Praise for *Towards Dawn*

"Bishop Erik Varden is one of the great confessors of the faith in our time. In this collection of essays, he weaves together spiritual wisdom from the Scriptures, the tradition of the Church, the lives of the saints, and classical and contemporary literature. He notes that Christianity is premised on the irruption of eternity in time and thus that essential coordinates are and must remain constant. As the Carthusian motto declares, *Stat crux dum volvitur orbis*—The cross stands firm while the world turns. He concludes that 'we need a Christocentric conversion in mind and manners to make sense of our significant being, to account for our origin and end, our longings and frustrations, our wounds and our capacity for healing.' This is a very hopeful book."

—**Tracey Rowland**, St. John Paul II Chair of Theology, University of Notre Dame (Australia), member of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences

"Bishop Erik Varden is the most exquisite and enthralling Catholic writer of our day, leery of the twin temptations of craven modernity and frozen traditionalism, always digging deep into the past and finding renewal and refreshment to meet the needs of the present."

—**Brendan Walsh**, editor of *The Tablet*

"In these dark times, we are profoundly in need of hope. Bishop Erik Varden's searching reflections deliver. With wit and wisdom, he rightly diagnoses the modern world's problem—our alienation from our own bodies (see chapter 3)—and provides the only true solution: 'The embodied application of Christian faith in God's Incarnation.' You will come away understanding all the more what Vatican II meant in declaring that 'only in the mystery of the Incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light.'"

—**Christopher West**, president of the Theology of the Body Institute

"Bishop Erik Varden offers a lively and fresh view of today's world, of which he knows very well literature, art, and cinema. To this post-secular but not post-Christian age, he declares sympathy and trust because Christ, Alpha and Omega, is at the beginning and will be at the end of history."

—**Giovanni Maria Vian**, former editor-in-chief of *L'Osservatore Romano*

"What burns at the heart of each chapter in *Towards Dawn*, along with the light and fire of a fine, contemplative intelligence, is a flame of faith that, far from being cowed by the grim, unhappy winds of modern secularization, survives and thrives with a fire of conviction at once notably urgent and yet always serene. In a reflection on contemporary society from a spiritual perspective, it's hard to imagine a more illumined, more authoritative statement than these few lines from the preface: 'It is often casually said that we live in post-Christian times. I believe that statement to be false. Theologically, the term "post-Christian" makes no sense. Christ is the Alpha and the Omega, and all the letters in between. He carries constitutionally the freshness of morning dew. Christianity is of the dawn.'"

—**Father Paul Murray, OP**, author of *A Journey with Jonah* and *Light at the Torn Horizon*

"At the beginning of the third millennium, Pope Saint John Paul II prophetically stated that the bishop is called 'to be a prophet, witness, and servant of hope . . . instilling confidence and proclaiming before all people the basis of Christian hope' (*Pastores gregis* 3). Bishop Erik Varden fulfills this essential duty in this collection of essays. As a man of hope, he thoughtfully reflects on important concerns for the contemporary Church and society, avoiding idealistic optimism and nihilistic pessimism. He builds his reflections on the rock of Jesus Christ, the Truth, and offers the reader profound reasons for hope amid the contemporary cries for meaning and purpose. The book is timely as we celebrate one of the final gifts given to the Church and the world by Pope Francis: the Jubilee Year of Hope."

—**Archbishop Samuel J. Aquila**, archbishop of Denver

TOWARDS DAWN

ESSAYS IN HOPEFULNESS

BISHOP ERIK VARDEN

WORD on FIRE

Published by Word on Fire, Elk Grove Village, IL 60007

Printed in Italy

Cover design, typesetting, and interior art direction by Nic Fredrickson, Clark Kenyon, and Rozann Lee

ISBN: 978-1-68578-274-0

Library of Congress Control Number: 2025935901

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Preface

It is often casually said that we live in post-Christian times. I believe that statement to be false. Theologically, the term 'post-Christian' makes no sense. Christ is the Alpha and the Omega, and all the letters in between. He carries constitutionally the freshness of morning dew. Christianity is of the dawn.

If at times, during given periods, we feel enshrouded by twilight, it is because another day is in the making. It seems to me clear that we find ourselves in such a process of awakening now. If we do want to deal in the currency of 'pre' and 'post', I think it more apposite to suggest that we stand on the threshold of an age I would call 'post-secular'.

