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ROWAN WILLIAMS, Master of Magdalene College, Cambridge University

Things Fall Apart?

Things Fall Apart?

The Mission of God and the Third Decade

MICHAEL PAGET-WILKES
Foreword by Justin Welby

THINGS FALL APART?

The Mission of God and the Third Decade

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To Richard F., who walked the walk as well as talking the talk; To Richard and John who are always there in the background; and to all our grandchildren, who will face the Mission of God in the third and ensuing decades.

Contents

List of Illustrations	xiii
Foreword by Justin Welby	xv
Preface	xvii
Acknowledgements	xix
Introduction	xxi
The Content	xxii
Postscript	xxiv
PART 1: WESTERN SOCIETY IN FLUX	1
Introduction	2
Chapter 1: Western Society in Flux and Transition	6
1.1 Markets, Hierarchies, and Networks	8
1.2 Sustaining Innovation in an Information Age	9
1.3 Coercion, Collaboration, Chaordic	13
1.4 Complexity	16
1.5 Emergence	18
1.6 Algorithms and Data-flow	19
1.7 Artificial General Intelligence—the Singularity,	
Nanotechnology—Molecular Manufacture	22
1.8 Intelligence and Consciousness	25
1.9 Superhuman	27
Endnote	28
Chapter 2: Marketization, Globalization, Climate Change	30
Introduction	30
2.1 Marketization	32

X CONTENTS

2.2 Prosperity and Growth	39
2.3 Disruption	40
2.4 Universal Basic Income/Wage	41
2.5 Tech and Democracy	43
2.6 Globalization, Nationalism, and Globalism	45
2.7 Demography	48
2.8 Climate Change	48
2.9 Endnote	49
Chapter 3: Matters Arising from the Melting Pot	51
Introduction	51
3.1 Contrasting Worldviews	52
3.2 Power and Meaning	55
3.3 What is Real? What is Being Human?	59
3.4 The Dark Side	64
3.4 Addressing Difference	71
Endnote	73
PART 2: THE JOURNEY OF THE CHURCH AND ITS FAITH	75
Introduction	76
Introduction Chapter 4: From Encounter to Institution	76 78
Chapter 4: From Encounter to Institution	78
Chapter 4: From Encounter to Institution 4.1 The Movement	78 79
Chapter 4: From Encounter to Institution 4.1 The Movement 4.2 Stabilization through Order	78 79 83
Chapter 4: From Encounter to Institution 4.1 The Movement 4.2 Stabilization through Order 4.3 Annunciation to Institution	78 79 83 85
Chapter 4: From Encounter to Institution 4.1 The Movement 4.2 Stabilization through Order 4.3 Annunciation to Institution 4.4 Institutionalization of the Holy Spirit	78 79 83 85 86
Chapter 4: From Encounter to Institution 4.1 The Movement 4.2 Stabilization through Order 4.3 Annunciation to Institution 4.4 Institutionalization of the Holy Spirit 4.5 Modal/Sodal Expressions of Church	78 79 83 85 86 87
Chapter 4: From Encounter to Institution 4.1 The Movement 4.2 Stabilization through Order 4.3 Annunciation to Institution 4.4 Institutionalization of the Holy Spirit 4.5 Modal/Sodal Expressions of Church 4.6 Narrative and Experience	78 79 83 85 86 87 88
Chapter 4: From Encounter to Institution 4.1 The Movement 4.2 Stabilization through Order 4.3 Annunciation to Institution 4.4 Institutionalization of the Holy Spirit 4.5 Modal/Sodal Expressions of Church 4.6 Narrative and Experience 4.7 Dwelling and Seeking	78 79 83 85 86 87 88
Chapter 4: From Encounter to Institution 4.1 The Movement 4.2 Stabilization through Order 4.3 Annunciation to Institution 4.4 Institutionalization of the Holy Spirit 4.5 Modal/Sodal Expressions of Church 4.6 Narrative and Experience 4.7 Dwelling and Seeking 4.8 Participatory Development Theory	78 79 83 85 86 87 88 89
Chapter 4: From Encounter to Institution 4.1 The Movement 4.2 Stabilization through Order 4.3 Annunciation to Institution 4.4 Institutionalization of the Holy Spirit 4.5 Modal/Sodal Expressions of Church 4.6 Narrative and Experience 4.7 Dwelling and Seeking 4.8 Participatory Development Theory 4.9 From Ignatius to Emperor Constantine	78 79 83 85 86 87 88 89 90
Chapter 4: From Encounter to Institution 4.1 The Movement 4.2 Stabilization through Order 4.3 Annunciation to Institution 4.4 Institutionalization of the Holy Spirit 4.5 Modal/Sodal Expressions of Church 4.6 Narrative and Experience 4.7 Dwelling and Seeking 4.8 Participatory Development Theory 4.9 From Ignatius to Emperor Constantine Chapter 5: From Constantine to the Renaissance/Reformation	78 79 83 85 86 87 88 89 90 91
Chapter 4: From Encounter to Institution 4.1 The Movement 4.2 Stabilization through Order 4.3 Annunciation to Institution 4.4 Institutionalization of the Holy Spirit 4.5 Modal/Sodal Expressions of Church 4.6 Narrative and Experience 4.7 Dwelling and Seeking 4.8 Participatory Development Theory 4.9 From Ignatius to Emperor Constantine Chapter 5: From Constantine to the Renaissance/Reformation 5.1 Joining a Society in Decay	78 79 83 85 86 87 88 89 90 91 93 94
Chapter 4: From Encounter to Institution 4.1 The Movement 4.2 Stabilization through Order 4.3 Annunciation to Institution 4.4 Institutionalization of the Holy Spirit 4.5 Modal/Sodal Expressions of Church 4.6 Narrative and Experience 4.7 Dwelling and Seeking 4.8 Participatory Development Theory 4.9 From Ignatius to Emperor Constantine Chapter 5: From Constantine to the Renaissance/Reformation 5.1 Joining a Society in Decay 5.2 Kings, Prophets, and Bisociation	78 79 83 85 86 87 88 89 90 91 93 94

