

NEXUS INSTITUTE

# Nexus Conference 2025

## Apocalypse Now

The Revelation of our Time



Saturday 22 November | 11.00 AM — 5.00 PM

National Opera & Ballet, Amsterdam

Josep Borrell — Javier Cercas — Patrick J. Deneen  
Admiral William Fallon — Gaya Herrington — Pervez Hoodbhoy  
Sigrid Kaag — Dmytro Kuleba — Connor Leahy  
H.E. Omar Sultan Al Olama — Vice President Mike Pence  
Mamphela Ramphela — Antonio Spadaro, S.J. — Carissa Véliz  
Leon Wieseltier — President Salome Zourabichvili

# Programme Nexus Conference

Saturday 22 November 2025

National Opera & Ballet, Amsterdam

11.00 AM Welcome *Rob Riemen*

11.10 AM APOCALYPSE NOW: 'WHAT HAVE YOU SEEN? WHAT IS?'  
(BOOK OF REVELATION 1:19)

Roundtable conversation with *Patrick J. Deneen*,  
*Admiral William Fallon*, *Gaya Herrington*, *Pervez Hoodbhoy*,  
*Sigrid Kaag*, *Dmytro Kuleba*, *Connor Leahy*, *Leon Wieseltier*,  
moderated by *Rob Riemen*

1.30 PM Lunch with complimentary refreshments

2.30 PM APOCALYPSE NOW: 'I WILL SHOW YOU WHAT MUST TAKE  
PLACE AFTER THIS.' (BOOK OF REVELATION 4:1)

Roundtable conversation with *Josep Borrell*, *Javier Cercas*,  
*H.E. Omar Sultan Al Olama*, *Vice President Mike Pence*,  
*Mamphela Ramphela*, *Antonio Spadaro, S.J.*, *Carissa Véliz*,  
*President Salome Zourabichvili*, moderated by *Rob Riemen*

5.00 PM Book signing

The Nexus Institute will serve a complimentary, vegetarian lunch. Please notify us of any allergies you may have before 11 November with an email to [info@nexus-instituut.nl](mailto:info@nexus-instituut.nl).

*The conference will be held in English.*

The programme may be subject to change. For the latest information on the conference and its speakers and for terms and conditions, please see our website [www.nexus-instituut.nl/en](http://www.nexus-instituut.nl/en).

# Nexus Conference 2025

## Apocalypse Now

### The Revelation of our Time

At the end of the first century, these are the words that a certain John on the island of Patmos felt compelled to write down as the Apocalypse, the Revelation given to him, which two centuries later would be included in the Bible, as its closing book:

Now write what you have seen, what is, and what is to take place after this... Four riders will come. I saw one on a white horse and it came to conquer, one on a bright red horse to bring war, one on a black horse to bring hunger, one on a pale green horse and its rider's name was Death. They were given authority to kill by the sword, famine and pestilence, and by the wild animals of the earth... Nature shall turn against humankind in the form of fire, floods and earthquakes, and the sun and the sky will be darkened. The Devil, Evil itself, shall rule the world in the form of a Beast with seven heads and ten horns... One of its heads seemed to have received a deathblow, but its mortal wound had been healed. In amazement the whole earth followed the Beast. They worshipped the Beast, saying: 'Who is like the Beast, and who can fight against it?'... Another beast will rise out of the earth and deceive the inhabitants of the earth through the miracles that it performs... From the mouth of the Beast and the false prophet came foul spirits deceiving people with miracles... Babylon, that great city with all its worldly affluence, its riches and licentiousness, having become the home of demons, shall be brought down and all its wealth destroyed in one hour... All this in the end-times. And final judgement will be passed on the living and the dead. Afterwards it shall come about that the Devil and Evil will be overcome. A New Jerusalem will come down... And its gates will never be shut by day — and there will be no night there. Because a new Creation is coming, a new Heaven and a new Earth. The water of life will flow again and the Tree of Life will bear fruit

from month to month once more... Let all this be written down in the Book of Life!

What John of Patmos saw happen right in front of him, in a vision of four horsemen, the historian Tacitus saw become a reality in that same era. This is what Tacitus noted down '*sine ira et studio* — without anger and passion' in his *Annals* concerning what he had seen in almighty Rome, capital of a world empire:

After much intriguing by his mother Agrippina, who had her husband Emperor Claudius murdered, her sixteen-year-old son Nero ascended the imperial throne in the year 54. Under his rule, the Roman conquests and wars continued, there were natural disasters, and death prevailed everywhere. None of this could be allowed to spoil Nero's festivities. He had a great love of the arts, regarded himself as a great artist and loved to organize festivities at which, with a lyre in his hand, he could perform songs that he had composed. For fear of being threatened in his reign as emperor, Nero had both his stepbrother and his mother murdered. He commanded his mentor Seneca to put an end to his own life, which the old man did by first opening the blood vessels in his arms with a dagger and then slashing his legs, and so slowly bleeding to death. In the year 65 a great sea of fire destroyed ten of the fourteen districts of Rome. Nero was rumored to have set that fire himself. To put a halt to such rumors, Nero produced culprits, on whom he inflicted a special punishment. These were individuals hated by the people for their infamy and called Christians. They were named after Christ, who had been put to death by Governor Pontius Pilate under the rule of Tiberius. After being repressed for a while, the pernicious superstition raised its head again, not only in Judea, cradle of that evil, but even in Rome, where all abominations and outrages flow together and find followers. They died with scorn heaped upon them. They were dressed in the hides of beasts to be torn apart by dogs. Or were nailed to a cross and set ablaze at dusk to provide evening light. Nero had made his gardens available for that show and there he also held circus games, dressed as a charioteer among the people, or indeed on a chariot. They were guilty, of course, but this evoked sympathy. Their annihilation seemed to serve no public purpose but only the cruelty of one man. The year, so terrible in its heinous deeds, was also marked by the gods with storms and pestilences.

*What is to take place after this...* Tacitus ends his account of history in the year 66. When a revolt against Nero broke out in 68 and he was in danger of being killed by the coup leaders, the emperor chose to put an end to his criminal life himself, crying out: '*Qualis artifex pereo* — What an artist dies

in me!’ In his second great account of the history of the Roman Empire, his *Historiae*, Tacitus remarks: ‘Nero will always be missed by the worst citizens; you and I must take care that he be not missed also by the good.’ This is as far as his expectations extend concerning ‘what is to take place after this’, in contrast to the Apocalypse of John of Patmos. We may assume, however, that at the start of the second century, neither the past nor the present gave Tacitus any reason to hope that in a future world the four horsemen of the apocalypse would be banished.



January 2025. Apocalyptic-looking fires destroy whole districts of Los Angeles: Altadena, Malibu, Pacific Palisades... The city that for a century has been home to the world’s dream factory, Hollywood, has become a nightmare for countless people. As if by a miracle, the house where Thomas Mann lived from 5 February 1942 onwards, 1550 San Remo Drive in Pacific Palisades, has escaped the inferno and remained intact.

There, on Sunday 23 May 1943, seated at his mahogany desk, Mann began writing his novel *Doctor Faustus: The Life of the German Composer Adrian Leverkühn as Told by a Friend*. In the form of the life story of a brilliant artist who sells his soul to the devil in return for 24 years of demonic inspiration, Mann tells the story of the fortunes of Germany, the crisis of an era, the crisis in art. It is a bitter history of intellectual arrogance and moral blindness, of the correlation between aestheticism and barbarity as a result of the cult of art, and the delusion that humankind can redeem itself.

The 34<sup>th</sup> chapter is devoted to the creation of the first of two great works that Adrian Leverkühn will compose, his *Apocalypsis cum Figuris*, an oratorio inspired by the fifteen woodcuts published in 1498 by German artist and humanist Albrecht Dürer.

Dürer deliberately chose the Apocalypse of John as the subject of his woodcuts. Once more the horsemen of the apocalypse were storming across the country. There was famine; there were wars and epidemics. Furthermore, a spontaneous popular movement was arising, made up mainly of young people who, filled with religious emotions, were convinced that the end of the world was at hand.

That in *Doctor Faustus* Thomas Mann makes his artist Adrian Leverkühn’s first great composition a work about the Apocalypse is again a deliberate choice, inspired by what he himself had seen in his home city of Munich, the city where Adolf Hitler, with his quite often highly educated sympathizers, started to turn Germany into Hitler’s Germany.

It is 1919, Mann writes. While his protagonist Adrian Leverkühn is composing his *Apocalypsis cum Figuris* in Schwabing, Munich’s neighborhood of artists and intellectuals, leading minds gather regularly for their ‘gentle-

men's philosophical discussion night' at the home of Sixtus Kridwiss, the well-known graphic artist and book illustrator. And so they meet again on the spring evening of 1919, when we find the erudite Dr. Chaim Breisachter, a scholar; Dr. Egon Unruhe, a philosophical palaeontologist; Professor Georg Vogel, a man of letters; and the art historian and Dürer specialist Professor Holzschurer. An affluent manufacturer and a few members of the upper nobility — friendly young men but none too bright — have kept their evening free for this gathering as well. Furthermore, the celebrated poet Daniel zur Höhe is there to read from his *Proclamations*, one of which ends with the exclamation 'Soldiers... I entrust to you the plundering — of the world!' 'Marvelous' and 'beautiful, very beautiful', they say when the poet takes his place at the table again.