Secularisation has run its course. It is exhausted, void of positive finality. The human being, meanwhile, remains alive with deep aspirations. It is an essential task of the Church to listen to these attentively, with respect, then to orient them towards Christ, who carries the comfort and challenge for which the human heart yearns.

The essays in this volume attempt to read the signs of our times hopefully. Hope, it should be noted, is not the same as optimism.

Christianity is no utopianism. Biblical religion is supremely, in some ways shockingly, realistic. The great teachers of faith have always insisted that supernatural life must build on a true appraisal of nature. We must train ourselves to see things as they are, ourselves as we are: spiritual life presupposes ability and courage to call a spade a spade.

To have Christian hope is not to expect everything to work out all right. Not everything does. To hope is to have confidence that everything, even suffering, disappointment, and injustice, can be purposeful. The light 'shines in the darkness' (John 1.5). It does not obliterate the dark – yet; that will be for the new heaven and the new earth, in which 'there will be no more night' (Revelation 22.5). Here and now, hope glimmers.

That is not to say it is inconsequential. There is a blessed contagion in hope, enabling it to spread from heart to heart. Totalitarian powers always work to obliterate hope and induce despair. That is significant. To school ourselves in hope is to exercise ourselves in freedom. In a wonderful poem, Péguy describes hope as the flame of the sanctuary lamp. This flame, he says, 'has traversed the depths of all the night'. It lets us see what is now, yet envisage what may come about. To hope is to stake one's existence on the possibility of becoming. That is an art to practise with assiduity today, in the fatalist, determinist atmosphere of our so very strange times.

This year the Catholic Church celebrates a jubilee under the motto *Peregrinantes in spem*. The phrase is dynamic. The word 'hope', *spes*, is in the accusative, designating it as the reality towards which we move as towards our natural home, much as the prodigal son of the parable, shocked to find himself enclosed in all-encompassing estrangement, 'came to himself' (Luke 15.17),

then set out without delay towards his father's house. To be pilgrims in progress towards hope is to move out of meaninglessness perceived towards sense and purpose incarnate in Christ, God from God, Light from Light.

Day is breaking. Why turn away from it disorientedly?

+fr Erik Varden
Ascension 2025

1

Evangelisation in Forgetful Times

Among the earliest outpourings of the human spirit to have been passed down to us is the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Gilgamesh was king of Uruk, on the bank of the Euphrates, around 2800 BC, when the Sumerian city-states knew their first flourishing. The oldest collections of Gilgamesh poems, preserved on clay tablets, date from around 2000 BC. Their various strands were woven together in different languages and places over eight hundred years to reach their standard epic form around 1200 BC.

Issued from a goddess's embraces with a man, Gilgamesh was a mortal, though sufficiently imbued with divinity to yearn for everlasting life. This yearning – undirected, thus frustrated – expressed itself in fierce enterprise and boundless ambition. Gilgamesh exhausted the people of Uruk, who pleaded with the gods to fashion a hero who might absorb their king's unrest: 'Let him be a match for the storm of his heart', they prayed, 'let them vie with each other, so Uruk may be rested!' The answer to this prayer was Enkidu, a man of preternatural ability, who won Gilgamesh's friendship. Together

they travelled to the ends of the earth, set on adventure, each a source of courage and comfort to the other.

Enkidu's death provoked a crisis in Gilgamesh. His reluctance to surrender the body of his friend to the tomb made the transience of human existence disturbingly apparent: 'I did not surrender his body for burial', says Gilgamesh, 'until a maggot dropped from his nostril.' This, he realised, was the fate in store for him also. He could not bear to sit and wait for it. So he began to roam, fleeing reminders of mortality:

> I was afraid that I too would die, . . .
> what became of my friend Enkidu was too
> much to bear,
> so on a far path I wander the wild.

Gilgamesh raced against the sun. He sought out Uta-napishti, Babylon's Noah, survivor of the Flood; he dived to the bottom of the sea to pick a youth-restoring plant, which a serpent then slithered away with. All the while the gods called out, 'Gilgamesh, where are you wandering? The life that you seek you never will find.' At the end of the epic, we find Gilgamesh back in Uruk, before the city wall he had built. Gilgamesh regarded that monumental wall as his one claim to immortality.

