Hope in Troubled Times: A New Vision for Confronting Global Crisis

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Hope in Troubled Times makes a great contribution towards an understanding of the embedded roots of ideologies that have immense destructive capability, even in the twenty-first century. This book provides remarkable surveys of modern ideologies in terms of their attributes, stages, devastating outcomes, and built-in demise. The authors survey examples of ideologies such as Communism, the French Revolution, Nazism, and Apartheid. The authors then discuss current ideological trends related to identities (e.g., Islamism and Zionism) and those related to economic prosperity and security. They also examine international relations to see if they display aspects of violence from economic, financial, and political perspectives.

The book is divided into four parts: setting the stage, contemporary ideologies in action, ominous spirals, and hope awakening life. The authors criticize the existing modes and methods of intervention as one of the contributing factors to the perpetuation of problems. Thus, they emphasize the need to explore new forms of intervention that truly address the root causes of these problems instead of treating their symptoms with policies. In the foreword, Nobel Laureate Desmond Tutu shares the hope of the authors, a hope rooted in Gods’ justice, forgiveness, mercy, and love: “If Apartheid can fall in South Africa, then ideologies of identity, materialism, and security can end too” (p. 11).

In the first part of the book, The authors discuss the existing persistent problems of global poverty, worsening environmental destruction, rising national and global insecurity, the unpredictability and volatility of financial markets, and the failure of existing policies and interventions to solve them. They underscore the notion that in the pursuit of goals such as prosperity, cultural identity, and protection, regardless of their costs, society becomes obsessed by these ends. Such “means to the end” start to function as idols or gods. The authors provide a remarkable analysis of the elements and stages of ideologies and the relative vulnerability of people and societies to fall into worshiping these human-made gods and idols, in which enemies of the ideologies are sacrificed, not because they represent evil, but because they oppose the overreaching end of the ideology. The
The authors also discuss how legitimate goals such as the survival of cultural identity, the pursuit of material wealth, and security against outside attacks can turn into ideologies. They also highlight the changing nature of idols from historically static objects into dynamic contemporary idols, such as technology. As modern societies expect technology to supply more luxury and prosperity, they put technology on a pedestal, as if technology possesses a life of its own to end disease, poverty, war, and suffering. The authors review six phases of full-fledged ideologies: the conviction that a radical change is required; the reorientation of society according to the fundamental pattern of the end (the end justifies the means); the reconstruction of a new society to align with the all-encompassing objectives; the domination of the means by coercing their users to participate; the terrorization of the newly idolized ideology—e.g., concentration camps and mass deportation for Nazism and the gulag for Communism; and finally, the dissolution of the idol, where the goals of the ideology conflict with reality to the extent that its defenders cannot prevent its demise.

The second part of the book (chapters 4 to 6) highlights three types of ideologies: first, ideologies that are deeply embedded in identities and accompanied with religious elements, such as the Afrikaners’ Apartheid ideology in South Africa, the emerging features of Islamism ideology to revive the Islamic identity and protect it against the Western modern secularization, and the Islamism-Zionism ideological conflict in the Middle East, in which the Jews seek to preserve their country, and the Islamists seek nothing less than an Islamic Palestine and the elimination of the state of Israel. Second, there are ideologies embedded in the pursuit of material progress and prosperity, accompanied with the rise of socioeconomic paradoxes such as the persistent presence of poverty in rich countries, increasing stress and burnout due to time pressure, and environmental destruction. The authors do a remarkable job in explaining the tension between dynamism and preservation. “Inevitably, in a world where society crowns dynamism king and compels people, the environment, and culture to adjust solely in the direction dictated by dynamism, paradoxes emerge” (p. 91). The authors describe how societies can elevate good institutions, such as markets, into artificial saviors, where freedom becomes freedom to act in one’s own interest, still within laws and contracts, regardless of the harm done to others. Instead of societies controlling markets, markets now control societies and politicians. And thirdly, there are ideologies related to guaranteed security and freedom, referring to excessive militarization, even after the end of the Cold War, and replacing international laws with the law of self-protection at any price. Countries are compelled to develop
and advance their weapons so that the progress of weapon technology determines the strategy. The authors use examples of the current military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, in which the weapons used by and against U.S. troops are mostly U.S. produced, and are used by people whom the U.S. supported in earlier military conflicts (e.g., Saddam Hussein and Osama Bin Laden). These ideologies, according to the authors, are still active in our world, where the means become independent of the ends, reaching the status of gods, and are capable of much destruction.

The third part of the book highlights escalations in the resource, financial, and moral vulnerabilities that accompany contemporary ideologies. This section addresses how globalization sets the stage for the formation and progression of ideologies, and the byproducts of globalization that negatively affect environment and culture. The authors share their doubts about the validity of applying money, markets, and improved technologies—the gods of Western progress—to solve these global problems, highlighting how increasing material progress in the West acts as a parasite on the growth possibilities of other nations and people, and serves a primary cause of the vulnerability of the world’s environment. In addition, Western material growth contributes to the erosion of cultural diversity, where people belonging to minority cultures can become deeply wounded by the malice or oppression foisted on them by a dominant culture. Such wounds can cause them to transform the preservation of their identity into an absolute end.