After the lofty art of poetry, they return to their topic of conversation: perspectives on current social reality. There is a lively sense that the war has disrupted and destroyed what had seemed to be life's fixed values. It is an emotion deeply felt and, they claim, objectively confirmed in the monstrous loss of self-worth that each individual has suffered through the events of the war, in the disregard with which life strides right over every single person nowadays, and in a general indifference to each man's suffering and perishing that has found its way into people's hearts. This disregard, this indifference toward the fate of the individual, might well seem to have been sired by the recent four-year bloody circus, but, as they argue, one ought not to be misled — for here, as in many other regards, the war only completed, clarified, and forged as a common drastic experience something that had long been developing and establishing itself as the basis of a new sense of life. The democratic republic and its freedoms are not accepted for a single moment as a serious framework for the new situation these gentlemen have in mind, but are unanimously shrugged off as self-evidently ephemeral, as predestined to meaninglessness in the present situation — indeed, as a bad joke.

*Reflections on Violence*, a book by Georges Sorel published seven years before the war, has an important part to play in the conversations of this culturally critical avant-garde. His unrelenting prediction of war and anarchy, his characterization of Europe as the soil of armed cataclysms, his theory that the nations of this continent have always been able to unite around only one idea, that of engaging in war — all of this furnished grounds for *Reflections* to be called the book of the age. People were enthusiastic about Sorel's conclusion that henceforth popular myths, or, better, myths trimmed for the masses, will be the vehicle of political action; that fables, chimeras, phantasms that needed to have nothing whatsoever to do with truth, reason, or science in order to be productive nonetheless, will determine life and history, and thereby prove themselves dynamic realities. The book's most important thesis is that violence will be the triumphant counterpart of truth. This thesis makes it possible to understand that truth's fate is closely related to

that of the individual, if not identical with it — and this fate is devaluation. The book opens a sardonic rift between truth and power, truth and life, truth and community. Its implicit message is that community deserves far greater precedence, that truth's goal is community, and that whoever wishes to be part of the community must be prepared to jettison major portions of truth and science, to make the *sacrificium intellectus*.

The intellectuals are animatedly discussing the arrival of an old-new, revolutionary, atavistic world. A world in which values linked to the idea of the individual, such as truth, freedom, justice and reason, will be sacrificed to violence and dictatorial power. Humanity will be transferred, along with all these new ideas, back into the theocratic situation of the Middle Ages; but according to these well-read men, this process will be no more reactionary than the path around a sphere can be termed regressive. Regress and progress, the old and the new, past and present — all become one. Consequently, this company is unanimous in its opinion that all humane pampering and emasculation, which has been the work of the bourgeois epoch, must make way for mankind's instinctively getting into shape for hard and dark times that will scoff at humanity, for an age of great wars and sweeping revolution, presumably leading far back beyond the Christian civilization of the Middle Ages and restoring instead the Dark Ages that preceded its birth and that followed the collapse of the culture of antiquity. Civilization, Enlightenment, humanity. They are gone. It is the age of a new barbarism.

This is the prognosis for the future of Europe, there in Munich on that early spring evening in 1919. We know this from the narrator of Adrian Leverkühn's life story in the novel *Doctor Faustus*, classicist and humanist Dr. Serenus Zeitblom, who has been invited based on his academic title and who listens to all this in silence, but with fear in his heart.

We also have Zeitblom to thank for a clear analysis of that impressive composition, the oratorio *Apocalypsis cum figuris*.

With his oratorio, Zeitblom says, Leverkühn holds up a mirror of revelation before the eyes of humanity, so that it will see what is now approaching with great speed: the end, the judgement, a doom that is dawning. A choir sings a lamentation of Jeremiah:

Wherefore doth a living man complain,  
A man for the punishment of his sins?  
Let us search and try our ways,  
And turn again to the Lord!

We have transgressed  
And have rebelled;  
Thou hast not pardoned;  
Thou hast covered with anger and persecuted us;



Thou hast slain, thou hast not pitied.  
Thou hast made us as the offscouring  
And refuse in the midst of the people.

In contrast to romantic works of redemption, such as Beethoven's opera *Fidelio* and his Ninth Symphony, with at its close the jubilant 'Alle Menschen werden Brüder', the *Apocalypsis cum Figuris* is typified by its theologically negative and merciless character. After everything that Zeitblom has heard from the learned gentlemen, he cannot help but conclude that his dear friend Adrian Leverkühn has succeeded in revealing through music the deepest secret of humankind: its ambiguity, an identity of both bestiality and the purest sublimity.

*What is to take place after this...* In 1947 there is no other way for Thomas Mann to end his *Doctor Faustus*, his novel about the apocalyptic era of the first half of the twentieth century and his fatherland, seized by a devilish evil, than by having the narrator of the story, Serenus Zeitblom, say a prayer: 'When, out of this final hopelessness, will a miracle that goes beyond faith bear the light of hope? A lonely man folds his hands and says: "May God have mercy on your poor soul, my friend, my fatherland."'



January 1935. In his study at the university of Leiden, Johan Huizinga has taken a break from writing his book *Homo Ludens*, about play as a determining aspect of culture, so that he can work on a talk he is to give in Brussels in early March. Having found fame with his book *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, and renowned for the fact that, like his great predecessors in the study of history, Michelet in France and Burckhardt in Switzerland, he understands the art of writing, Huizinga is much in demand as a speaker.

In Brussels, however, the historian does not want to speak about the past but about Europe's present and the possible consequences of it for the future. Like his great example Erasmus, Johan Huizinga is a convinced European humanist, and it is precisely that humanist tradition that he sees threatened all around him. The title of his talk, published several months later as a small book, bears the appropriately apocalyptic title *In the Shadow of Tomorrow*. This is what he has seen:

We are living in a demented world. And we know it. It would not come as a surprise to anyone if tomorrow the madness gave way to a frenzy which would leave our poor Europe in a state of distracted stupor, with engines still turning and flags streaming in the breeze, but with the spirit gone. [...] How to avoid the recognition that almost all things which



once seemed sacred and immutable have now become unsettled: truth and humanity, justice and reason. We see forms of government no longer capable of functioning, production systems on the verge of collapse, social forces gone wild with power. The roaring engine of this tremendous time seems to be heading for a breakdown. [...] If, then, this civilization is to be saved, if it is not to be submerged by centuries of barbarism but to secure the treasures of its inheritance on new and more stable foundations, there is indeed need for those now living fully to realize how the decay has already progressed.

What has happened? Culture, Huizinga teaches us, demands first of all a certain equilibrium between spiritual and material values. We have material values to thank for prosperity, and an ability to banish hunger and poverty. The spiritual values encompass the domain of the spiritual, intellectual, moral and aesthetic. But this balance has been lost. The material values have narrowed to an idea of progress in which, because of technological advances, everything must be bigger and better. In the grip of this materialism and instrumental rationalism, we have increasingly neglected the cultivation of spiritual values. Thorough knowledge of human history has taught Huizinga that ‘culture must have its ultimate aim in the metaphysical or it will cease to be culture’, because without the preservation of its spiritual values, humankind is doomed to be nothing more than its bestial nature.

With the weakening of spiritual values, Huizinga writes, our ability to judge has been weakened. ‘The world has grown wiser? We know better. Folly in all its various forms, from the frivolous and ridiculous to the wicked and destructive, was never so manifest throughout the world.’ With this the need for discernment has weakened too, because of a decline in the awareness of truth. Furthermore, with the rise of the racial theory so popular among the Nazis, a form of quasi-science has become dominant.

Huizinga also concludes that society, precisely because of all its technological possibilities and in contrast to the ideal of the Enlightenment (with Kant’s ‘*sapere aude* — dare to know’), has become immature, even childlike. ‘In his world full of wonders man is like a child in a fairy tale. He can travel through the air, speak to another hemisphere, have a continent delivered in his home by radio. He presses a button and life comes to him. Will such a life give him maturity? On the contrary.’

Technical perfection and its economic and political effectiveness cannot safeguard culture against barbarism. In fact barbarism in alliance with these perfections only becomes more powerful and tyrannical. As an example, Huizinga writes how the author of a book entitled *The Decline of the Written Word* has predicted with glad assurance a near future in which children will be brought up on pictures and talks, and will not have to read any more books. As Huizinga writes: ‘Were this prediction to come true, it would

mean a tremendous stride towards barbarism. A better method of teaching youth not to think, of keeping it puerile, and of eventually boring it to death as well, could hardly be devised.'

*What is to take place after this...* The diagnosis he proposed in 1935 predicted little good for the near future. So where, according to Johan Huizinga, was hope, salvation, to come from? No longer from him and his generation. The decay of culture was too far advanced for that. With resignation, the 63-year-old historian ended his apocalyptic diagnosis with the following words: 'To this young generation the task of ruling this world again as it would be ruled, to save it from perishing in pride and folly, to permeate it again with the spirit!'



January 1980. Seventeen years old, I'm sitting in the cinema waiting for the start of the recently released film *Apocalypse Now* by the famous American director Francis Ford Coppola. First there are all the adverts and announcements of films 'coming soon to this cinema'...

It doesn't surprise me that the seats have sold out. In practically all the newspapers, the film has been welcomed and praised as '*the* film about the Vietnam War', the war that dominated the news through the 1960s and early 1970s and finally ended in 1975 with the withdrawal of American army units from South Vietnam — troops that, French president Charles de Gaulle said, should never have been there at all.

In his *Mémoires d'espoir* De Gaulle writes of how on 31 May 1961, during a visit to Paris by his American fellow president John F. Kennedy, he warned Kennedy not to make the same mistake as the French had made years before, and above all not to send 'military advisers' and then American troops to Vietnam, from which the French had withdrawn their own fighting forces:

'You will find', I said to him, 'that intervention in this area will be an endless entanglement. Once a nation has been aroused, no foreign power, however strong, can impose its will upon it. [...] The ideology which you invoke will make no difference. Indeed, in the eyes of the masses it will become identified with your will to power. [...] I predict that you will sink step by step into a bottomless military and political quagmire, however much you spend in men and money.'