It has perished, of course, as surely as did the works of Shelley's Ozymandias. The word alone, apparently fugacious yet wondrously able to bridge the distance of four thousand years, allows Gilgamesh to live among us still – a near, strangely troubling presence.

I say 'troubling' because Gilgamesh could be our contemporary. He is a megalomaniac, in love with his proficiency but unsure

of his purpose, haunted by death, perplexed by his heart's craving, courageous in the face of the absurd, yet weighed down by sadness. Especially striking is Gilgamesh's refusal to stay still. The keener his despair, the more frantic his movement: Remember, he attempted to outrun the course of the sun. This tendency is as old as humanity. Yet never have women and men been so well equipped to indulge it as today.

The modern fixation with movement and change is dissected in a 2018 book by François-Xavier Bellamy, a notable figure in French political and intellectual life – two arenas that do not, perhaps, intersect often enough. Bellamy maintains that a gradual transformation of consciousness began in the wake of the scientific revolution wrought by Copernicus and Galileo. Whereas Gilgamesh knew human contingency within a world supposed to be stable, we moderns regard change as a universal law. We take it for granted that nothing endures, that we are specks of dust in an expanding universe, that reality as such is advancing with no set goal, having no centre. The one thing left to believe in is movement or 'progress'. We pursue it religiously. The ideologies of the twentieth century made of progress an absolute value. The market economy is based upon it. It increasingly establishes its sway in anthropology. The narrative of 'transhumanism' no longer pertains to Orwellian hyperbole. It is put before us as the inevitable next stage of 'progress', which some predict will see human beings outdone by the machine. So completely have we succumbed to this manner of thinking, notes Bellamy, that 'modernity is characterised by an immense rage against anyone who declines to fall into step with its rhythm'. Our passion for change has become obsessive and totalitarian.

We encounter this passion in the Church too. It accounts for

major tensions that plague the ecclesial body to the extent of threatening its unity. It is surely an ecclesial task to make the Word of God intelligible *now* while remaining faithful to an unbroken tradition. The Word of God does not speak into a void but to minds and hearts, eliciting a response. Its expositors must address real people, the people of their time. Yet how do we get our message across? By what approaches, images, and terms can the Church's *kerygma* be made resplendent in our fast-moving time, conveyed 'not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word' (1 Thessalonians 2.13), as a decisive *evangelion*? What is the freeing word our world longs to hear? What, in our contemporaries' anguish, is essential, what merely of the hour? To answer such questions is to identify an ecclesial and evangelical task. It exceeds my presumption to pretend to do so in the course of an essay. What I shall attempt is simpler.

First, I shall suggest four perspectives on evangelisation by reflecting on the semantic potential of the word 'catholic', a word qualifying our theological enterprise and announcing our mission. Next, I shall consider a curious feature of today's Catholic climate, at least in the Western world: the tendency by which the very elderly call the young retrograde and conflicts arise over the rightful custody of tradition. Intergenerational squabbles about what to keep in the attic and what to bring down are banal. They occur in every age. Here and now, though, they are peculiarly charged, conditioned by a verifiable experience of rupture. Considering this rupture serenely, we may hope – this is my third section – to bring to it, too, an *evangelion* in view of healing. This matter is of concern to me. Perhaps it may concern you also.

WHAT IS CATHOLIC?

The adjective 'catholic' reaches us through Latin from Greek, where we find it as an adverb, *kath' holon*, meaning 'according to the whole'. Aristotle opposes what is *kath' holon* to what is *kath' hekaston*, 'pertaining to specifics'. It is 'catholic' to contain a sum of particulars and to form them into an elegant whole. In this regard, I am indebted to Dame Gertrude Brown, a nun of Stanbrook, for a brilliant insight. In the early 1980s, she was sent to the United States to assist a community reconciled to the Church after embroilment in what came to be called the Boston heresy case. Dame Gertrude was glad to accompany a broadening of outlook among the sisters and brothers. One day she wrote home to Stanbrook delightedly. A homily preached that morning at Mass, she noted, had been 'very good. Marks of true Christian spirituality – Trinitarian, Christocentric, Biblical, doctrinal, liturgical, Catholic, *i.e.* hospitable.' I consider this definition of 'Catholic' as 'hospitable' to be inspired. To be a Catholic is to inhabit a vast, inviting space and to breathe within it an air of Alpine freshness. A construct of theology in which we keep bumping our head on the ceiling, oppressed by the odour of old socks, may need to be tested for catholicity. That said, to be hospitable is to invite guests *home*, and a home has boundaries. What is more, a home is a space that is lived in and loved. To claim a home as home, it is not enough just to be able to itemise its furniture; we must use it, cherish it, make it our own. A Catholic theologian is one who receives the Catholic tradition in its fullness with a guest's graciousness, increasingly grateful to find a home within it and delighting in inviting others in, to enable their homecoming also.

