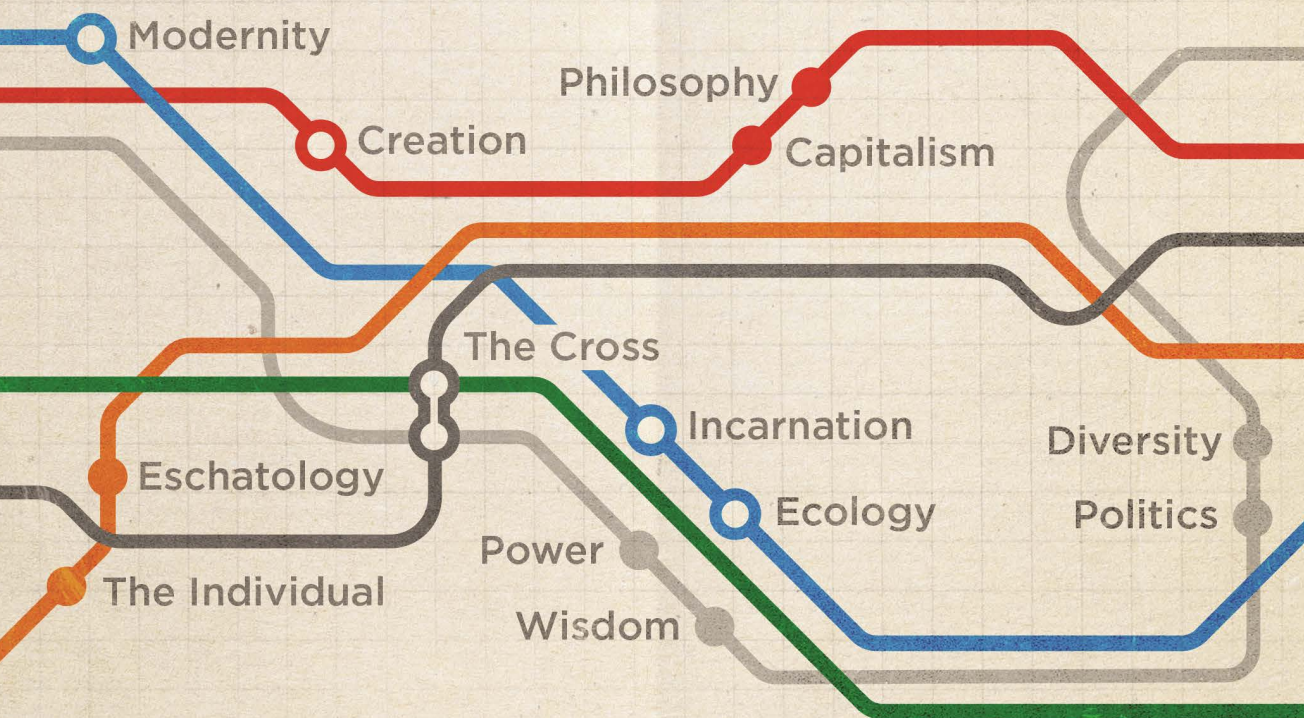


FOREWORD BY TIMOTHY KELLER

BIBLICAL CRITICAL THEORY

How the Bible's Unfolding Story Makes Sense
of Modern Life and Culture



CHRISTOPHER
WATKIN

Watkin turns and overturns the tables of today's culture-changers by examining various critical theories through biblical lenses rather than vice versa. *Biblical Critical Theory* is an important update of Augustine's *City of God*, a proposal for making biblical sense of what is happening in contemporary culture. This is the ultimate how-to book for disciples looking to beat ideological swords and other weapons in the popular culture wars into gospel plowshares, tools for making sense of, and reconciling, the contradictions of our present moment.

—**Kevin J. Vanhoozer**, research professor of systematic theology at
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

I am so thankful to God that this long-awaited book has finally arrived at this particular moment in our late modern world. For those of us who have been advocating the imperative of biblically faithful cultural critique and construction, Chris Watkin has taken away our blunt machete and given us a scalpel; indeed, he's given us a whole set of diagnostic and surgical tools. *Biblical Critical Theory* will become a seminal text for us: part manifesto, part Bible overview (the most maximal one imaginable), part blueprint for civilization. It's a revelation about the implications and applications of God's revelation and how Jesus Christ is the subversive fulfilment of all and every culture. In terms of Christian doctrine, Watkin admits that he is saying nothing new, but the arrangement of the material is menthol fresh, his interlocutors are the heavyweights, and his writing is a model of elegance, engagement, and empathy. From first steps in Christian discipleship, through catechesis and seminary, and to the highest level of academic research, Watkin's work in *Biblical Critical Theory* will be a foundation and frame for years to come. Absolutely essential reading.

