

## PROLOGUE

In Thornton Wilder's novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, the collapse of "the finest bridge in all Peru" on July 20, 1714, sent shockwaves among all those who had previously crossed it with misplaced confidence:

The bridge seemed to be among the things that would last forever; it was unthinkable that it should break. The moment a Peruvian heard of the accident he signed himself [with the cross] and made a mental calculation as to how recently he had crossed by it and how soon he had intended crossing by it again. People wandered about in a trance-like state, muttering: they had the hallucination of seeing themselves falling into a gulf.<sup>1</sup>

Some years ago I wrote a book called *Gods That Fail*.<sup>2</sup> It was an attempt to show how every society turns around some deity or deities that claim the total allegiance of its citizens. Even the most "secular" of states worships such surrogate gods as "national security," "market forces," "technological imperatives," "economic growth" and "patriotism." The biblical term for such prostration before human creations is *idolatry*, and the propensity to idolatry is endemic in all human individuals and societies. Idols not only blind us to ultimate realities, but they exact a heavy price. They demand human sacrifices and, as we have learned painfully in recent years, wreak havoc on the nonhuman world.

All who experience the world as a safe and secure place tend to assume

that has been so always and is so for everybody. When familiar sources of security fail us, we are left adrift in a meaningless void until we can latch onto other idols. And then the never-ending cycle of optimism and despair is reenergized once more. In the absence of biblical hope, which is grounded neither in futurology nor in romantic utopias but in the promises of God, entire societies are held captive to the merchants of fear and death.

Why is it so often said that September 11, 2001, was a benchmark in the history of our era, a turning point for the world? For the vast majority of the world's peoples, especially the poor of all nations, life went on as before. Nothing had changed. Moreover, this was not the first time that many lives were lost in terrorist attacks and war in the United States. The violence and terrorism of the Civil War and the 1960s social protest movements also brought destruction and death. The bombing of the Murrah building in Oklahoma City claimed more than two hundred lives. Lynchings of men, women and children of African descent by terror groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, and the continued fire bombings of black churches in the American deep South, have taken the lives of thousands.

In an essay written soon after 9/11, the theologian John Milbank stated: "The question that one should ask in response to the immediate aftermath of the events of September 11th 2001 is this: why was there outrage on such a gigantic scale?"<sup>3</sup> Milbank's own answer—that it posed a threat to sovereign power (the power of the state being the highest authority in secular modernity) and that it gave an opportunity to strengthen the policing of the market system in whose service the state stands—is not very convincing, but the question is significant, nevertheless.

On February 13, 2001, an earthquake, the second within a month, hit the tiny Central American country of El Salvador. Two-thirds of the country was affected by the earthquake. The El Salvadorean theologian Jon Sobrino, in a lengthy reflection on the earthquake, has observed that such tragedies serve as an x-ray of a country: "The earthquake has pointed out where sin, poverty, and injustice are most cruelly focused: on women and children, on peasant men and women, on those who have lost jobs and those who cannot get credit, on those who have practically no decision-making power over their own lives and future."<sup>4</sup> He points out that

an earthquake, like a cemetery, reveals the iniquitous inequality of a society, and thus also its deepest truth. Some tombs are huge, sumptuous pantheons of luxurious marble, in prestigious locations. Others, almost without names and without crosses, are piled up in hidden places and consigned to anonymity. They are the majority.<sup>5</sup>

The role of the global media is crucial. Despite all the liberal rhetoric about “equality,” who in the world of the media or the academy really believes that the life of a Nepali peasant, say, is as valuable as that of a Hollywood actress or a football star? Hurricane Katrina, which struck the Gulf Coast in August 2005, killing about 1,300 people, generated forty times more Western print coverage than Hurricane Stan that killed more than 1,600 people in Guatemala a month later. On the same day that the second earthquake struck El Salvador, a soccer game was played between Real Madrid and Lazio. The combined market value of the players on the field was \$650 million, slightly less than half of what it took to rebuild the entire physical infrastructure of El Salvador after the earthquake. The press reported the value of the soccer players with enthusiasm bordering on veneration.<sup>6</sup>

The October 20, 2005, issue of the *New York Review of Books* carried a full-page advertisement for a book by one Sam Harris called *The End of Faith*. It was hailed as a “New York Times Bestseller” and had won the 2005 PEN Award for Nonfiction.<sup>7</sup> The advertisement carried a string of rave reviews from Richard Dawkins to Natalie Angier. The latter praised the book for articulating “the dangers and absurdities of organized religion so fiercely and so fearlessly,” and said that she “felt relieved” as she read it, “vindicated, personally understood.” The review from British newspaper *The Independent* saluted Harris’s “brave, pugilistic attempt to demolish the walls that currently insulate religious people from criticism.”