A second hallmark, outlined in the so-called 'canon' of Vincent

of Lérins, is this: Catholic truth is what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all. This is not to contend that theology is static, but to say that theology's *object* does not change. This object is given, revealed, and calls for reverence. Theology aspiring to be Catholic may not be reoriented to lesser causes. We should beware of projects that set out to develop a theology 'of' this or that; likewise of attempts to tie theology down by descriptive, identity-political tags. Theology is the intelligent, humble, praying engagement with the deposit of faith handed down in the Church – nothing less. When the Church tries to keep up with passing fashions, she is bound to fail. She will always lag a few steps behind. She risks cutting a sorry, even comical figure, like late-middle-aged parents who attempt to adopt the dress code of their teenage children. This fact reveals the fragility of in-*sub*-culturation. It teaches us that Catholic engagement with contemporary culture must touch the still waters of the depths, not the flotsam washed up on beaches.

To consider a third aspect of the word 'catholic', let us return to Aristotle's definition. To be *kath' holon*, says he, is to generate a whole out of disparate parts. This presupposes an ability to hold a degree of tension. The key dogmas of our faith (of the Trinity, the hypostatic union, the body's resurrection) are vastly sophisticated formulas of equilibrated paradox. The encompassing nature of Catholic thought requires of those who exercise it a well-formed, rigorous discipline of mind. The Catholic theologian must be learned in the Scriptures, which he or she should ideally study in the languages of their composition; he or she must be conversant with philosophy both ancient and modern, have a good grasp of history, understand the form and development of doctrine, and be able to pursue Catholic truth, not only in manuals, but in the

Gradual and Missal, and in hagiography. At a time when faculties of theology are pushed out of universities, it is vital to uphold the intellectual integrity of the discipline. Sociologists tell us that the residual transmission of faith within communities is, in the West, a model in collapse. The believer of the future is likely to have made a solitary journey to faith by way of a searching mind. The intellectual apostolate plays a key part in displaying the coherence and beauty of Catholic teaching, in stimulating minds moulded by computational logic to metaphysical flights.

While Catholic theology challenges and satisfies the intellect, it is not restricted to discursive forms. It appeals to our whole being. It engages our sensibility. To illustrate this fourth characteristic of catholicity, I will call on a testimony from outside the fold, as it were. A few years ago, Navid Kermani, the German Orientalist and novelist, published a book of essays on Christian art. It is a book remarkable for its insight – even more for the fact that its author, of Iranian descent, is a Shia Muslim. With empathy and acumen, Kermani reflects on how the Catholic soul has sought pictorial expression over the centuries. He makes original, shrewd observations because he has that distance from the subject which enables a global view, alert to the strangeness of motifs that Christians, blinded by familiarity, fail to notice. In one essay, Kermani makes an especially significant statement. While prolonged engagement with Christian creativity did not convert him, he writes, it led him to 'recognise, or better still, to *feel*, why Christianity is a possibility.' In order to unlock that door of perception, double-bolted in an atheistic age, the Church's heritage of music, visual art, and the *ars celebrandi* may be at least as effective as a multitude of words, as was the case with Saint Augustine in Milan or, five centuries later, with Prince

Vladimir's envoys to the Constantinopolitan court. In this area, too, stringent standards must be met. Where the communication of truth is at stake, there is no room for mediocrity. Integrity of worship will overflow in charity to the poor and in peace-making on evangelical terms, grounded in justice.

