widespread terrorism' as the major themes of the book, and it is slightly disappointing to find that issues of economics and security get far broader and deeper treatment than the environment. But in a sense all that is needed for us to be reminded of what we already know. There has been a long series of international conferences and reports (the latest just out) which have tallied threats to species, water, and climate, but which have achieved little beyond pronouncements. The reason is familiar: there is something the West cannot conceive of doing without. The old story of the monkey with his fist stuck in a jar comes to mind. He wants to release his hand but will not let go of the nuts. The authors of the book talk about an unspoken taboo on threatening the West's ideals of growth.

'The unspoken rule of thumb is that the wealthy nations may not, for the most part, be held in check. The recent report "The Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change" even argues that desperately needed measures to stabilise climate change need not interfere with the growth ambitions of the rich countries: "Tackling Climate Change is the pro-growth strategy for the longer term. And it can be done in a way that does not

cap the aspirations for growth of rich or poor countries”. But again, what will be the horrific repercussions – perhaps even deadly – if the topic of the material saturation of wealthy Western countries remains taboo? This taboo is ideological through and through. For the West, everything seems open to conversation as long as the dialogue never touches on the preservation of its own power and the expansion of its own prosperity’ [p 153].

So where is the hope and what can Christians offer? The remedy is truth. Jesus told us what we need to know, but scarcely believe: ‘A man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions’. This becomes particularly pertinent in relation to the environment, because nearly all that we are ‘given’ in nature consists of things we do not possess: water, air, sea, sky, wild creatures and plants. As well as what we need for life, there is so much to enjoy that we do not have to own. The abundance of possessions can easily prevent us from seeing what we have.

So the first duty of ‘environmental’ Christians is to show what life is, apart from owning stuff, and to keep finding out what the richer life is to which Jesus has called us. It is only then that arguments about reducing consumption make sense. If happiness really consists in consuming, what right have we to call people to desist? But if we are made for a better way, then we are leading people into gain, not loss.

The authors in their final chapter make several suggestions for how we can think beyond the hypnotising goals and idols with which our society is consumed. They talk about a number of movements around the world in which the consensus is challenged. And they suggest that we can perfectly well make do with ‘enough’.

‘...why not take one decisive, perhaps painful, but also realistic step back from the economic goal that hypnotizes us? Why not accept a threshold in our levels of income and consumption and orient ourselves to a level of *enough* so that our production processes can be liberated from extreme stress, turn to meeting the needs of the poor, and invest in the genuine preservation of culture and the environment?...Consider what stewardship could mean today...’ [p 191].

As with all such writing, in the end it is over to us to live the truth, and no book can do that for us. But the main theme, that the reason so many grand policies and pronouncements do not work is that we will not give up our illusions, gives us a place to go, and that place is life and truth. As Desmond Tutu points out in the case of South Africa, those who lived the lie failed, and those who believed in the truth were vindicated. There is only one way that reality has been made, and it is constructed for the success of justice and truth. So of all the many gloomy books I have read about the present age, this one, though it does not falsely put its faith in human solutions, is one of the more encouraging.

David Thistlethwaite, 1 November 2007