Preface to the Third Edition


It took a dozen years to research and write what is now the first edition of God—The World’s Future. I solicited and received critical reviews and editorial suggestions from scholars such as Wolfhart Pannenberg (who passed from this life in 2014) and from seminary students in Berkeley. My mind thrashed, convulsed, and contorted. This intellectual catharsis led to the launch of what has become a never-ending project, one that continues with periodic revision and renewal. The truths here are provisional, subject to repeated revision while we still “see through a glass darkly.”

Now, in the first quarter of the twenty-first century, we are rolling into the third edition. The hub in the center of the theological wheel remains the gospel, the story of Jesus told in its significance. The wheel’s spokes carry the gospel’s significance outward in multiple doctrinal directions, creating a coherent and stable network of theological thought.

Two new spokes have been added in this third edition. The first is a detailed treatment of justification-by-faith in light of the philosophical debate over gift and the emphasis on the indwelling
of Christ proffered by the Finnish School of Luther research. The second is an introduction to astrotheology, which is a widening of the scope of our treatment of creation in light of the immensity of our cosmic home.

As the wheels of theological reflection rotate, so also does our cultural context roll forward. In the first two editions, I began interpreting the Christian faith from within our modern and emerging postmodern context; and I have continued to engage the understanding of reality implicit in this kinetic globalized context. Here, in the third edition, I need to take into account five culture-shaping forces that have gained momentum since the opening of the new century.

The first, already initiated in the decades prior to the year 2000, is a form of post-institutional spirituality once known as New Age but now called, “Spiritual But Not Religious” (SBNR). Church membership may be shrinking, but spiritual appetite is growing. New spiritual practices and theological discussions are taking place outside the church, as well as inside.

The second culture-shaping force is the eruption of a new form of atheism. Whereas traditional atheists simply remained home on Sunday morning to tend to their gardens and avoid religious worship, the new atheists have become volcanic in their criticism of traditional religion; and they lobby to establish a strictly secular society by removing religion from public influence. The new atheists are out to convert believers into non-believers. The new atheists claim they have a superior morality, one that supports inclusivity over against the alleged bigotry of traditional religious believers. Curiously, many atheists today exhibit traits in common with both the SBNRs and Christian evangelical missionaries.

The third culture-shaping force is the transformation of day-to-day consciousness precipitated by the internet and the ubiquity of
new technologies. Young minds are so connected to electronic devices that young people often communicate solely through these devices. Traditional communities are giving way to unanticipated forms of international and intercultural relationships. Whatever social support we previously relied upon to reinforce our system of beliefs has suddenly evaporated. It becomes increasingly challenging for a young person to grow up within a coherent religious worldview; because he or she is confronted daily with a dozen takes on ultimate reality or two dozen competing ideologies. The pluralism of worldviews is beyond anybody’s control, or even assessment. The possibility of developing one’s self-awareness within the framework of a single coherent horizon of understanding has been electronically incinerated. The implications of this new phenomenon are not yet known.

The fourth cultural force is the explosion of violence around the world involving Islamic terrorism and Hindu nationalism. Christians especially in the Syriac and Coptic traditions are undergoing intense persecution, suffering beheadings and church burnings. Christians along with Muslims in India daily confront threats and intimidation. Courageous leaders in every major religious tradition continue their pursuit of peace and cooperation, to be sure; yet inflamed rivalries challenge the assumptions voiced by the religious pluralists of a previous generation.

The fifth cultural force is the new public awareness of Planet Earth, both in terms of the ecosphere and the cosmosphere. The futurists of the 1960s and 1970s had prophesied that our planet is headed for catastrophe due to overgrowth of population, industrial pollution, agricultural pollution, depletion of non-renewable resources, and what we today know as anthropogenic climate change. During the 1980s and 1990s a dark curtain of denial fell over us that frustrated international preventative action. But, after a generation of school
children have grown up with the facts and the data which demonstrates conclusively that our climate is changing, ecological consciousness is growing. And many of us now look forward to a single planetary community of moral deliberation to address the ecological crisis.

The cosmosphere is beginning to gain public traction as well. Since the mid-1990s, more than a thousand exoplanets have been discovered in the Milky Way. Probes of Saturn’s moons seem to be on the brink of discovering microbial life. Plans are being made to transport life from Earth to Mars. We terrestrials are ready to invite extraterrestrials into our church basements for a covered dish dinner.

Any meaningful explication of fundamental Christian beliefs will necessarily arise out of interaction with modernity, postmodernity, and these five global cultural forces. The theologian will find himself or herself engaging and even critiquing the picture of reality projected in this context, to be sure, but the constructive task will be daunting.

As we have said in previous editions, theology is reflection on faith. But, perhaps we can say more. Is there a feedback loop, wherein theology informs, inspires, and even strengthens faith? That would be a blessing worth praying for.

Finally, over the quarter century since the first edition of this work went into press, my life situation has changed. My beloved children have grown, and they have brought children into the world and adopted them into their home. I cannot find the words to express my pride and gratitude at witnessing this ongoing marvel. Nor can I avoid dedicating this third edition to the next generation: Kayla, Jessica, Jacqueline, Nina, Lydia, David, Maddie Lulu, Jack, Will, and Reynold.

In addition, let me thank those who have aided me in finalizing this text. This includes Karen Ann (Svenske) Peters who not only
offers inspiration but also brings me my breakfast while I sit glued to the computer. This also includes Ki Wook Min, who produced the bibliography and revised the index, and Lisa Gruenisen whose scrupulous editing makes this text readable.

Ted Peters
Berkeley, California
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