	CONTENTS
Chapter 6: From the Enlightenment to the Millennium	104
6.1 The Christian Faith and the Enlightenment	105
6.2 The Response of the Church	108
6.3 The Response of the Church Over Time	109
6.4 "Tomorrow is Another Country"	112
6.5 Engaging Tomorrow's World	115
Chapter 7: A Tsunami of Threats	120
7.1 Roots in the Past	121
7.2 A Crisis of Structure	123
7.3 A Crisis of Ministry	142
7.4 Management of People	149
7.5 Lay Vocation/Total Ministry/Marketplace Ministry	152
7.6 Theolocracy	154
7.7 The Contextual/Countercultural Balance	156
PART 3: FROM HERE TO ETERNITY	159
Introduction	160
Chapter 8: Power and Vulnerability	164
8.1 Power	165
8.2 Vulnerability	168
8.3 The Cross, Suffering, and Victory	180
8.4 Redefinition-Reimagining	183
Chapter 9: Hierarchy, Hybrid, and Emergence	184
9.1 Change and Choice	186
9.2 Crossing the Bridge	187
9.3 The Rump	191
9.4 The Hybrid	192
9.5 The Emergent	197
9.6 The Edge of Chaos	220
Chapter 10: Holistic Ministry	226
10.1 State of Play	226
10.2 Constraints and Possibilities	227
10.3 Holistic Ministry	231
10.4 The Authority of Leadership	238
10.5 A New Reformation	246

xi

xii CONTENTS

Chapter 11: Contextual/Countercultural Balance	248
11.1 Significance of the Millennium	251
11.2 Existing Issues Within the Church	251
11.3 A Countercultural Approach	253
11.4 Driving Force	255
11.5 Relationships—The Identity of the Church	257
11.6 Holistic Ministry	258
Chapter 12: A Context to Critique	260
12.1 Critical Issues	260
12.2 Good and Evil	261
12.3 Inequality	263
12.4 What is Human, What is Real?	265
12.5 Face to Face	266
12.6 Globalism—Mutual Global Decision-Making	268
12.7 Endnote	269
Conclusion/Postscript	270
Glossary	273
Bibliography	283
Index	293

List of Illustrations

The Sigmoid Curve	12
Sigmoid Curve arising from Point B	13

Foreword

By the Most Reverend Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury

I have known Michael since he was Archdeacon of Warwick, and I was Rector of Southam in the 1990s. Even in those days he engaged widely with life outside the church, observing changes in society and philosophy, and encouraging the church to think more carefully about how these changes would affect its mission.