Catholic theology, then, is compassionate and open-minded, yet has clearly thought-out boundaries; it constantly reroots itself in divine revelation and the deposit of faith in order, therefrom, to find adequate and supernatural responses to contemporary quandaries; 'compact in itself' (see Psalm 122.3), firm in its core, it has the solidity required to sustain intellectual tension and to enunciate a coherent, confident account of the hope with which it is entrusted; it endeavours to express this hope, which draws mankind out of self-referentiality towards participation in the divine nature (see 2 Peter 1.4), not only in discursive teaching, but in art, in the celebration of the mystery of faith, and in just charity.

THE AGGIORNAMENTO OF ANOTHER DAY

None of this is controversial in principle. Controversy comes sailing in from another angle. Much talk about what is and is not Catholic is presently conducted not on the basis of principles but on the basis of sensibility. Here disagreements are rife. Permit me to make my point anecdotally. Early in 2018, while abbot of a monastery in England, I asked for a life of Paul VI to be read in the refectory, to accompany the brethren's dinner. Paul VI was to be canonised that autumn. It seemed opportune to revisit his life and career. We had in our library the standard English account, *Paul VI: The First Modern Pope* by Peter Hebblethwaite, so that was the volume we chose.

After the first instalment had been read, one of our young monks, a man of good sense in his twenties, came to see me. He observed that the author, introducing his subject, had used the accolade 'modern' three times on the first half-page. I checked. He was right. Hebblethwaite calls Paul VI a 'modern pope' and 'modern man', and he adds that he was 'modern' above all by implementing Vatican II.

This language says more about the author than about his subject. Hebblethwaite was born in 1930. Having become a Jesuit in 1948, he spent a quarter-century in the Society before leaving it to marry. He remained into old age a prolific commentator on Church matters. He would very much have thought himself a 'modern' man. In his introduction to the life of Papa Montini, he exudes the confidence of a 'modern' Catholic. This confidence is bound up with the reception of the council. Hebblethwaite is sure he knows what is right in this respect; he is sure he understands what the council *really* means. He fulminates against the pope in office at the time of publication – that is, in the year of our Lord 1993. The man we now venerate as Pope Saint John Paul II was to Hebblethwaite a repudiator of Paul VI's policies, a dismantler of Montini's heritage. In these ways the book, which otherwise has much to recommend it, shows both its own and its writer's age.

In my experience, today's self-identifying 'modern Catholics' tend to be octo- or nonagenarian. For them, to be 'modern' is a badge of honour, a guarantee of their walking unfailingly towards a splendid tomorrow. To their great-grandchildren, meanwhile, the word 'modern' has an old-world ring, a musty perfume of yesteryear. My young brother in the monastery did not scorn 'modernity'. He was too thoughtful for that. But to call someone

'modern' seemed to him faint praise. The notion inspired in him neither confidence nor enthusiasm.

We cannot ascribe this change in sensibility just to a mechanistic pendulum, positing that each new generation rebels against what went before. It is rooted in a decisive, verifiable shift. I think of my parents, who were of Hebblethwaite's generation, more or less. For them, it was axiomatic that the world was getting better every day. The gospel of progress, typical of the post-war years, had formed their view of reality. It had become, to use a fashionable word, their paradigm. One can see why. To have lived through the awfulness of a war that threatened to annihilate all, then to have seen the world reconstitute itself, abetted by undreamt-of progress in science and technology, with so much getting *easier*, gave an intoxicating sense of modernity's saving potential. If we can send people to the moon, read the papers online, and have dishwashers that leave the glasses sparkling, then *anything* is possible!

Confronted with this mindset, I feel positively Jeremian. My gloom, however, is nothing compared to that of today's twenty-year-olds, who could be my children. Often, what they see is a world gone to the dogs, an escalation of mind-blowingly destructive potential made manifest by environmental, political, terroristical, and digital hazards. They see a society in tatters, then look to their elders and ask: How could you let this happen? The question is valid, though often enough is neither heard nor heeded by those to whom it is addressed.

Terms change with the passage of generations. The 'modernity' Peter Hebblethwaite thirty years ago thought to be a synonym for 'reality' has ceased to exist. Cultural historians have pronounced it dead, replaced by *post*-modernity. There are those who claim we

now live in *post*-post-modern times. As far as the Church is concerned – the Church we love, which we would serve – this fact is essential. Much Catholic optimism at the time of the council – optimism with regard to engagement with the world, to secular culture, to the scope for dialogue – appears, from the perspective of 2025, touchingly or culpably naive. It is telling that the conciliar constitution that may seem most dated to us is *Gaudium et spes*, qualified as 'Constitutio pastoralis de Ecclesia in mundo huius temporis', a title the official English version rendered, 'Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the *Modern* World', as if the present were destined to remain 'modern' for ever.