But the younger generation, in whom Johan Huizinga had placed the hope that it would do better than the generations before it, the younger generation that had now come to power in America at any rate, was deaf to the advice of the elderly general who, with all his experiences in two world wars and the French colonies, Algeria in particular, had gained a wealth of knowledge

about what military power can and cannot do. One of the reasons for not listening to De Gaulle might have been that the general was known as a gruff, almost misanthropic man who, to both the surprise and the contempt of the Americans, regarded *la culture Française* as far *supérieur* to the ‘American way of life’ and the ‘American dream’, and made no secret of the fact.

That De Gaulle was not a likeable man does not detract from the reality that he turned out to be right. Everything that President de Gaulle warned his young American counterpart Kennedy about came to pass. The Vietnam War became a bottomless military and political quagmire that would tear American society apart for many years.

But what is war? What is that dark urge in human nature to obliterate the lives of others? Why is the human species so violent and destructive? How can it be that, so soon after the Second World War, through our television screens, a new war came into the living room? A war in the midst of the bleak Cold War with as its permanent threat the use of the Bomb, which would mean the apocalyptic end of humankind on planet Earth — without ever seeing a New Jerusalem.

The cinema is full because those questions occupy the minds of all those present, born after, but not long after, the Second World War. And however great might be the imagination with which Stendhal, with his novel *The Chartreuse of Parma*, Tolstoy with *War and Peace* and Remarque with *All Quiet on the Western Front* wrote about war, what they describe cannot outweigh what a film with the most penetrating images can show us. Especially a war film inspired by Joseph Conrad’s novel *Heart of Darkness*. But the curtain is going up! *Apocalypse Now* is about to begin.

As the sound of military helicopters grows increasingly grim, we watch them for a full minute as they fly between plumes of smoke along the edge of a primeval forest. Then napalm bombs are dropped and the forest is transformed into a devastating red-orange sea of fire. At the same time we hear the song ‘The End’, sung by Jim Morrison of The Doors, with lyrics that fit the apocalyptic images.

This is the end  
Beautiful friend  
This is the end  
My only friend, the end

Can you picture what will be?  
So limitless and free  
Desperately in need  
Of some stranger’s hand  
In a desperate land

The next image is of an American soldier who, with boxes of pills and empty liquor bottles next to him, lies tattered and exhausted on a bed in a hotel room. We are in Saigon in 1970, during the Vietnam War. The man, Captain Benjamin Willard, is told by two fellow soldiers to get himself into shape and go with them to the local command center, where Lieutenant General Corman wants to talk to him about the activities of a certain Colonel Kurtz.

Over lunch, Corman informs his guest Captain Willard of the most relevant biographical facts about Colonel Kurtz. He was once one of the best soldiers in the American army, the best in his class at the elite military training school West Point, a man who had carried out several missions during the Korean War and then in Vietnam, and in doing so had been awarded innumerable high decorations for acts of military heroism. Kurtz was even nominated for promotion to the general staff, but in 1966 he opted instead to join the Special Forces and go to fight in Vietnam once again. He was always thought of as a humane person, good to his family and popular with the troops.

But, Corman goes on, at some point Kurtz went mad. He no longer follows orders, goes his own way and uses 'unsound methods'. He has taken the law into his own hands by executing spies who were working for the Americans. Audio recordings provide evidence of his eccentric, dangerous behavior. He has now withdrawn into the Cambodian jungle with his own small army, and there he is worshipped by an indigenous tribe as a kind of deity.

Confronted with a questioning look from Captain Willard, who fails to understand how it could possibly be that a man with such a record of military service could exhibit such behavior, Corman explains to him the following:

Well, you see, Willard, in this war, things get confused out there. Power, ideals, the old morality, and practical military necessity. But out there with these natives, it must be a temptation to be God. Because there's a conflict in every human heart, between the rational and the irrational, between good and evil. And good does not always triumph. Sometimes, the dark side overcomes what Lincoln called the better angels of our nature. [...] Every man has got a breaking point. You and I have them. Walter Kurtz has reached his. And, very obviously, he has gone insane.

Insane. And precisely because the man is a military genius whom the men listen to, he is also dangerous, with his 'unsound methods'. Hence the order to Captain Willard to 'terminate his command'.

Since he is to kill an American officer, his orders must remain so secret that Willard is given to understand that 'this mission does not exist nor will it ever exist'. To ensure he will not attract attention, he is allocated a small boat with four crew members, for whom the mission must also remain a secret. He must travel up the river with them, far into the darkness of the jungle, track Kurtz down and put an end to his life.

On his journey to find the insane Colonel Kurtz, Willard first comes upon Lieutenant Colonel Bill Kilgore, commander of the Ninth Air Cavalry. Kilgore, who poses as a rough, arrogant cowboy, fearful of nothing, must take Willard and his crew safely to the mouth of the river. There, however, lies a small village that is home to the Vietcong, the communist guerilla fighters. To render them harmless, Kilgore flies his helicopters, from which bellows Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries* to instill all the more fear, to the village. There they fire machine guns at civilians, including a class of schoolchildren. That human lives mean nothing to Kilgore becomes even clearer when he gives the order to set fire to a village with napalm bombs so that he can safely pursue his favorite hobby, surfing. As he watches the conflagration he swaggeringly remarks: 'Napalm, son. Nothing else in the world smells like that. I love the smell of napalm in the morning.' It seems, Captain Willard realizes, that the army leadership regards this as a 'sound method'.

As the journey into the 'heart of darkness' continues, we experience not only more and more horrors brought about by the war but also the loneliness, fears and dangers that young American soldiers, not yet twenty years old and often from the most impoverished of backgrounds, are exposed to. Before they reach their objective, two of the four soldiers on the boat are killed in skirmishes with the enemy. Earlier, while carrying out an inspection on a small Vietnamese boat, they themselves have fatally wounded a frightened and innocent woman for fear of a bomb, and, to spare themselves further discomfort, shot her and her companions dead.

During the journey, reading the file on Colonel Kurtz, Willard becomes increasingly fascinated by him, even finding it impossible to suppress a certain sense of admiration. Kurtz, he finds, went his own way because he'd had enough of lies, of a hypocritical morality according to which you can use napalm bombs to bring freedom and democracy to a country where the population did not invite you to come. He subsequently cracked and, yes, went mad.

Eventually Captain Willard arrives with his two remaining soldiers at a compound built on an ancient Cambodian temple. A group of brightly dressed men of the indigenous tribe, holding spears, and American soldiers with machine guns at the ready, are there to receive them. As is Jack, an American photojournalist-cum-hippie who is very stoned. As Willard enters the complex, Jack, draped with cameras, says: 'Colonel Kurtz, he is a poet-warrior in a classic sense... I am a little man, a little man, but he is a great man! A great man!' Meanwhile, Willard notices that countless dead bodies are hanging from trees and that on the wall is written, in white letters: 'OUR MOTTO: APOCALYPSE NOW'.

Willard is taken prisoner and shackled by the indigenous people, who do indeed worship Kurtz as a god, but he is not killed, unlike one of the two men who stayed on the boat to call for reinforcements if necessary. That

man, Chef, who in the army would have preferred to be merely a cook, is beheaded by Kurtz. To his shock and horror, the shackled Willard has Chef's head casually tossed into his lap by Kurtz, dressed as a member of the Vietcong.

Willard is eventually released and told that if he tries to escape he will be shot dead. This enables him to watch Kurtz, a huge man with a shaved head, from a distance. He hears him recite the first few lines of 'The Hollow Men', a poem written in 1925 by T.S. Eliot about the soulless, degenerate and disillusioned people who have to deal with a meaningless existence amid the ruins of a postwar world.

We are the hollow men  
We are the stuffed men  
Leaning together  
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!  
Our dried voices, when  
We whisper together  
Are quiet and meaningless  
As wind in dry grass  
Or rats' feet over broken glass  
In our dry cellar

Shape without form, shade without colour.  
Paralysed force, gesture without motion;

Those who have crossed  
With direct eyes...

The next day, Willard finds himself in Kurtz's room and there he sees the man's many military decorations, photographs of Kurtz's family, a Bible and other books lying on a table. In the half-dark we see Kurtz sitting on the edge of his bed. Knowing that Willard is there, and knowing the reason why he has come, Kurtz starts speaking, slowly, in his deep bass voice, without even looking at his guest. This is his monologue:

I've seen horrors. Horrors that you've seen. But you have no right to call me a murderer. You have a right to kill me. You have a right to do that. But you have no right to judge me. It's impossible for words to describe what is necessary to those who do not know what horror means. Horror. Horror has a face. And you must make a friend of horror. Horror and moral terror are your friends. If they are not, then they are enemies to be feared. They are truly enemies.

For a moment the huge man is silent. Then, yet more turned in on himself, he tells Willard a story, a story that, to an even greater degree than all the violence and cruelty he experienced as a soldier in the war, has made him into the man he is now. A man without hope, a man who, in the face of horror, has become a broken man who can no longer believe in the goodness of humankind and really only wants to die.