His book is written from an Anglican perspective but makes use of a range of examples from the wider church. In fact, throughout the book Michael provides engaging evidence to illustrate how the church might respond to the leadership challenge that the third decade of the millennium presents.

In part one he begins with an overview of the state of the world, technology, markets, and related issues. He has insights into current technology and theories about the ethical questions surrounding development. His conclusion is that the age of information innovation may be for many an age of uncertainty, something we have observed around us in recent years. As a result, he encourages those who believe the church still has much to offer to engage with these uncertainties, to find out what he calls "the edge of chaos," to refresh our understanding of what ministry looks like. He poses the profound question about what ordination means and involves: whether it is principally about doing or being and how this differs from the early understanding of the Ministry of the Baptized.

In part two he uses a management SWOT analysis of the Church of England, advocating significant change in the structure in favor of an emergent bottom-up pattern. He returns to this rationale throughout part three. Part three is the most challenging section as it is about the ministry of Christ and how it intersects with society. In polemical and provocative style, he presents truths that he believes the church must face, always based on a sense of opportunity and hope. His high view of both culture and Gospel enables him successfully to engage the two in a constructive and critical conversation with each other.

One of the areas that is both most provocative and most timely is his challenge to the church as to whether it is human centered or has as its primary purpose the protection of its structures, its authority, and its hierarchy. He argues that the tensions that are sometimes visible between bishops, clergy, and laity arise from a mismatch of expectations of the nature of the church.

While I might not agree with everything he says, as is always the case with Michael, his book will leave his readers stirred and interested.

Preface

W. B. Yeats wrote "The Second Coming" in Dublin in 1920 within the maelstrom of the emerging Irish Free State, with a bitter civil war looming ahead. Knowing how history continues to repeat itself, this poem can easily be seen to be pertinent to both British society and the Christian faith/church—they all face radical change—on entering the twenty-first century.

We are moving from the Industrial Age to the Information/Data Age, from hierarchical order to networking innovation, from absolute to relative values, from planet pollution to eco-friendliness, from outright materialism to growing spiritual enquiry, from Western neo-liberal capitalism to an uncertain future, from a national mindset towards overwhelming globalization and then back to reemergent localism.

How then does both society and the faith/church face these changing circumstances? Which elements of the past will crumble into insignificance, and which are worth holding onto? What are the already emerging new signs of life, and the fresh questions that accompany them? In what direction is society traveling, and what inspirational guidance has the faith/church to offer?

In seeking to reflect on these questions, I will undoubtedly draw on my previous life experience: from being an agricultural development worker in Tanzania; to inner-city youth and community ministry in Canning Town, Wandsworth, and New Cross; to Midland urban and rural ministry in Rugby and Warwickshire; to aid/church consultancy in Khartoum, Juba, and the surrounding countrysides; to engaging with extreme Muslim and secular governments who faced defiant Christian communities seeking to be fully participating citizens of Sudan and South Sudan.

I have approached this task as a practical theologian: one who reflects theologically and biblically on all experience, both within society, and within the church. My work has taken me to a rich variety of communities, places, and responsibilities. It has involved working through the rapid social change environment of Arusha Declaration "ujamaa" villages of Tanzania

in the 1960s—which has a counterpoint in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's book *Americanah*; juxtaposing Latin American liberation theology with the racially torn, inner-city London melting pot of the 1980s;¹¹ engaging with the urban/urban shadow of the West Midlands, as the church has sought to come to terms with decaying structures and the challenge of postmodern, postindustrial society; and participating side by side with a living church, in the traumas of war, peace, persecution, and the corruption of the divided multicultural Sudanese countries.