When a young Western Catholic today surveys Catholic life in the past half-century, he or she is unlikely – such is my experience – to feel elated. What the young see looking back is not the glorious fulfilment of 'modern' promise, but a swift unravelling: the emptying of seminaries and religious houses, the ageing of congregations, liturgical impoverishment, increasing vagueness in teaching, and the loss of credibility – not least in view of the terrible legacy of sexual abuse. I do not say that this list is objective or exhaustive; I simply say it is what many young Catholics associate with Catholic 'modernity' and its fruits. They are suspicious of the recycling of that era's catchwords: calls for a 'new springtime', for nonjudgemental inclusivism, etc. *Their* concern is to ensure that what they see as a formless Church returns to shape, takes a stand, and reclaims its dignity. We must attend intelligently to this contemporary perspective on the 'modern'. We must seek, 'rooted and built up in [Christ]' (Colossians 2.7), a renewal of fidelity, holiness, coherence, and Catholic zeal unattached to rhetoric that is no longer meaningful.

To dismiss men and women uneasy about 'modern' Catholicism as mindless traditionalists or to accuse them point-blank of being in opposition to the Second Vatican Council is too facile. The council is rarely a subject of controversy, in fact. What raises questions is the way in which it has been applied or instrumentalised. Malaise springs from a sense of loss, issuing in grief. I can relate to such a sense of loss, such grief. During my years as a monastic superior, desiring to work as well as I humanly could to enable a future in a context marked by the opposite of flourishing, I often felt my hands were tied. An abbot, says Saint Benedict, is someone who brings forth from the store things 'both new and old' (see Matthew 13.52). This is hard to do when so much that is old has been labelled redundant and discarded. In terms of liturgy, customs, and observance, most Catholic communities still sail in the wake of a tornado. They are anointed heirs to a project of *aggiornamento*, but the sun has long since set on the *giorno* by which this project was defined. Many of its 'modern' features are fossilised, amiably shaped but lifeless. Confidence in the project has to a large extent gone.

The common ecclesial home energetically stripped and redesigned half a century ago according to fashion, with gadgets then state-of-the-art, has come to feel empty, impractical, and inhospitable to many. One notices design flaws only time can reveal. One looks at the colour schemes and asks, How could anyone have *chosen* this? One wonders, Whatever happened to all the old furniture, all the old books? In terms of Saint Benedict's words, cited above, I often felt, as abbot, like the curator of a collection of fine icons who was not permitted to display them; who must exhibit instead a quantity of finger paintings made at the local school; who was expected to say (and, ideally, think) that the finger paintings were

better; and all of this, long after most of the children who made them had left school and gone home.

The enterprise of post-conciliar bringing-up-to-date was wholly in view of renewal, conducted with admirable good will, courage, generous hope – and often considerable shortsightedness. In many instances, it has not borne the fruit it was intended to bear. After decades of self-affirmation, it is time to admit this – not to reject an era whose graces and gains are unquestionable, but to no longer rely *a priori* on constant change as the means by which to negotiate crises, to hold fast instead to what endures, to seek stability. 'Gilgamesh, where are you wandering?' These words uttered long ago challenge us. They call for a considered answer, whether we are erring solitarily, in small packs, or in compact *synodos*.

EPOCHAL CHANGE

Pope Francis regularly affirmed, notably in a text calling for 'a paradigm shift, a courageous cultural revolution' in theological reflection, that we are living through 'not merely an epoch of change but a change of epoch'. At a certain level this is self-evident. Ours is a society in flux. It faces constant transformations. Looking back over the period we have considered, we might pinpoint the cultural revolution of 1968, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the ascendancy of the internet in the 1990s, and the mainstream recognition of global climate change in the 2000s as instances of epochal change, each having occasioned an adjustment of paradigms and cultural turnings-round. We could easily extend the list.

We also find examples of epoch-changing claims that turned out to be premature. Back in the heady days of 2020 and 2021, it was common to speak of COVID-19 as heralding a new epoch. A