I remember when I was with Special Forces. It seems a thousand centuries ago. We went into a camp to inoculate the children. We left the camp after we'd inoculated the children for polio. And this old man came running after us, and he was crying. He couldn't see. We went back there, and they had come back and they'd hacked off every inoculated arm. There they were, in a pile. A pile of little arms. And, I remember, I cried, I wept like some grandmother. I wanted to tear my teeth out. I didn't know what I wanted to do. And I want to remember it. I never want to forget it. I never want to forget. And then I realized like I was shot, like I was shot with a diamond. A diamond bullet right through my forehead. And I thought, my God, the genius of that! The genius. The will to do that. Perfect, genuine, complete, crystalline, pure. And then I realized, they were stronger than we are. Because they could stand it. These were not monsters. These men were trained cadres. These men who fought with their hearts, who had families, who had children, who had families who were filled with love, but they had the strength, the strength to do that. If I had ten divisions of those men, then our troubles here would be over very quickly. You have to have men who are moral, and at the same time who are able to utilize their primordial instincts to kill without feeling, without passion. Without judgment. Without judgment. Because it's judgment that defeats us.

Rarely will a cinema audience have felt so horribly gripped as while listening to that confession.

Then we come to the final scene. It is night. In front of the temple complex, young men of the indigenous tribe stand ready to ritually slaughter a water buffalo with their machetes. Inside, in the dark of the ruins of the Cambodian temple, Kurtz is speaking into a tape. 'We train young men to drop fire on people, but their commanders won't allow them to write "fuck" on their airplanes because it's obscene.'

Willard approaches Kurtz from behind with his machete, and the images of the end of Kurtz merge with those of the buffalo that is being slaughtered. The last words of Kurtz in his death rattle are: 'The horror... the horror...'

On the table next to Kurtz's dead body, Willard sees a manuscript. Written on it in large letters is 'DROP THE BOMB. EXTERMINATE THEM ALL!'. He now knows that if Kurtz had had the chance, he would not have hesitated to



make his motto, APOCALYPSE NOW, a reality. The Bomb would have put an end to a human species so full of lies, deceit, hypocrisy and bloodlust.

In the final image, we see Willard with his one remaining comrade pushing off onto the river again at the dead of night, and we hear once more the voice of the dying Kurtz: 'The horror... the horror...'

The film is over. The curtain comes back down and the cinema lights go up. Silent as mice, we leave the cinema one by one and make our way home through the darkness.

*What is to take place after this...* On 21 November 1981 a huge peaceful demonstration by 441 thousand people was held in Amsterdam, against the nuclear weapons in the arsenals of America and the Soviet Union. On 29 October 1983, 550 thousand people came out in The Hague to demonstrate against the Bomb that, if used, would make the whole of planet Earth uninhabitable. On 9 November 1989 the Berlin Wall fell, heralding the end of the Cold War. Everywhere the expectation held sway that the four horsemen of the apocalypse would finally be driven out of the world and that the future would be dominated by a New Jerusalem...

I 'WHAT HAVE YOU SEEN? WHAT IS?' (BOOK OF REVELATION I.19)

20 January 2025. It is icy cold in Washington D.C., so those invited to the inauguration of Donald J. Trump, elected convincingly for the second time as president of the United States on 5 November 2024, gather in the Rotunda of the Capitol of the United States Congress.

Because of the cold, the inauguration will take place at the same spot where on 6 January 2021 supporters of President Trump, egged on by him, tried to prevent the formalization of the victory of the president elect, Joe Biden, by means of a great deal of violence. Those invited are, as usual, the senior representatives of American politics, including the former presidents Clinton, Obama, and now Biden. Naturally members of the Supreme Court are there, and John G. Roberts Jr., Chief Justice of the United States, will administer the oath of office. Also invited to this solemn and festive occasion are several prominent foreign heads of government, including the Hungarian Orbán, the Italian Meloni and the Argentine Milei. Present too, and this is new, is a collection of megarich Americans from the world of Big Tech: Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, Mark Zuckerberg, Google CEO Sundar Pichai, Apple CEO Tim Cook, TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew...

Before the eyes of the world, it does not go unnoticed, because it's highly unusual, that although when Trump takes the oath his wife Melania *does* lovingly hold in front of him two Bibles (one that once belonged to his mother and one that belonged to President Lincoln) so that with his left

hand on the Bible he can faithfully swear ‘to the best of my ability to defend, preserve and protect the American Constitution. So help me God’, he does not lay his hand on the Bible!

This is not only unusual but striking, even disturbing, because it might give the impression that the revealed word of God does not matter to President Donald J. Trump. But the reverse must surely be true. ‘The biggest thing to bring back to America to make it great again is God’, we hear him say in a promotional video that has just appeared, showing a book with engraved on its cover in beautiful lettering ‘Donald J. Trump, 47<sup>th</sup> President of the United States of America, Inauguration Day Edition January 20, 2025’. The book promoted by the video is the God Bless the USA Bible (yours for \$69.99).

Make America great again. Bring back God. It’s a vision that fits with the realization prevailing everywhere that humankind once again finds itself in apocalyptic end-times. So it’s no coincidence that on that cold Monday afternoon of 20 January 2025, President Trump remarks in his Inaugural Address:

As we gather today, our government confronts a crisis of trust. For many years, a radical and corrupt establishment has extracted power and wealth from our citizens, while the pillars of our society lay broken and seemingly in complete disrepair. We now have a government that cannot manage even a simple crisis at home, while, at the same time stumbling into a continuing catalog of catastrophic events abroad.

This language is not only a distant echo of the Apocalypse of John, it’s a more recent echo of a famous observation by Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci, who in 1930, in the third of his *Quaderni del carcere* — *Prison Notebooks*, writes:

That aspect of the modern crisis which is bemoaned as a ‘wave of materialism’ is related to what is called ‘the crisis of authority’. If the ruling class has lost its consensus, i.e. is no longer ‘leading’ but only ‘dominant’, exercising coercive force alone, this means precisely that the great masses have become detached from their traditional ideologies, and no longer believe what they used to believe previously. The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.

What morbid phenomena can we observe now, 95 years later? Or in the language of the Apocalypse of John: what form does Evil, the Beast, take in our own times?

This is what we see.

*Conquests:* The politics of world powers like America, China, Russia and Saudi Arabia are once again centered upon rewon 'greatness' through (economic) conquests and, if necessary, wars. Even a small country like Israel is in the grip of a politics in which Lebensraum is far more important than the rights of the Palestinian people and the lives of thousands of innocent Palestinian children. Economic superpowers likewise often have only one goal: to conquer the entire world, whatever the consequences.

*Hunger:* Everywhere in the world, violence, corruption and social inequality lead to hunger, poverty and 'deaths of despair'. As a result of climate catastrophes, with the famine and bitter poverty they bring, around 50 million people are in flight around the world and nowhere welcome.

*War:* The world has not rid itself of nuclear weapons. On the contrary, once again the Bomb is being used to menace us. And a nuclear war is far from the only threat that can lead to the feared Armageddon about which John writes in his Apocalypse. New technologies can have the same destructive power. Warfare is spreading and the arms industry is working flat out. The possibility of a Third World War becomes more likely by the day.

*Death:* The chances of a plague, a new pandemic that will wipe out an entire population, are more likely than unlikely. The inferno in Los Angeles is only one of the many forms of climate disaster sweeping across the world. Drugs cartels and groups such as Hamas cultivate death, and in their sadism they are no less extreme than the SS butchers of Nazi Germany. We are witnessing the decline of a civilization in which the value of life is central, and the loss of universal moral values is increasingly clearly visible.

The society that Thomas Mann writes about in *Doctor Faustus*, the learned gentlemen in Munich, who in 1919 were unanimous in their belief that the humane softness of the bourgeois age must make way for a society trained for a hard and dark era that would ridicule humanity and civilization, have found their adherents in the countless intellectuals who in the 21<sup>st</sup> century advocate a 'Dark Enlightenment' and the restoration of absolute power. As far as they are concerned, civilization, Enlightenment and humanity have had their day. This is a time of re-barbarization. The fact that society is becoming more violent is an indication of that fact. The following lines by W.B. Yeats — also written in 1919 — are therefore more topical than ever:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand...

What we see are the four horsemen of the apocalypse sweeping across the world stage again! And what does that reveal to us?

Liberal democracy is in decline, and Western peoples have turned their backs on an ancien régime, the great political parties that have produced the governing elites in the West since the end of the Second World War, just like they did at the time of the Weimar Republic. Why? In what ways have they failed? Did they pay too much attention to their own (financial) interests and too little to those of the people? Too many (parliamentary) words and too few deeds? Too much (political) opportunism and utilitarianism and too little vision? Has the liberalism they championed turned out to be little more than a disguised form of nihilism? Why has America not for years now been the ‘arsenal of democracy’ for the world that Franklin D. Roosevelt wanted it to be, and why does it unequivocally no longer wish to be so? Where does the revived desire for collectivity come from, at the expense of the own individuality?

‘Babylon, that great city with all its worldly affluence, its riches and licentiousness, having become the home of demons’ is the ultimate temptress, writes John in his Apocalypse. Why does the biblical Revelation see this much evil in the love for riches, and what kind of socio-economic consequences does this love have? And what is Babylon now? Is it America? China? Does it correspond to the invisible but all-powerful financial markets? ‘Babylon shall fall and all riches will be destroyed in one hour’, it was revealed to John. How shall Babylon fall and what will this lead to?

How can it be that we, as Huizinga did in January 1935, see that ‘all things which once seemed sacred and immutable have now become unsettled, truth and humanity, justice and reason’ and that ‘forms of government are no longer capable of functioning’? What is the cause of the fact that ‘things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; [...] the ceremony of innocence is drowned; / the best lack all conviction while the worst / are full of passionate intensity’...?