It was only when I left all of these spheres of work and experience that I had time and clarity of mind to objectively analyze and reflect on the issues in which I had been deeply immersed. Networking with other practitioners and following these discussions with further research/reading led me to discern and articulate an overall response to my search, which is the book that follows.

Throughout all of this it is clear that both society and the church, be they British or African, have found it difficult to survive intact as secularization, postmodernism, and technological change have engulfed global society and opened up an uncertain future.

Hopefully the conclusion to this journey—with Yeats's poem in mind—will include both a deeper understanding of the church's predicament, and a facing up to the distinct possibility of its center falling apart, and yet at the same time, a belief that there is a constructive way forward. By looking both seriously and critically at the context, and by rediscovering the purpose and relevance of the mission of God, it is argued, the church could be reimagined so as to become the wild beast that "slouches toward Bethlehem to be born," participating afresh in the inauguration of God's mission amidst the excitement of the third decade. The hope and expectation behind all of this is that once again the falcon might alter its course, following the guidance and cry of the falconer.

¹ See Paget-Wilkes, Poverty, Revolution and the Church.

² Yeats, quoted in Childs, Modernism, 39.

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This book has been a team effort from the very beginning, with so many people contributing to the final outcome. Central to this has been the group who met in Burford: Richard Cooke, John Benington, and Andrew Kirk, together with the advice from afar from Ann Morisy, Jenny Bickmore-Brand, Jean Hartley, Paul Wignall, and Tony Bradley. In particular, Richard Cooke, Director of Ministry at Coventry Diocese, made up for my deficiencies theologically, and John Benington, Professor Emeritus at Warwick Business School, gave advice and shape to the chapters in part one. I am deeply indebted to Karen Czapiewski for manuscript preparation, together with Angie and Yvette who so patiently typed earlier manuscripts. My whole being still benefits from working alongside Ezekiel in Khartoum, and Harriet, Enoch, and Pauline in Juba. I am grateful to Jessica, Claire, and Rory, who kept me in touch with contemporary thinking, and to Gillian for her patience and support during the gestation of this work. Finally, it is the thought of our grandchildren, entering future decades of life, that has encouraged me to articulate a lifetime of thoughts onto paper.

Introduction

For the past sixty years the world has been engulfed in rapid social change. Since the millennium, the speed and scope of this change have been increasing and expanding exponentially. Being immersed within that experience makes it difficult to identify what is happening objectively, or to offer thoughts on the direction and endpoint of travel. So to step to the side and consider what is happening is both an exciting and daunting task. It requires looking back, standing still, and imagining the future, all at the same time. The challenge this book hopes to kick-start is a process that others of future generations will continue to explore and expand upon.

The three parts of this book will juxtapose three aspects together: the changing societal context in which we live; the development of the Christian faith from New Testament times up until the millennium; and a reimagining of the mission of God within the Western church as it approaches the third decade following the millennium.

Stimulation to write this book has come from the single Chinese character that denotes both crisis and opportunity. As the paradigm shift in Western culture becomes clear, and new horizons open up, the Christian faith/church is becoming increasingly aware of a crisis looming. Both the church's structures and the traditional articulation of its faith are being threatened by the oncoming age, with the distinct possibility of disintegration for the church as we have known it.

At the same time, the paradigm shift in culture is offering the church an opportunity, in the eye of the storm, to reassess its core message and represent it, not only recontextualized but also counter-culturally, to western society. This paradigm shift is unnerving to the whole of society, leaving it open to alternative views as to what is happening and alternative suggestions concerning the way forward. It is bemused by the fresh issues/questions being thrown up that have no easy answer or response. This therefore is an opportunity for the church to understand and acknowledge its own failings and then to represent its message with a confident countercultural

stance to an ever-evolving society that is hesitantly treading, step by step, into an uncertain future.

THE CONTENT

The content of this book is divided into three parts.

Part one looks at twenty-first century Western society in flux. It refers to analysis/interpretations that have been made, and notes examples that illustrate those changes/developments. These relate not only to institutional and political structures but also to the marketplace of ideas, ethics, and morals, together with reference to the apparent winners and losers in this maelstrom of change. Chapter one covers structural and technological development right up to the possibilities of genetic engineering, molecular manufacturing, sentient computers, and superhumans. Chapter two covers the outworkings of these in social, political, economic, and global structures. Chapter three looks at the philosophies underlying society, and the ethical questions raised in this melting pot of development.

