

69. Preface to the New Edition

Bob Goudzwaard *Capitalism and Progress: Western Society and the Faith it Professes The Classics Library, Carlisle: Paternoster 1997.*

This is a reprint of No. 33 with a new Introduction. Strangely, but perhaps to save paper, the Translator's Acknowledgments are one page earlier (pp x-xi instead of pp. xi-xii) and the original Preface (now *Preface to the First Edition*) is, correspondingly pp.xii-xvi (instead of pp. xiii-xvii). There are other indications that this republication was put together with undue haste. The bibliographical data page has some serious spelling and typographical errors and there are a few infelicities in the *Preface to New Edition* which is now on pp. xvii-xix. Written in 1997, it begins:

The main text of this book was written between 1975 and 1978, a time which was in many respects very different to our present time. At that time there was no indication that Communism would collapse suddenly within the span of a few years or that a Gulf War was imminent. The rise of the newly industrialized countries of the Far East was still of a modest nature and the cultural phenomena of post-modernism and New Ageism had not yet registered widely. There had been little reference to the possibility of accelerated global climate changes or the electronic highway and virtual reality. So what possible use can it be to reprint a book about modern society which was written at that time - except for its present historic interest?

The core of my answer to the question is that to some extent the book appeared prematurely. In 1978 we were still caught in the climate of the Cold War with its ideological controversy between communism and capitalism. Clearly each of these systems of society was based on its own cultural and religious presuppositions. But within a few years after the fall of the Berlin Wall the debate turned to the new situation with which the world was now confronted. Could this new situation be described as a world without ideology (Daniel Bell), or as the end of the history of all ideologies (Francis Fukuyama)? It seemed as if (sic!) the so-called 'mixed' or 'social market' economy in combination with a democratic parliamentary political structure had become the only remaining, effective and broadly accepted structure of modern society - with no alternatives in sight. And so views like those of Francois Lyotard which teach that all the great stories, **les grands récits**, of Western civilization had now ended (p. xviii) for good and turned their promises of self-made paradise into factual bankruptcy, were widely applauded. It seemed as if a new kind of neutrality had been born.

However, problems did not end. To the contrary, they increased in number and in complexity, sometimes paradoxically - the increase of poverty in the midst of plenty; the erosion of care for mankind and nature while more money was available than ever before; the increase

in unemployment at the same time as a rapid increase in the human labor force; and scarcity at the very place and time we expected abundance. These problems were not solved or appeased by the simple declaration that old ideologies had ended. Instead, these problems grew and increased with an inner resistance which defied the standard remedies applied to cure them - like insects that have become immune to the insecticides used against them. It became clear that there was more to it, that most of these problems spring from roots deep inside the structure and culture of our (post)modern society. That is why in our time there is a full-fledged return to debate whether the roots of our modern Western society have been the breeding ground for our present insurmountable social and economic problems. It is no longer possible to argue that these problems are only related to wrong politics and that a change in the organization of society will bring a solution.

It is remarkable that some post-modern philosophers agree largely with this conclusion, yet decline to find any element of hope that there is a possible way out of the predicament. A post-modern thinker like Jean Baudrillard, for instance, explains the present problems solely in terms of the world of objects having itself taken the lead in contemporary development. 'The things', so he writes in the first sentence of his book, **Fatal Strategies**, 'have succeeded in extracting themselves from the influence of the human subjective meanings and opinions which annoyed them, and now are stretching themselves out to infiniteness, to a future known by no one'. It is a thesis which sounds as interesting as it sounds alarming, but is also superficial. For if it is true, how did the world of objects (technological, scientific, economic) come to take such a dominant place in our society? Was that place not given to them by our Western culture? And if so, is this way of post-modern thinking then not an expression of a premature abandonment of responsibility, a deliberate withdrawal by the subjects themselves?

The main interest of this book is the many and diverse (p. xix) cultural and structural dimensions behind our present societal problems. It contends that neither the structure nor the culture of society can stand independently, but have religious roots. Both are always, in one way or another, the expression of a particular understanding of meaning. And meaning is either self-made, which leads to ideology, or meaning has its source in Revelation. Therefore, in my opinion, it is even dangerous to exclude simultaneously and systematically the elements of both faith and ideology as effective depth components from our present society.

And that is where the quest of this book starts, and that is why this book continues to be relevant [[replaces](#): continuation to be actual]. It is no more, but also no less, than the continuation of a search for the

revealed and hidden faith dimensions of Western society. It is further based, throughout, on the assertion that every society is more than a body, an organizational framework. It also has a soul, a spirit which permeates the whole and which is capable of leading the body to the abyss or to ways of healing.

Let me conclude by encouraging especially Christians who live today to be continuously aware of spiritual dimension (sic!) of our (post-)modern society. Firstly because without such an awareness there is a big danger that we might succumb too easily to a kind of faith or spirituality which is alien to and in opposition to the spirituality of the living Word of God. Secondly because without this insight and knowledge we may easily fail to find and advocate real hope for a staggering world.