In 1944 the American Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr became famous for his study of the Apocalypse of John, an essay called *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of its Traditional Defence*. In it he makes a somber prediction:

We may live for quite a long time in a period of history in which a potential world community, failing to become actual, will give rise to global, rather than limited, conditions of international anarchy, and in which the technics of civilization will be used to aggravate the fury of conflict.

After the experiences of the First and Second World War, and in the knowledge that the predictions of Niebuhr implied the coming of a Third World War, a year later, in 1945, the United Nations was established as guarantor of a rules-based world order. The aim was to prevent the horrors of new vast

geopolitical conflicts that might easily end in an apocalyptic Armageddon. But more and more often, world powers exchange the concept of a world order based on international rules and justice for the rule of the strongest. Why this new imperialism? What are the consequences for the world and for the institutions that were set up after 1945 to keep guard over that world order? Now that the Western alliance in reality no longer exists, have the seeds been sown here for a Third World War?

And where is Europe? The good thing that Europe might take from the current situation is the chance to perhaps herself become 'great' again, but the question is: will Europe succeed in this? And how long will she take to regain economic and military sovereignty?

In that same book, Niebuhr presents an observation that has lost none of its relevance and topicality eighty years later:

One of the greatest problems of democratic civilization is how to integrate the life of its various subordinate, ethnic, religious and economic groups in the community in such a way that the richness and harmony of the whole community will be enhanced and not destroyed by them.

That the 'solution' to this problem is increasingly found nowadays by choosing to let refugees drown or starve rather than by giving them a chance to build a new life, and by striving for a uniform culture, is an illustration of how the foundations of a democratic civilization are increasingly being undermined.

Never have so many people received an education, and our scientific and technological knowledge is greater than ever. Yet there is no shortage in our own time of 'folly in all its various forms', a phenomenon observed by Johan Huizinga back in 1935. This is clear from, among other things, the fact that sociological research shows that close to half of Americans have never touched a book and that for a quarter of 15-year-old Dutch people semi-illiteracy lies in wait. They can read Instagram messages, but not a page of a novel or a letter from the government. As the latest forms of folly, we have talk shows and social media, where every 'media personality' or 'influencer' can pour their nonsense and fake news (formerly known as propaganda) over humanity.

In his *Apocalypse*, John of Patmos writes that the masses are misled, that they listen to false prophets. Is that why folly has taken command again? Is that why we ignore the truth and even science, preferring the *Don't Look Up* attitude, as in Adam McKay's film from 2021 about the willful ignoring of an apocalyptic meteor that will destroy all life on planet Earth?

In 1919 the learned protofascists laughed at the way that 'myths geared to the masses will from now on be the vehicle of the political movement: fables, delusions, fantasies that need have nothing at all to do with truth, reason or science in order to influence history decisively'. This kind of 'folly

in all its various forms' can be seen again now. The social consequences will be little different from what they were then. Now too, violence will be the triumphant adversary of truth, which makes clear that the fate of truth is closely related, or even identical to, that of the individual, namely decline.

Who are the deceiving spirits who have crawled out of the mouth of the Beast? With which fairy tales is humankind being led towards the ruin of an unlivable planet? A planet ruined not only by devastating wars, the cult of death, or possession by folly, but by ecological devastation too. Is it the fault of the false prophets, or are we ourselves responsible?

For more than a century we have been warned (for example by the scientific report from the Club of Rome in 1972, but there have been countless other warnings) that if we would go on treating planet Earth in the same unconcerned way, and continue plundering nature, the catastrophes confronting us now would be inescapable. Yet we did not want to listen. Because of folly, arrogance or indifference?

'Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary', was the wise insight of theologian Niebuhr in 1944. The question is: What misleading miracles has the Beast performed to make us lose our capacity for justice, so that our capacity for injustice, as befits our worship of the Beast, has only grown? It's not by chance that liberal democracy is increasingly being forced to give way to xenophobia, nationalism, tyranny and fascism.

*The Sleepwalkers* is the title of a trilogy of novels by Austrian writer and philosopher Hermann Broch, published in the years 1928-1932. In volume three, *The Realist*, set in 1918, Broch describes in ten essayistic intermezzos on history the main reason for the downfall of the European ideal of civilization: the disintegration of values.

Is that not the unifying theme that runs through the Apocalypse of John, the *Annals* of Tacitus, Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, Huizinga's *In the Shadow of Tomorrow* and Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, with a Kurtz who by reciting Eliot's 'The Hollow Men' confronts us with the fact that we are still those soulless, degenerate and disillusioned people who do not know how to deal with a meaningless existence... Could we not as a result easily become addicted to the digital drugs of Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, video games and so on? An addiction that holds out to us permanent relaxation and escape, but ultimately, like every addiction, results in even more fear and uncertainty. Is our heart of darkness nothing other than the fact that our supposed Western civilization is itself hollow? That we ourselves repeatedly call up the four horsemen of the apocalypse with those very consequences that delighted the protofascists in 1919, a society trained for hard and dark times that would scoff at humanity. 'Civilization, Enlightenment, humanity. They are gone. It is the age of a new barbarism.'

The horror... the horror... Is all this now being revealed to us?

II 'I WILL SHOW YOU WHAT MUST TAKE PLACE AFTER THIS'  
(BOOK OF REVELATION 4.1)

If the world doesn't perish from apocalyptic self-destruction, how should we then envision a new creation, a New Jerusalem? That President Trump, with his Inaugural Address on 20 January, is not only aware of the apocalyptic characteristics of the current era but sees himself as a messianic figure, promising a 'new creation', in America at any rate, is clear from the opening of that speech:

The Golden Age of America begins right now. From this day forward, our country will flourish and be respected again all over the world. We will be the envy of every nation, and we will not allow ourselves to be taken advantage of any longer. During every single day of the Trump administration, I will, very simply, put America first.

John, in the Revelation given to him, is warned of false prophets, of the deceit that can put people on the wrong track, the temptation of the powerful and of the oh-so-rich city of Babylon that with its opulence tempts people to idolatry. He is warned that the Beast, although mortally wounded, recovers and is then admired so endlessly by the masses that they no longer see that the Beast is nothing other than a form of Evil. That is why in chapter 17 verse 9 of his Revelation, John urges us to be highly critical of everyone and everything that presents itself to us as a savior, a redeemer, but is in fact a false prophet and a false messiah: 'This calls for a mind that has wisdom.'

A mind that has wisdom. That is what we need to be able to know what is to take place after this (Revelation 1:9), indeed what must take place after this (Revelation 4:1) if a new era is to dawn for humanity: a new creation, a new heaven and a new earth, the New Jerusalem where none of the four horsemen of the apocalypse can ever come.

Let us apply our minds with wisdom to this, first of all by looking as critically as possible at what or who is fake or real, lie or truth, so that we do not allow ourselves to be misled, do not worship that which must not be worshipped, or admire what and whom we ought not to admire.

President Trump, once (almost fatally) wounded, then healed, is now worshipped by millions. Will he contribute to the new creation of the Book of Life, or is he nothing else than a head of the Beast, bringing the people only calamity? How can we know?

And should he indeed perform the miracle of creating our new world, what should we imagine when we think of the 'greatness' that he is after? If America must be 'great' again, what economic, ecological and political consequences will that have for the rest of the world? President Trump is not the only person striving to make his country great again. According to President Xi Jinping, China must be great again (although with Chinese



characteristics), and Putin has the restored greatness of Russia in mind, Erdoğan that of Turkey, Modi that of India. Israel, which came into existence in 1947 only because of the United Nations, must now be ‘great’ again too...

What is needed to make not just one country, but our entire world great again? How can we establish an international system of laws that will guarantee durable peace between all nations? What kind of greatness can create a world that will not be violated? For the sake of the New Jerusalem and the promise of peace on earth, who has and takes the power to bring about the *pax humana*, as the only real countervailing power that can prevent the all-destroying *Apocalypse Now*?

It is clear that President Trump, with all his guests from the world of Big Tech, just like President Xi Jinping, but also the EU, has every faith in the blessings and power of science and new technologies, whether they be artificial intelligence, biotechnology, regenerative robotics, genetic technology, transhumanism, chip design or whatever may follow as a result of technological progress.

This faith is expressed brilliantly by the influential American software engineer, venture capitalist and billionaire Marc Andreessen, in his book, published in 2023 and already famous, entitled *The Techno-Optimist Manifesto*, in which he enthusiastically claims among other things:

Techno-Optimism is a material philosophy, not a political philosophy. [...] We believe technology is liberatory. Liberatory of human potential. Liberatory of the human soul, the human spirit. Expanding what it can mean to be free, to be fulfilled, to be alive. [...] Our enemy is stagnation. Our enemy is anti-merit, anti-ambition, anti-striving, anti-achievement, anti-greatness. [...] Where are we going? What world are we building for our children and their children? A world of fear, guilt and resentment? Or a world of ambition, abundance, and adventure? [...] We owe the past, and the future. It's time to be a Techno-Optimist. It's time to build.

Does this vision of the future imply a highly desirable step in the evolution of *Homo sapiens sapiens*, so that we will at last be capable, as a result of these technological possibilities, of building a more peaceful world? Or are we justified in fearing a dystopia in which the world will be controlled by ‘techno-feudalists’, to whom the rest of humanity will have to subordinate itself?

A variation on this technological vision is *The Network State*, invented by another American entrepreneur, the investor and former chief technology officer Balaji Srinivasen. Because of technology, he writes, wealthy people can form a community in the cloud, even a ministate, which they can shape and rule according to their own insights.