Part two takes us on a journey through the development of the Christian faith/church, from Pentecost right up to the present day. Dividing the time into four eras, chapter four considers the time between Pentecost and the edict of Emperor Constantine in AD 313, the legitimizing of the Christian faith, and the initiating of a long association between the church and state rulers. Chapter five continues that story up until the Renaissance/ Enlightenment, including the Protestant Reformation. Chapter six takes the story on from the rise of modern life sciences through to the millennium, from when the rise of individualistic humanism and the centrality of fact over value and belief broke the liaison between church and state, relegating faith to the private lives of its followers. Postmodernism continued that trend, undermining absolute truth with its relativist claims, and pointing onward to the fourth postmillennial era.

Chapter seven takes us into more detail on the various crises facing the church around the millennium, leading up to the point when the church is faced with the arrival of this fourth era. It highlights both the threats and the opportunities present as structural difficulties threaten its very existence.

Arising out of this journey, four key issues/disjunctions are identified that appear regularly throughout these eras of historical development. These same disjunctions remain with us today as the faith/church face yet another paradigm shift. They are:

- The attraction of the church towards prerogative power in society as compared to Jesus' dependence on the power of vulnerability.
- The centrality of hierarchy, control, and coercion for the church as compared to the networking, digital, innovative, and emergent dynamic within today's society.
- 3. The pivotal, functional, dominant role of "ministerial order" as compared to the "ministry of the baptized."
- 4. The church's efforts to contextualize and assimilate being "in the world" as compared to its responsibility to be countercultural, prophetic, and challenging to society—being "not of the world."

It is these four disjunctions that continue on into this fourth era.

Part three immerses itself in this fourth era within which we live. It seeks to reposition both faith and church as the mission of God for the third decade. It is concerned that the medium should reflect the message, that contextualization does not obliterate its prophetic countercultural role. It takes the four key questions raised in chapter six, and offers ways forward. Chapter eight looks at power and vulnerability: the disjunction between the medium of the church, and the message of Christ's identification with the marginalized. Chapter nine begins by delineating three choices facing the church as it enters this postmillennial period.

The first option is to reemphasize a conservative, orthodox, *laager mentality*. The second is to continue along the lines of a *mixed economy*. The third is to take a step towards becoming an *emergent organism*.

These choices center around how the hierarchy responds to the networking society around it: whether an ordered structure could be transformed into an emergent Holy Spirit empowered experience arising from the periphery. Chapter ten looks at the dualism encompassing "representative" orders and the "ministry of the baptized." It seeks a holistic synthesis, spearheaded by lay vocation and supported by an iconic servant ministry. Chapter eleven returns to the question of balance between contextual relevance and countercultural activity in ethics, reality, relationships, reconciliation, and spiritual warfare. Chapter twelve raises a number of these issues/questions as an agenda that the whole body of the church should address.

The overall thesis of the book stresses the cruciality of these deeprooted, longstanding issues as the Christian faith engages with this posthumanist, algorithmic, technological, brave new world, a world which raises as many questions as it does innovations/achievements. The book will highlight that, despite the incredible transformation of the Western world, through the exponential rise of computer power, the Christian faith remains totally relevant to the unresolved questions concerning the nature of society, humanity, and reality. So far many of them lie unresolved, beyond humanity's hope, expectation, and belief that power, possessions, and problem-solving potential can solve them.

Alternatively, the thesis will firstly stress that the faith/church's identification with the "least in society" could provide a firmer and more sustainable base from which to serve the whole of humanity. Secondly, it will show that the vulnerability of relational love can oil the wheels of structures more effectively than coercion, dominion, control, and prerogative power. Thirdly, it will stress that the very nature of God can emerge from the bottom up through transformed, individual life empowerment by the Holy Spirit, as seen in New Testament times. Fourthly, it will point toward a more balanced contribution between the necessary contextualization required and appropriate countercultural contributions—the mission of God in the third decade.