The same issue of the *New York Review* also carried an essay by Richard Lewontin, an eminent biologist and one of the sanest critics of evolutionary psychology, on the topic “The Wars Over Evolution.” Unfortunately, the only reference in the entire essay to any Christian (or other religious) argument was a lengthy quotation contrasting evolution unfavorably with “special creation” by a Reverend Ron Carlson, described by Lewontin, as a “popular preacher,

lecturer, and author.” If Harris’s pugilism has inspired Lewontin, then this is like Muhammad Ali in his prime knocking out a lightweight reporter. There was no engagement with the best of Christian philosophers or theologians on what the biblical doctrine of creation means. And since then we have been treated to many such one-sided offensives against orthodox Christianity and Islam in the scholarly as well as popular Western media.

For a non-Western observer like myself, there is something interesting afoot here. Is the benign disregard for religion in the West giving way to a strident assault on religion, with the comforting stereotyping of the “other” that we have come to associate with racism and colonialism? Once liberals have tasted on their own soil the violence that their societies have inflicted on others, does fear expose the Achilles’ heel in their rhetoric of human dignity and human rights? American, British and Australian governments, which have patronizingly lectured their Third World counterparts about civil liberties and respect for the rule of law, have, since September 11, 2001, and their own “war on terrorism,” taken more than a leaf out of the book of the worst Third World regimes.

The near adulation with which prominent liberal journals responded to Harris’s book is far more intriguing, indeed fascinating, than the book itself. Ironies abound. The weapons of mass destruction, under whose cloud Harris writes, were created and developed by men (perhaps a few women, too) of scientific, enlightened reason, under the aegis of secularized liberal government. Now that such horrific weapons lie within reach of Islamist movements and states, we are told that the West can no longer afford the luxury of tolerance. The battle lines are drawn. And they are once more drawn between “us rational, civilized, progressive types” and “them out there—religious, ignorant and backward.” Will men and women of faith be the last defenders of liberal values in the West?

What frightens a people serves as a reliable guide to their idolatries. Idols are sustained by myths—public, large-scale narratives that engage our imaginations and shape the way we experience the world. Myths are an intrinsic part of human existence. They give meaning to our lives, sometimes at the expense of truth. The eminent literary critic Northrop Frye points out that “Certain stories seem to have a particular significance: they are the stories

that tell a society what is important for it to know, whether about its gods, its history, its laws, or its class structure.”<sup>8</sup> Global capitalism, Marxism, behaviorism, evolutionism, social contract theories, all represent particular ways of seeing that employ metaphors and symbols embedded within an overarching story of the human condition. They all contain a central truth which is then inflated and used to exclude other, perhaps more important, ways of seeing. The modern market system, for instance, places an artificial scarcity at the heart of human existence. It envisages human beings as creatures with insatiable desires. It leads to a conception of human life centered on competition, acquisitiveness and unqualified consumption. As such it militates against other myths, often present in the same society, that speak of “the sacredness of nature” or the “inherent dignity of human beings.”

The British philosopher Mary Midgley has argued that not only are myths central to worldviews but they are strongly influenced by the dominant technology of the day. Mechanistic views of the natural world, and of human beings’ relationship with nature, flourished in a world of clocks and steam engines. In an age of computers, everything (including human intelligence) becomes information and information-processing. The rise of genetic engineering diverts attention to the search for biochemical solutions to complex social, political, psychological and moral problems. “For instance,” she writes, “much of the demand for liver transplants is due to alcohol. But it is a lot harder to think what to do about alcohol than it is to call for research on transplants. Similarly, infertility is largely caused by late marriage and sexually transmitted diseases. But changing the customs that surround these changes calls for quite different and much less straightforward kinds of thinking.”<sup>9</sup>

The “quite different and much less straightforward kind of thinking” is characteristic of the theological approach that undergirds the present book. Christian theology is more than a set of doctrinal beliefs or systematic arguments. It is a way of seeing, of so dwelling in a particular language and doing new things with that language so that its revelatory and transformative power is manifest in the world. That language arose out of specific historical events that both constitute us as the *ekklesia* of Christ and call forth characteristic social practices such as thanksgiving, forgiving, exposing evil, truth-telling, welcoming the broken and the hopeless, and bearing testimony to grace.

Such a theology seeks comprehensiveness, because it seeks to bear prophetic witness to One whose speech-acts heal, renew and transform the world in its entirety, but its own speech is always broken, sharing in the not-yet-redeemed character of the world.