But how is it possible to guarantee that such virtual ministates do not compete with each other, fight each other, so that once again the unity of humanity is threatened?

Inspired by the Revelation of Saint John, there are countless Christians who believe, as is written in that last book of the Bible, that a *pax divina* can bring about a new creation. Given the failure of the human species thus far, this is hardly a strange idea. But how should we imagine it happening? Every religion has believers who strive for a theocratic state ruled by their god. In America they are known as the Christian nationalists, who see a messiah in Donald J. Trump. Iran is already an example of such a theocratic state, but it is also the aim of ultra-orthodox Jews in Israel, orthodox Hindus in India, and countless sects. The secular variant of the *pax divina* is the totalitarian state brought about by Hitler, Stalin and Mao.

History teaches, however, that up to now all these political-theocratic visions, rather than leading to a heaven on earth, have only led to a hell on earth. Will that be any different in the future? If not, why not? How should an Apocalypse of John be read in order for it to lead to a New Jerusalem?

And who or what is the god that President Trump says is ‘the biggest thing to bring back to America to make it great again’? The god of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? Or, because with Trump we cannot rule this out, the god whose name is Mammon? In that case, might it be what psychologists so nicely describe as ‘Freudian’ that Trump *could not* lay his hand on the Bible, because his god is described in the Bible as an idol? And what, therefore, will the consequences be if the desire for wealth governs America? Will that put an end to social and economic inequality so that there are no more deaths of despair?

What does ‘a mind that has wisdom’ teach us about all of this? Because the question remains: How can we stop the plagues and the four horsemen of the apocalypse, now that the world is practicing apocalyptic destruction?

The elite to be found every January in Davos continues to impress upon us that the true vision of a new creation can be made a reality through ‘Innovation, Globalization, Digitalization, Cooperation, Sustainability, the 4<sup>th</sup> Industrial Revolution, a New Business Model’. All that’s needed is for enterprises to be given space, for startups to be stimulated, and for higher education to concentrate on the knowledge of science, technology, economics and mathematics.

But can this economic orientation also remove one of the greatest obstacles to the pursuit of a new creation, the discontent in our culture? That seems to contradict what a great connoisseur of the human soul, Sigmund Freud, drew attention to in the first sentence of his brilliant study of *Civilization and its Discontents*:

The impression forces itself upon one that men measure by false standards, that everyone seeks power, success, riches for himself and admires others who attain them, while undervaluing the truly precious things in life.

As for the idea that everything will become better if the ancien régime political parties come to power again, we find ourselves confronted by the observations from the 1940s of the French philosopher Simone Weil. She was of the opinion that 'All politics has degenerated into a technique for getting and keeping power, and the notion that a political party is merely a machine for calling up collective passions and exercising collective pressure on the thinking of every individual who is a member of it.'

Should that be true, if politics in Western democracies has indeed degenerated into an empty striving for the preservation of power for power's sake, how can we make politics become again what Aristotle says it should be: having regard for differing interests, using the force of argument, striving for the highest common good?

For anyone who still hopes that yet more laws and yet more regulations bring a just society closer, in one of his posthumous fragments from the 1880s Nietzsche reminds us of the wisdom of an ancient Chinese saying: 'An elderly Chinese man said he had heard that when empires were doomed they had many laws.' If that is so, then what does it mean for the idea that with more laws and more rules, a more just society will come?



The revelation of our time offered to us by Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, Huizinga's *In the Shadow of Tomorrow* and the film *Apocalypse Now* by Francis Ford Coppola is of a very different order, however, from that of the visions of the future discussed above and the well-trodden paths we are on now. So, to end, let us investigate what insights these works have to offer.

The most important thing these contemporary apocalyptic works teach us is that we can avoid the doom we are ourselves bringing about by first escaping from the heart of darkness. By escaping from that empty, meaningless, deceitful, hypocritical Western 'ideal of civilization', the perverted creation of the hollow men we have become. But how?

Fortunately, as well as the four horsemen of the apocalypse, we can also bring to mind four guides who want to be our advisers on our journey out of that heart of darkness.

Our first guide is the British historian Arnold Toynbee. In 1948 he published a book called *Civilization on Trial*. After two world wars, both of which started in Europe, he advises us that it's time the West no longer saw itself as the epicenter of all civilization but tried to learn from other civilizations, because 'Sooner or later, the West, in her turn, is bound to receive the re-education which the other civilizations have obtained already'.

But, as we cling to the adage that everything must be investigated by 'a mind that has wisdom', the question is: from which other civilizations should the West attempt to learn? And what kind of re-education will we then receive?

Goethe is our second guide. In a conversation on 23 October 1828, he proposes to Eckermann, and therefore to us, that it's time everyone took responsibility for the entirety of humankind: 'The only point now is what a man weighs in the scale of humanity; all the rest is nothing.'

We might nod our agreement, but we also need to ask how to respond to this appeal to individual responsibility in a time in which collective passions once again reign supreme.

The third guide is the French-Jewish writer Romain Gary, born in Lithuania, with his phenomenal novel *The Roots of Heaven*. Published in 1956 and awarded the Prix Goncourt that same year, it is not only the first ecological novel but one of the most beautiful novels of the twentieth century. It's a work in which the guidance of Toynbee and Goethe comes together, and furthermore it builds on Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

The story Romain Gary tells in his *The Roots of Heaven* is set in the 1950s in the French colonies in Africa. The hero of the story is Morel, who, as a climate activist *avant la lettre*, wants to put a stop to the killing of 30 thousand elephants every year. All these animals are killed, mainly by Westerners, purely and simply for the pleasure of having the ivory as a 'trophy', or to sell it. Morel eschews no means of saving them. On the one hand he makes a public appeal to stop the elephant hunt and collects signatures on a petition, while on the other he does not shrink from setting the belongings of the elephant hunters on fire and, if necessary, menacing them. The French authorities do all they can to catch and arrest him, and meanwhile his activities garner increasing sympathy among a mainly American public, so that the international media become familiar with what he is doing.

In the manifestos Morel publishes to gain international attention, he writes, for example:

The time for pride is finished. We must turn with far more humility and understanding toward the other animal species, different but not inferior. Man on this planet has reached the point where really he needs all the friendship he can find, and in his loneliness he has need of all the elephants, all the dogs and all the birds. [...] It is time to show that we are capable of preserving this gigantic, clumsy, natural splendor which still lives in our midst.

In Africa, Morel encounters enemies, his path crosses those of African resistance fighters against the French colonial regime, and at the same time he can count on the sympathy and support of, among others, a former British soldier, the elderly Danish naturalist Peer Qvist, two men of the cloth (a Jesuit and a Franciscan), a young German woman who was taken prisoner by the Russians in Berlin at the end of the war and forced into prostitution, and a single member of the staff of the French governor in the African colony.

All these people are set thinking by the actions of Morel. When the chief of staff is alone with the governor, he admits:

How can we talk of progress when we're still destroying, all around us, life's most beautiful and noble manifestations? Our artists, our architects, our scientists, our poets, sweat blood to make life more beautiful and at the same time we force our way into the last forests left to us, with our finger on the trigger of automatic weapons. We've got to resist this degradation. Are we no longer capable of respecting nature, or defending living beauty that has no earning power, no utility, no object except to let itself be seen from time to time? Liberty, too, is a natural splendor on its way to becoming extinct. I'm speaking for myself to get it off my chest, because I don't have the courage to act like Morel. It's absolutely essential that man should manage to preserve something other than what helps to make soles for shoes, or sewing machines, that he should leave a margin, a sanctuary, where some of life's beauty can take refuge and where he himself can feel safe from his own cleverness and folly. Only then will it be possible to begin talking about civilization. A utilitarian civilization will always go on to its logical conclusion — forced labor camps...

What the reader knows by this point is that Morel spent two years imprisoned in various German concentration camps. There is one experience in those camps that marked Morel for life, an experience he has to thank for his love of elephants. A certain Robert, imprisoned there because he was a member of the French Resistance, was, Morel says, the most courageous man he'd ever met in his life, someone who became for him the embodiment of hope, of never giving up. Robert was always cheerful; he had the cheerfulness of someone who had gone deep down into things and come back reassured.

One day this Robert came walking into the block where the men were held as if he had a beautiful girl on his arm. It was all imaginary, but the consequence was that the other prisoners joined in the game, started to behave differently, no longer went around swearing, no longer made an unnecessary mess. The ss naturally noticed that the mood of resignation and docility in the block was changing, that the prisoners were no longer behaving like animals but as self-respecting people. As soon as the camp commandant understood how this could have happened, Robert was called to account and ordered to hand the invisible woman over to the ss:

I understand these things Robert. I understand them very well. I was born to understand them. It's my job. That's how I rose so high in the party. I understand them and I don't like them. I can even say that I hate them. They are what made me a National Socialist. I don't believe, Robert, in the omnipotence of the human spirit. I don't believe in the noble conventions

or in the myth of dignity. I don't believe in the primacy of the spiritual. That kind of Jewish idealism is what I find most intolerable. I know all about idealists and about humanists. Don't forget that, essentially, we are, like Communists, a materialistic revolution. Therefore tomorrow morning I shall come to block K with two soldiers. You will hand over to me the invisible woman who does so much for your morale, and I shall explain to your comrades that she will be taken to the nearest military brothel to satisfy not the spiritual but the *physical* needs of our soldiers. If not, you will be put in solitary confinement.

Robert went into solitary. When he returned a month later he was even thinner than before, and his fingers were without nails. He told his comrades that he'd managed to overcome his claustrophobia in the cell by thinking of a herd of elephants walking across the endless African steppe, thousands and thousands of elephants that allow nothing to stop them. That is *la liberté*...!