Returning to the stanzas of Yeats's poem, the conclusion/postscript suggests that this third decade will bring the issues facing the church/faith, to a head. Having laid out these key issues, and offered three possible responses in part three, the postscript will stress that this third decade will be a pivot upon which the future of the present church will hinge—a point of no return. Choices and actions will need to be taken by the church, otherwise they will be forced upon the church. The key dynamic pointed out will be whether the church identifies the mission of God as a giant leap of faith, like a free-fall base jumper launching off from the top of the Shard; whether it goes for the hybrid option, choosing to take the express lift instead; or whether, enveloped by its pre-Enlightenment past, it attempts to "laager" and "lock down," slowly descending the central staircase, settling simply for survival.

The book radically believes that the center, in its present form, should not hold, but that the falcon should refresh its connection with the falconer. In doing so it believes that "the rough beast," with its hour fast approaching, will "slouch toward Bethlehem to be born."

POSTSCRIPT

With regard to terminology I have sought to use the generic term "church" as much as possible. Although it has often referred to the Roman Catholic/Anglican denominations down the centuries, I believe it still has relevance

to other denominations/community churches. Uses of the terms "threefold order" and "ministry of the baptized," again often relate more to Roman Catholics/Anglicans, but I believe they can be easily equated to the concepts of "ministry leadership" and "church membership." And just as the influence of the Enlightenment and postmodernism has assimilated itself into church life comparatively undetected, so too I believe elements of Anglican dynamics have been absorbed into nonconformist structures far more than is recognized.

PART 1

Western Society in Flux

Turning and turning in the widening gyre The falcon cannot hear the falconer; Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world¹

INTRODUCTION

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

There are Jim, Jean, Kevin, and Stuart on a council estate in a Midlands town, trying to make ends meet, supporting their children, mentoring their growing number of grandchildren. There are Sally and Harry; Sally, a health operative spending so much of her free time with youngsters excluded from school, and open to the attractions of "county lines." There are retired businessmen in a coastal village of Northumberland, praying for their village to come alive with faith. Within the Birmingham urban shadow there is a car manufacturing executive living in one hamlet, and a University professor in another, both seeking to contribute to society in their day jobs, whilst at the same time doing their best to uphold their historic village churches as a witness of faith.

There are Sanjay, Jenny, and Bill, all living under the shadow of Canary Wharf, and ministering to those who are buffeted by the stresses and strains of innercity life. There is Maxine, living on the Welsh border, fresh into secondary school, seeking to find her way and her faith in a teen world of friends, social media, and, often, anxiety. Then there are commuter couples in Cotswold villages, where one leaves on the 6:27 and returns on the 8:09; whilst the other looks after the children, and finds a job share as a jobbing architect or an estate agent's assistant, with short day working hours.

Each one of them is being blown along by the strong winds of change both in society and in the Christian faith, which never seem to die down. Yet far too often the sailing boat—the church within which their faith is nurtured—has a hull that is riddled with holes below the water-line. They have to spend so much time baling out the water just in order to stay afloat. Just what does the future hold for people like them—and us? How are we to participate in the mission of God today, and to find hope and purpose in this epoch of volatility and uncertainty?

We live in fast-changing times, in a world of increasing uncontainable complexity. The last five centuries have led the West through global exploration, from agricultural societies through the Industrial Revolution, the information and communications revolution, into our present digital age. Ahead of us lies an algorithmic and undreamed-of future, a point of posthuman "singularity" as the physicists say, where machines can think faster than humans, and where artificial intelligence—AI—can either liberate, enslave, enhance, or supersede humans as the dominant species on this planet.

SHENZHEN—THE MEGA-CITY OF THE WORLD

Nothing illustrates the speed of change better than the city of Shenzhen, just north of Hong Kong. Forty years ago it was a fishing village surrounded by rice paddy fields in the Pearl River Delta. Today it is populated by up to fourteen million people, and surrounded by an urban area of more than 120 million people. It has more skyscrapers over 200 meters than any other city—eighty-two in 2019, with a further sixty under construction. Initiated by Deng Xiaoping as a Special Economic Zone, described as market capitalism guided by ideals of socialism with Chinese characteristics, it now claims to be a global center for scientific and technological innovation. Development may well be initiated in Silicon Valley, but Shenzhen is becoming the ultimate capital of innovation, production, and sale—including its famous Huaqiangbei Shopping District; a cashless tech market with all purchases being made by QR code.