This book brings together essays that have grown out of talks given in various parts of the world. The essays take up six areas of contemporary, global discourse where powerful myths energize and mobilize a great deal of public funding as well as academic production. They are addressed not primarily to theological specialists but to all thoughtful men and women who are concerned about the public issues that shape our increasingly interconnected and interdependent world.

Chapters one and two explore the ways politics and international relations have come to be dominated in recent years by public narratives in which slogans such as “the war on terror,” “combating religious violence” and “secular reason versus fundamentalist faith” play a central role. If they are not thought through carefully and critically they only obscure the truth of what is actually happening around the world. These chapters draw on my own experience working as a pastor-theologian among university students and professors against a backdrop of militant religious and secular ideologies in a country (Sri Lanka) which has suffered from “terrorism” and a “war on terror” that has claimed over sixty thousand lives since the late 1970s and shows no signs of abating. They also reflect the experience of living and traveling extensively not only in the West but in several of the “trouble spots” in Asia today.

The language of human rights is fast becoming a universal discourse and is promoted with a missionary zeal that often disguises its hypocritical practice. In chapter three I present a biblical, Christian approach to human rights and argue that if we are to promote that in a way that is both intellectually coherent and morally consistent, we need to move beyond a secularist paradigm of humanness. Can we practice respect for human dignity without taking seriously the role of cultural communities in human formation? What rights attach to cultures and when do these become problematic? What are the benefits of a multicultural society and how do we reconfigure a multicultural state? These issues have been the stuff of incendiary political debates from Canada to Fiji in recent years. In chapter four I try to bring a Christian

mind to bear on some of these complex but pressing questions. Early versions of chapters three and four were first given as part of the Josiah Mann Lectures in Pastoral Theology at the China Graduate School of Theology, Hong Kong, in 2003.

Chapter five addresses the way that science and technology have become the site of powerful global myths from sociobiology to transhumanism. Scientific research has come to be dominated by political, military and huge corporate interests in India and South Korea no less than the United States, and this has important implications for what is presented to the public as science. No one who cares deeply about science (as I do) can be indifferent to such developments. This essay critiques the popular antireligious myths that lie behind the hegemonic role that science has assumed in the media and much of the academy. The identification of evolution with atheism is promoted both by scientific fundamentalists and their religious counterparts. I seek to clarify the real issues behind contemporary debates over evolution, biotechnology, stem-cell research and a posthuman future. Early versions of this chapter have been delivered as public lectures in places as far afield as Delhi, Uppsala and New Jersey.

Chapter six is an extensive revision of an essay that was delivered and later published in the proceedings of the British and Irish Association of Mission Studies annual conference in Belfast in June 2005.<sup>10</sup> It brings a historical and theological challenge to both Eurocentric readings of globalization and postcolonial theorizing about the Third World today. It begins by sketching the decentering of histories of modernity that have been undertaken in recent years by a new breed of historians; and proceeds to describe the abiding colonial legacy and how that has provoked the fruitful and important academic discourse known as “postcolonial theory.” I dialogue critically with the latter, questioning some of its assumptions but also welcoming its relevance for doing theology today.

Obviously, these essays do not aim at exhaustive coverage of any given topic; but nor, on the other hand, do they provide the sound bytes that some readers prefer. “My novels are not fast food,” Salman Rushdie recently told an audience of journalists in India, with understandable impatience. It is a line every serious writer today must be tempted to use. To find a humanities

student, let alone a scientist or engineer, who has actually read a whole book from cover to cover during his or her university career, is a rare pleasure. Baroness Susan Greenfield, the eminent British neuroscientist, has warned her government that a new generation is growing up, immersed in cyber worlds and mobile communication technology, but lacking what we have long identified as the hallmarks of critical intelligence: curiosity, attentive listening, the ability to place information in context, the weighing of evidence, retentive memory, independent judgment and articulate expression. She has set up an all-parliament group comprising former education secretaries and brain scientists to investigate the way that the changing cultural environment is affecting the brain circuitry of children and the implications of this for parenting and educational practice.<sup>11</sup>

In fairness it must be said that the myths that hold us captive were not generated by the present teenage generation but by their very literate and articulate forebears. Also, enveloped as we are in a global media that is obsessed with mindless celebrities and owned by a few powerful tycoons, we all struggle to sort out the significant from the trivial. Slow, thoughtful and critical readers who care to explore reality rather than flip from one reality show to another do actually exist. To them this book is offered as an invitation to journey with the author in heretical subversion of the present reality in order to make way for another.