After the war, Morel loses sight of Robert. Until...

One of the plantations Morel sets ablaze belongs to a certain Duparc, who, on the pretext of protecting his plantation, has had dozens of elephants killed. When Morel finally catches him, Duparc turns out to be none other than... Robert! 'You!' Morel stutters. 'You! If there's any man who ought to be on our side, defending the elephants, it's you!' 'They were ruining my plantation', is Robert's response. 'They cost me three million francs last year.'

At one point Morel tells the elderly Danish biologist Peer Qvist, who has become a friend and comrade-in-arms, when and why he made the decision to resist, in every respect, the killing of elephants. It was when he first decided, out of sympathy, to respond to the appeal of a poverty-stricken girl to buy her puppy from her, so that she would have a little money. There wasn't much he could do with the dog, so he took it to a pound, where he was touched by all those puppies and dogs behind bars, all of them looking at him helplessly and pleadingly. When he asked what would happen to the animals if nobody came to fetch them, the casual answer was: 'We leave them there for a week and afterward put them into the gas chamber. We recover the skins and make gelatine and soap out of the bones.' Morel says:

I think that's where it got hold of me. At first I nearly knocked the man out — and then I said to myself: 'You wait a little you human master race, I'll teach you to respect life. I'm going to have it out with you, and with your gas chambers, your atomic bombs and your need for soap.' That evening I got together with two Baltic friends and a Polish Jew and we carried out a little commando raid: set the dogs free and the hut on fire. That's how it began. I was sure I'd made a good start.

When Morel has finished speaking, it's quiet for a moment. Then his old wise friend remarks:

Islam calls that 'the roots of heaven', and to the Mexican Indians it is the 'tree of life' — the thing that makes both of them fall on their knees and raise their eyes and beat their tormented breasts. A need for protection and company, from which obstinate people like Morel try to escape by means of petitions, fighting committees, by trying to take protection of species in their hands. Our needs — for justice, for freedom and dignity — are roots of heaven that are deeply imbedded in our hearts, but of heaven itself men know nothing but the gripping roots...

The journey back out of the heart of darkness and separation from our existence as hollow men, Romain Gary tells us, begins with the recognition of those 'roots of heaven that are deeply imbedded in our hearts' and the realization that it's only by protecting nature, that 'useless' and 'unproductive' nature, that we can win back our sense of our own dignity and so, also, our freedom.

In 1958 a successful film was made of Gary's book by John Huston, with the main roles taken by actors including Errol Flynn, Juliette Gréco and Trevor Howard. So this work and the message of Romain Gary was certainly not unknown to a wider public. How is it possible, then, that almost seven decades later the killing of elephants is still going on, that since the twentieth century millions of whales have succumbed to the hunt, and many other animals are at risk of extinction? That water, air and soil are more poisoned by us than ever? Why does it turn out that those 'roots of heaven' are not so deeply embedded in our hearts? Does it perhaps have something to do with what Morel was forced to realize when the brave Robert turned out to be the vile elephant-killer Duparc? Namely that which in *Doctor Faustus cum Figuris*: in every individual lurks both a capacity for the best of acts and a capacity for the worst.

Once again, if this is the case, then what the Irish poet Seamus Heaney, our fourth guide, holds up before us at the end of his poem *The Cure at Troy* (1990) remains true: even when people suffer, and torture each other, we must not abandon the hope that justice can rise up, that hope and history will again rhyme, that a god can speak to us as we hear the birth cries of new life...

Human beings suffer,  
they torture one another,  
they get hurt and get hard.  
No poem or play or song  
can fully right a wrong  
inflicted or endured.



The innocent in gaols  
beat on their bars together.  
A hunger-striker's father  
stands in the graveyard dumb.  
The police widow in veils  
faints at the funeral home.

History says, Don't hope  
on this side of the grave...  
But then, once in a lifetime  
the longed-for tidal wave  
of justice can rise up,  
and hope and history rhyme.

So hope for a great sea-change  
on the far side of revenge.  
Believe that a further shore  
is reachable from here.  
Believe in miracles  
and cures and healing wells.

Call the miracle self-healing:  
The utter self-revealing  
double-take of feeling.  
If there's fire on the mountain  
Or lightning and storm  
And a god speaks from the sky

That means someone is hearing  
the outcry and the birth-cry  
of new life at its term.

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February 2025

# Speakers

## First roundtable

PATRICK J. DENEEN (USA, 1964) is a political theorist and a leading conservative intellectual of our time, known for his critiques of liberalism and his advocacy for a return to traditional, community-centred values. A professor of political science at the University of Notre Dame, he gained widespread attention with his 2018 book *Why Liberalism Failed*, in which he argues that liberalism, by prioritizing individual autonomy over a shared moral order, has eroded civic life and led to social fragmentation. The book was highly recommended by President Obama for its insights into the loss of meaning and community. Deneen's 2023 follow-up, *Regime Change: Toward a Postliberal Future*, outlines a vision for postliberal political order rooted in the common good. Deneen challenges both progressive orthodoxy and market-driven libertarianism and is of key influence to the new wave of conservative political thought — most notably to Vice President J.D. Vance, who has publicly expressed his admiration for Deneen's work.



ADMIRAL WILLIAM FALLON (USA, 1944) is a retired four-star naval officer whose career reflects distinguished service, ethical leadership and strategic vision. Beginning his service as a naval aviator flying combat missions, he was at the critical frontline during the Vietnam War. Over four decades, he rose to command both US Pacific Command and US Central Command (CENTCOM), overseeing operations across Asia and the Middle East. At CENTCOM, while directing combat operations, he advocated for diplomacy and engagement with all countries in the region, notably opposing calls for military confrontation with Iran — stances that underscored his integrity and commitment to balanced policy. Fallon resigned in 2008, citing the need to avoid being a distraction amid political controversy. Since retiring, he has remained active in global affairs as a consultant, advisor, and speaker on national security and ethical leadership. He will publish a book about his experiences while in command at CENTCOM entitled *Decisions, Discord and Diplomacy from Cairo to Kabul* in the Fall of 2025. Admiral Fallon is on the Advisory Board of the Nexus Institute.





GAYA HERRINGTON (Netherlands, 1981) is an internationally recognized sustainability researcher and well-being economist, and member of the Club of Rome. She holds master's degrees in econometrics and sustainability from the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and Harvard University, and became known for her influential 2021 study 'Update to limits to growth' in Yale's *Journal of Industrial Ecology* and her subsequent book *Five Insights for Avoiding Global Collapse* (2022), which reignited global discussion on sustainability and economic limits. Her TED Talk 'Will the end of economic growth come by design — or disaster?' in 2024 reached over half a million views. Herrington calls for a transformation of economic systems, from a system obsessed with perpetual growth to an economy that centers around human and ecological well-being, meeting all human needs — physical, emotional, and spiritual — within planetary boundaries. Herrington serves as vice president at Schneider Electric, named the world's most sustainable corporation by *Time* (2024).



PERVEZ HOODBHOY (Pakistan, 1950) is a prominent nuclear physicist, educator, and outspoken public intellectual. After earning a PhD in nuclear physics from MIT, he spent over forty years teaching at Quaid-i-Azam University in Islamabad while advocating for secularism, scientific literacy, and rational public discourse. Hoodbhoy is a long-time member of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, where he is part of the board that annually sets the Doomsday Clock, raising global awareness of nuclear risks — especially those in South Asia. A vocal critic of nuclear armament and religious extremism, he authored *Islam and Science: Religious Orthodoxy and the Battle for Rationality* (1991), warning against ideological influences in education. As founder and president of The Black Hole, a non-profit, open-to-all, educational and intellectual space for science, art and culture in Islamabad, Hoodbhoy continues his efforts for education in Pakistan.

SIGRID KAAG (Netherlands, 1961) is a seasoned diplomat and former politician, renowned for her profound expertise in international relations, conflict resolution, trade and development. Until recently she served as the United Nations Senior Humanitarian and Reconstruction Coordinator for Gaza and as Under-Secretary-General at the office of the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process. Prior she has held high-profile roles as leader of the Dutch social liberal party D66, First Deputy Prime Minister of the Netherlands, Minister of Finance, Minister for Foreign Trade and Development and Minister of Foreign Affairs. Kaag is an experienced multilateralist and is widely respected for her principled as well as pragmatic approach to international affairs, and her commitment to peacebuilding, mediation and sustainable trade and development. Her career reflects a rare blend of leadership with moral clarity, while she navigates some of the world's most challenging crises with insight, integrity, and a global perspective grounded in human values.



DMYTRO KULEBA (Ukraine, 1981) served as Ukraine's Minister of Foreign Affairs from 2020 to 2024 and was one of the most effective and visible members of President Zelensky's cabinet during the Russian invasion of Ukraine. He was the youngest foreign affairs minister in Ukraine's history, and led his department through its most challenging times, playing a pivotal role in forging alliances, securing arms, imposing sanctions, advancing Ukraine's bids for EU and NATO membership, and strengthening ties with Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Today, Kuleba lives in Ukraine and holds affiliations as a Senior Fellow at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard and as Associate Professor at the Institute of Political Studies (Sciences Po). He is the author of *The War for Reality: How to Win in the World of Fakes, Truths, and Communities* (written in 2018, later translated into English), in which he delves into the realities of information warfare. In 2024, Kuleba curated *War and New Horizons*, a forward-looking collection of essays by several prominent thinkers, including Anne Applebaum, Ban Ki-moon, Condoleezza Rice, Nassim Taleb, and Samantha Power.