Increasingly, through open source/open innovation on hyper-speed—the New Shanzhai—it is at the forefront of creative development, with 2019 offering, for instance, flying bikes, drones that deliver your fast-food meals, three-dimensional interactive imaging that can model traffic flow through a whole city, and facial recognition security cameras that can feed into Government data banks. It's no wonder the youth of Hong Kong are prepared to fight for their own independence at the barricades.

Such an unimaginable future is made possible not just by the assistance of technology, but by its speed and accelerated expansion. This is best illustrated by Moore's Law, that computer power will double every eighteen to twenty-four months, that microprocessing boards double their capacity by 50 percent every year, that the acceleration of technology will fuel the transformation of life, leaving us in the death throes of the Anthropocene era, where humans have irreversibly altered the ecological balance of nature, putting at risk soils, rivers, forests, the climate, and other species.

Such change will bring complexity that both excites and frightens, that heralds both opportunity and crisis, that will offer societal choices over reduction in menial labor for all, and further rises in inequality. Not only does it increase our abilities to create and wield power, but it also raises timeless questions of meaning, of value, and of human relationships. Despite the extended horizons of human potential, we all search for an answer to creation, evolution, chance, and purpose. Scientists, following Stephen Hawking and others, still strive for a grand unified theory of everything. Others expect to achieve John von Neumann and Ray Kurzweil's point of singularity, which will usher in a posthuman age. The human brain stands

out as the most complex computer of all, but we are still discovering and debating the meaning of the mind and its relationship to the body and soul.

The framework of Western society has been shaped by Christendom, renaissance, reformation, enlightenment, humanism and Western capitalism, but the twenty-first century has revealed deep-seated cracks in this configuration, suggesting that they may struggle to survive the consequences of political economic globalization, the shift of power and empire away from USA and the West towards China and the East, the continuing discoveries of the life sciences and neurosciences, and the outworking of the latest wave of digital, technological innovation, automation, and machinegenerated algorithms.

No wonder W. B. Yeats's poem, following the Easter uprising and the dawn of Irish independence in Dublin, still resonates so strongly in western and global society today. "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold" are the unuttered thoughts floating deep within the hearts and minds of so many today. The amazing potential for good is acknowledged, but the depravity of self-obsessed individuals, globalized capitalist markets/mammon, and populist, dictatorial governments can so easily destroy all that has been gained through the long struggles for liberal democracy. There are many therefore who fear in their blood that "Our Iceberg is Melting."³

So as the Christian faith seeks to be a serious signpost for those living in the twenty-first century, and attempts to understand and engage with today's changing context, what are the issues that both excite and confront it? Innovation and technology mushroom with benefits, and yet also hint that automation will bring significant unemployment with it. Finite resources might well be replaced by technological development. But will the ensuing automation bring with it massive unemployment, shrinking consumer demand, and dwindling growth? Globalization has swept the board through industrial conglomerates and internet giants, but now nationalism has reemerged, and national governments have begun to recognize and respond to the power of the Silicon Valley elite. The need to confront climate change has been accepted in principle, but national positions frequently rebel against carbon reductions. Increased automation will, in turn, foster growing inequality between the developed West, and poor continents such as Africa. Worldwide population growth, water and food shortages, together with the demography of an aging population in developed countries, will exacerbate already-existing social instability.

^{2.} Yeats, "The Second Coming," in Childs, Modernism, 39.

^{3.} Kotter, Our Iceberg is Melting.

As a part of all of this, ensuing turbulence will continue to feed the world migration and refugee movements.

So how do we evaluate the issues of change confronting us? How do we identify a shaft of positive hope to guide us through the narrow channel between the shifting sandbanks that could so easily ground us?