The authors do a remarkable job of illustrating the intertwined influence of military, political, financial, economic, and cultural powers, using clear examples of the webs of influence and interactions among these powers to serve the interest of an ideology. Vicious cycles of impoverishment demonstrate the dire position of poor countries, given their debt problem and externally imposed adjustment programs.

The last part of the book focuses on sources of hope for a future that is free of ideologies and false gods, emphasizing the active presence of the Spirit of God as a comforter, advocate, defender of all innocent victims, and destroyer of every persecution. The authors utilize Biblical symbols to illustrate this hope, such as the cross and the morning star. The authors suggest three guidelines: to widen one’s view and scan the whole horizon, not just a part of it; to deal with the roots of problems rather than their symptoms; and to ensure mutual benefits of growth, instead of some (rich) countries gaining at the expense of others (poor countries). They also highlight the vision of building an economic life in which economies (rich and poor) should be able to grow and flourish.
together as trees in one garden, where rich countries create space for poor ones to grow while maintaining their specific cultures, and minimizing environmental degradation and other negative byproducts. Moreover, the authors recommend the reclamation of the Biblical meaning of peace and justice, the application of the year of Jubilee, the use of non-governmental organizations and other peaceful means to defuse tension and conflict, and the reallocation of inflated defense budgets towards non-military security tools to defeat the ideology of guaranteed freedom.

In general, the authors offer a commendable analysis of roots, elements, and outcomes of destructive ideologies that should be considered in planning for proper interventions against ideologically related problems that challenge the world. Nevertheless, some questions and observations demand feedback and counter arguments.

First, the authors evaluate markets, technology, and globalizations against normative standards that mostly serve to highlight their shortcomings. Their normative recommendations fall short of being explicit as to how to apply them in a world that is still fallen, where government and corporate corruptions, rent seeking, moral hazard, and opportunistic behaviors are embedded in everyday life, which may distort the utopian economic life proposed by the authors. In addition, the authors’ recommendations generally lack needed economic (cost-benefit) analysis, instead leaning heavily on the normative side. Fallen practices will have their place on earth until the fulfillment of God’s promise and the total defeat of evil. The acknowledgement of progress should not be ignored for the sake of highlighting persistent problems or ideologies. These problems do not invalidate the concepts of democracy, market capitalism, and freedom. The problems described in the book are mostly byproducts of unregulated and undetected human fallen behaviors and tendencies, as mentioned above. The authors’ own recommendations are not immune to these tendencies and practices in a fallen world.

Second, the authors do not provide a much-needed analysis of the sub-Saharan African region that is associated with several internal and regional conflicts (including wars and genocides), social fractionalization, and government corruption. Further studies of internal institutional corruptions and failures (Fafchamps, 2004; North, 2000; Platteau, 1994), and the typical misuse and appropriation of foreign aid by corrupt governments in many of these countries, are required to examine and treat the roots of their problems, instead of treating the symptoms.
Third, the authors overlook the major ongoing improvement of the state of living for billions of people, especially the poor, according to reliable economic and social indicators, such lower illiteracy, longer life expectancy, lower child mortality, longer schooling years, eradication of many diseases, more freedom, and the empowerment of women. These are examples of direct outcomes or byproducts of free markets, democracy, economic prosperity, and globalization (United Nations, 2008), and embedded hopes and optimism associated with them (Bhagwati, 2004; Sachs, 2005). The two most populous countries in the world, India and China, are showing promising signs of growth, inclusion in global markets, and absence of the cultural or moral vulnerabilities and conflicts. More poor countries are following their examples.

Reformed Christian thought accepts the reduction, rather than complete eradication, of the evil of poverty, ideologies, and violence, as a measure of success in a world with built-in vulnerabilities that penetrate all spheres, after the fall. Moreover, in a fallen world, international interventions—e.g., the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund—are not immune from negative side effects, which should not invalidate their good primary effects. The evaluation of the policies of these international agencies should be based on a thorough cost-benefit analysis.

Fourth, the authors offer a typical Eurocentric perspective based on problems and ideologies of the West, overlooking ideologies in other parts of the world, especially in the Islamic world and sub-Saharan Africa, which in turn, is likely to yield partial recommendations, at best. The authors do not address the stubbornness of embedded internal cultural, social, and religious instruments, especially in collectivist problem-ridden societies, such as some Islamic and sub-Saharan African countries.

Lastly, the authors tend to treat certain ideologies and conflicts, such as Islamism and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, as politically sensitive issues that should be approached with immense caution. In contrast, they seem more comfortable in criticizing the West, especially U.S. perspectives, responses, and interventions. This unfortunate imbalance does not help the cause of deciphering ideologies—e.g., Islamism, and the Islamist-Zionist conflict—and the authors’ hope of freeing the world from existing ideologies. A comprehensive analysis should evaluate all valid claims, including the claims of embedded violence in both Islamism and Islam, to reach a better and genuine understanding, and to avoid reducing ideologies to just extreme fronts, such as Al QA’ida or Hamas.
References