CONNOR LEAHY (USA, 1995) is a brilliant computer scientist who is on the front line of AI, or more accurately — given the speed with which it is developing — of AGI (Artificial General Intelligence) or even ASI (Artificial Superintelligence): the AI systems that are capable of learning and surpassing human intelligence. According to Leahy, humanity might face nothing less than extinction if these systems get out of human control. Dedicating his life to solving the problems of AI control, Leahy co-founded Conjecture, of which he is the CEO. He is advisor to ControlAI, an advocacy non-profit working to ban the development of uncontrolled superintelligence, and reaches large audiences speaking and writing on AI control thanks to his convincing and wise insights. Leahy was the co-founder and head of EleutherAI, a decentralized grassroots collective of volunteer researchers, engineers and developers focused on AI alignment, scaling, and open-source AI research.



LEON WIESELTIER (USA, 1952) is an American-Jewish public intellectual and editor-in-chief of *Liberties*, a journal of culture and politics. He advocates liberalism as essential for the survival of a free democracy and society. Wieseltier was educated at the universities of Columbia, Oxford and Harvard where he was selected to the Society of Fellows. From 1983 to 2014 he served as the renowned literary editor of *The New Republic*. He is the author of *Against Identity* (1996) and of *Kaddish* (1998), which was translated into many languages and has become a classic about love, death, the accursed questions and the quest for wisdom.

## Second roundtable

JOSEP BORRELL (Spain, 1947) is an experienced politician and diplomat, who served as the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (2019–2024). With a career spanning decades in European and national politics, Borrell brings profound insight into global affairs. A former President of the European Parliament and Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs, he is known for his assessments of geopolitical dynamics and his advocacy for a stronger, more cohesive European voice on the world stage. Borrell has been a key figure in navigating complex challenges — from the EU’s response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine to the shifting power balances in the Indo-Pacific and Middle East. A committed multilateralist, he champions diplomacy, human rights, and a rules-based international order, reinforcing Europe’s role as a principled yet pragmatic global actor.



JAVIER CERCAS (Spain, 1962) is a celebrated public intellectual, novelist and essayist, renowned for his insightful engagement with European history, politics, and culture. With his books, including *Soldiers of Salamis* (2001) and *The Anatomy of a Moment* (2009), he delves into the complexities of Spain’s twentieth-century past, confronting themes of political violence, democracy, and the moral ambiguities of history. Cercas’s work combines rigorous historical inquiry with literary artistry, offering nuanced reflections on human dignity, justice, and the consequences of ideological conflict. Beyond his literary achievements, he is an active public intellectual, engaging with contemporary European social and political challenges through essays and lectures. Cercas’s commitment to truth, critical thought, and cultural dialogue cements his place among Europe’s foremost voices advocating for humanistic values in an era of political turbulence.



Photo © Raúl Cercas



HIS EXCELLENCY OMAR SULTAN AL OLAMA (UAE, 1990) was appointed as the UAE Minister of State for Artificial Intelligence in 2017, becoming the world's first minister in this field. In July 2020, his role was expanded to include Digital Economy and Remote Work Applications. In 2023, he was also appointed as the Director General of the Prime Minister's Office at the Ministry of Cabinet Affairs and as Director General of the Dubai Crown Prince's Office, and

he holds numerous other leadership positions. His Excellency, as the driving force behind the UAE's AI strategy and digital economy initiatives, has a clear vision for establishing the country as a global leader in AI and technology. His focus areas include fostering a fertile AI ecosystem, enhancing the UAE's competitive advantage in priority sectors, attracting and nurturing talent for future AI-enabled jobs, and promoting cutting-edge research collaborations with industries. His Excellency's commitment to strong governance, effective regulation, and the provision of essential data and infrastructure, positions the UAE as a prime test bed for AI innovations. With initiatives like the Personal Data Protection Law, the National Program for Coders, and the UAE Council for AI and Blockchain, he aims to accelerate the growth and transformation of the digital economy, ultimately doubling its contribution to the UAE's non-oil GDP within the next decade. His Excellency was named one of the hundred most influential people in AI by *Time Magazine*.



MIKE PENCE (USA, 1959) was born in Columbus, Indiana, on June 7, 1959, into a family that epitomized the American Dream, instilling in him values of hard work, faith, and family. After graduating from Hanover College and Indiana University School of Law, he embarked on a multifaceted career, including law practice, hosting a talk show, serving as a congressman for six terms, and championing limited government and fiscal responsibility. Pence then was elected

the 50<sup>th</sup> Governor of Indiana, focusing on tax cuts, job creation, education reform, and infrastructure investment while maintaining fiscal responsibility. His accomplishments in Indiana led to his selection as the 48<sup>th</sup> Vice President of the United States. Pence's conservative philosophy, inspired by Ronald



Reagan, led to his founding Advancing American Freedom which continues to advocate for faith, family, and liberty as foundational American values. In 2025, Pence received the John F. Kennedy Profile in Courage Award® for putting his life and career on the line to ensure the constitutional transfer of presidential power on January 6, 2021.

MAMPHELA RAMPHELE (South Africa, 1947) is a physician, academic, political thinker, and above all an agent for change. A co-founder of the Black Consciousness Movement with Steve Biko, she was a leading voice in the fight for justice, dignity, and liberation during one of South Africa's most repressive eras. Together with her friends Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, she played a pivotal role in the anti-apartheid struggle. She was detained without trial by the apartheid regime, but she continued her activism through community health and education initiatives. Post-1994, Ramphela became Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cape Town — the first black woman to hold the position — and later served as one of the managing directors at the World Bank. She is the co-founder of ReimaginesA (SA for South Africa), tirelessly advocating for human rights, governance reform and ethical leadership, and thus remains a powerful voice in South Africa's post-apartheid evolution. Through her writing and public engagement, Ramphela continues to challenge systems of inequality and inspire new generations of African leadership grounded in justice and accountability. An adherent of the Ubuntu philosophy, she reaches beyond the borders of South Africa with her efforts: she served as the co-president of the Club of Rome between 2018 and 2023 and inspires audiences all around the world with her lectures and publications. Among her books are *Laying Ghosts to Rest: Dilemmas of the Transformation in South Africa* (2008) and the autobiographical *A Passion for Freedom: My Life* (2013).





ANTONIO SPADARO, S.J. (Italy, 1966) is a Jesuit priest, theologian, and influential voice in contemporary Catholic thought. As former editor of the Jesuit periodical *La Civiltà Cattolica* he has played a key role in shaping and articulating the intellectual vision of the Catholic Church, and consequently of the late Pope Francis, a fellow Jesuit, to whom Spadaro was a close advisor. Spadaro is known for engaging with culture, politics, and technology through a theological lens that bridges faith and modern secular life, as is reflected by his *Conversations on Faith* (2024) with Martin Scorsese, his conversations with the artist Michelangelo Pistoletto as published in *Spiritualità* (2025) and his collections of Pope Francis's texts on poetry and literature, *Viva la poesia!* (2025). Spadaro influences both ecclesial discourse and broader conversations on the Catholic Church's role in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



CARISSA VÉLIZ (Mexico) is an associate professor of philosophy at the Institute for Ethics in AI, and a fellow at Hertford College, University of Oxford. A leading voice in digital ethics, she specializes in privacy, AI ethics, political philosophy, and the intersection of technology and public policy. Véliz is the author of *Privacy is Power*, one of the best books of 2020 according to *The Economist*, and editor of *The Oxford Handbook of Digital Ethics*. Her work has significantly shaped global conversations on data rights and responsible technology, earning her the 2021 Herbert A. Simon Award for Outstanding Research in Computing and Philosophy. A trusted advisor to governments and companies worldwide, she also serves on the board of the Proton Foundation alongside Sir Tim Berners-Lee and Andy Yen. Véliz is a member of UNESCO's Women4Ethical AI and continues to advocate for a digital future rooted in human dignity, autonomy, and justice.

PRESIDENT SALOME ZOURABICHVILI (France, 1952) has served as president of Georgia since 2018, becoming the country's first female head of state. Born in Paris to Georgian émigrés, she built a distinguished career in French diplomacy before returning to Georgia as Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2004. Elected president as an independent, she has been a leading voice for Georgia's European integration: under her leadership, Georgia was granted EU candidate status in 2023. In 2024, following contested parliamentary elections, Zourabichvili's mandate was challenged by the ruling party. However, the European Parliament reaffirmed her legitimacy, recognizing her as Georgia's rightful head of state and urging the EU to continue engaging with her. Zourabichvili is a symbol of democratic resilience and pro-European unity in Georgia.



### Moderator

ROB RIEMEN (Netherlands, 1962) is the founder and president of the Nexus Institute. Riemen founded the journal *Nexus* in 1991 to keep the tradition of European humanism alive. In 1994, he established the Nexus Institute, which has become one of Europe's most prestigious organizations to inspire public intellectual debate about the most important subjects for humanity and society. He is the author of the bestselling books *Nobility of Spirit: A Forgotten Ideal* (2008), a passionate plea for the revival of classical humanist values; *To Fight Against This Age* (2018), consisting of two beautifully written, cogent and urgent essays about the rise of fascism and the ways in which to combat it; and *Becoming Human is an Art* (2023), written as an empowerment of all those individuals who are eager to regain the virtues and values necessary to realize the coming victory of democracy and to defeat the growing totalitarian mindset. In the fall of 2025, his new book *The Word That Conquers Death: Stories About True Greatness* will be published. His work has been translated so far into 24 languages.



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