Part 1 looks at Western society in flux. Chapter 1 introduces us to some of the key changes that are impacting and transforming twenty-first-century lives. It begins with the evolving nature of institutions and organizations that make up the heart of our ordered society, including the shift from hierarchies and markets to networks. It analyzes growth through information, innovation, and reformation, leading on to the dynamics of coercion and collaboration, chaos and order. These are followed by the issues of complexity, emergence, algorithms, and data-flow. It concludes with the debates on what it means to be human, whether machines will ever usurp the role of human beings—the singularity—and whether and how an enhanced superhuman might come into being.

Chapter 2 then discusses globalization and nationalism, markets and the crisis facing capitalism, and issues arising from automation, unemployment, and reduced growth.

Chapter 3 unpacks some of the intransigent issues surrounding the tension between power and meaning: substance and relationship; coercion and collaboration; individuality and community; the question of worldviews; the challenge to secularization/humanism as the only show in town. It goes on to touch on the point raised by the film *Blade Runner 2049*, "What is real? What does it mean to be human?," the decoupling of intelligence and consciousness, and, finally, our morally inept approach to these issues, from individual self-centeredness to new ways of conducting war.

Chapter 1

Western Society in Flux and Transition

Political, Economic, Social, Technological, and Ecological Change

Western culture has undergone successive waves of ecological, political, economic, social, technological and organizational change. The ruptures with the past and the new opportunities kickstarted by the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century are mirrored in some ways by the Digital Information Revolution in the twentieth century. Both have also led to new divisions in society, within class, race, wealth, and age, with a growing division between the information-rich and the information-poor, between those who have access to and an affinity for the web, internet, social media, fast broadband, and global interconnectedness, and those who don't.

Three factors interact, amplify, and multiply these influences. First, the speed of change, for example, in computing power, has an exponential impact on everything. To use a borrowed example. a car traveling at 5mph, takes one minute to cover 440 feet. If you double its speed every minute, in the fifth minute it will cover a mile, reaching a speed of 80mph. In twenty-seven minutes its speed will be 671 million mph and it will have traveled 11 million miles. Five minutes more would take it to the moon.

Second, the complexity of change. Natural scientists—particularly in physics, chemistry, and biology—are increasingly recognizing the

limitations of traditional reductionist explanations, which explain things by reducing them to separate component parts and analyzing linear patterns of predictable cause and effect. Reductionist thinking is relevant and fit for purpose when the problems being addressed are relatively "tame" or technical, when there is little dispute about either the causes or the solutions to the problems. Reductionist thinking was effective in resolving many of the technical engineering challenges which drove the industrial revolution.

However, many of the problems now facing society—climate change, drug and alcohol abuse, caring for an ageing population—are wicked rather than tame, and complex rather than technical. Neither the causes nor the solutions to the phenomena are understood or agreed upon; the effects of interventions cannot be predicted accurately because new phenomena emerge unexpectedly. In these conditions scientists find that they need to move beyond reductionist thinking and methods, and instead explore new holistic forms of explanation and engagement with these continuously fluid inter-connected complex adaptive systems.¹

Complex adaptive energy systems include the formation of atoms at the Big Bang right through to the CERN atomic particle collider in Switzerland, where some of those self-same atoms are split, giving off immense heat and energy. Or consider the complexity of the human brain: What we know is that it is made up of neurons, 86 billion of them, that relate to each other through synapses, operating on a whole range of levels—deep neural networks—with each grouping of these nerve ends responsible for the actions and activities of different parts of the body.

Third, artificial or machine intelligence. Our world has been significantly influenced by the use of machine-generated algorithms defined in the House of Lords Report² as "a series of instructions for performing a calculation or solving a problem," or as Yuval Harari has put it, "a methodical set of steps that can be used to make calculations, resolve problems, and reach decisions (not a) particular calculation, but the method followed when making the calculation." Harari goes on to describe them as "arguably the single most important concept in our world." By having algorithms built into its software, a computer can develop further algorithms that enable it to solve problems and find solutions to increasingly complicated questions within infinitesimally small amounts of time. This ability to process data so much faster than the human brain and to use algorithms give computers

- 1. Benington and Moore, Public Value, ch. 1.
- 2. House of Lords Report, AI in the UK.
- 3. Harari, Homo Deus, 97.
- 4. Harari, Homo Deus, 97.