—**Dan Strange**, director of Crosslands Forum

Commendations of this book will likely sound like wild exaggerations. They are not. Christopher Watkin has done something remarkable. He has given thoughtful believers and doubters a whirlwind tour of both the biblical narrative and the myriad ways that narrative critiques, commends, and completes the best thoughts of thinkers from Plato to Popper. Watkin is a thoroughly reliable guide to complex biblical material, whether the patriarchal narratives, eighth-century prophets, or apocalyptic literature. And when he steps onto the field of his main expertise—modern intellectual history—he truly shines. He does not attempt to dazzle us with his intimate knowledge of often-impenetrable thinkers like Heidegger, Marx, and Foucault. Instead, he shows why such figures deserve their place among the greats, how their ideas continue to influence contemporary life, and why they are wrong when they are wrong, only because they preserve a half-truth that is found complete in the Bible. This book is a magnificent achievement. It is a must-read for Christian leaders wanting to think biblically about our de-Christianising world. It is also a gift for those who aren't sure what to make of the Christian faith. Here is a total defence and commendation of Christianity like no other. Buy it. Read it. Ponder it. Pass it on.

—**John Dickson**, author and historian, host of *Undeceptions*,
Jean Kvamme Distinguished Professor at Wheaton College

We not only read the Bible; the Bible reads us, challenging familiar assumptions about "the way things are." A careful scholar of both "horizons," Watkin guides us upstream from politics and culture wars. This isn't just another survey or apologetic for a biblical worldview. Rather, Watkin provides a fascinating and bracing exploration of key points at which the biblical story calls into question fundamental preunderstandings we take for granted even before we "engage the culture." *Biblical Critical Theory* doesn't just give us answers; it helps us to come up with better

questions. The components aren't new, but the way he's put it all together offers an innovative and immensely fruitful paradigm.

—**Michael Horton**, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics at Westminster Seminary California

Many of us find critical theory confusing, intimidating, or even suspect territory. Chris Watkin is well travelled in these places where many fear to tread, and you could not ask for a more affable or informed guide to show you around. Starting from the premise that the Bible offers the most expansive and generative account of reality, he engages both head and heart with humor and humility and maps out a path over some of the most fundamental impassés of our time. Urgent and weighty, *Biblical Critical Theory* is also, simply, a tremendously exciting read. Here is mastery—of an astonishing range of material—that, instead of asking the reader to strain and slog, brings the most complex ideas within reach and makes the whole thing feel like a glorious adventure.

—**Natasha Moore**, senior research fellow at the Centre for Public Christianity

Watkin's *Biblical Critical Theory* reveals how the whole of Scripture presents a lens through which we can—and should—see all of reality. It is an exercise in understanding “the now and the not yet.” Incisive, accessible, and astonishing in scope, this book is sure to be an immensely valuable Christian resource.

—**Dolores G. Morris**, associate professor of instruction at University of South Florida, author of *Believing Philosophy: A Guide to Becoming a Christian Philosopher*

Where was this book when I was floundering in a sea of humanities all those years ago? Christopher Watkin's *Biblical Critical Theory* equips Christians to walk confidently as they appropriate and advance the ideas of our cultural milieu. Watkin will capture your intellect and imagination. This book is a must-read for all serious thinkers.

—**Sam Chan**, City Bible Forum, author of *Evangelism in a Skeptical World* and *Topical Preaching in a Complex World*

This is a brilliant and unique book. Inspired by Augustine's *City of God*, Watkin has written a tour de force, diagonalizing a biblical path through rival narratives and ideologies. *Biblical Critical Theory* combines rich biblical theology with penetrating philosophical reflection; the result is a wonderful example of how cultural engagement should be done. It is the most biblical, up-to-date, and comprehensive analysis of contemporary Western culture that I know of. And to top it all off, Watkin can turn a phrase.

—**Joshua Chatraw**, executive director of the Center for Public Christianity

This is the best yet most accessible exploration of the intersection between Christianity, culture, and philosophy I've read in recent years. Christopher Watkin invites readers through a tour of the Bible's philosophical depths and implications, while demonstrating persuasively that the Christian worldview subversively fulfills major philosophies, ancient and modern. Further, it applies the theology of neo-Calvinism for a contemporary audience. I can't be more excited about Watkin's work. Run, don't walk, to get this book!

—**Nathaniel Gray Sutanto**, assistant professor of systematic theology at Reformed Theological Seminary, Washington, DC

With astonishing breadth and depth, *Biblical Critical Theory* gives readers a fresh way of seeing the world, life, culture, and the Bible. Watkin's scholarship is impressive, taking what is valuable

and true wherever he finds it and making it accessible to the reader. I highly recommend this book for anyone seeking a deeper understanding of our time and culture.

—**Alan Noble**, associate professor of English at Oklahoma Baptist University,
editor in chief at *Christ and Pop Culture*, author of *You Are Not Your Own*

This book is a feast. Chris Watkin accomplishes what few have. He combines wide-ranging knowledge of resources with a lucid and accessible style. More important, he digs deep into critical thinking that is so necessary if we are to make sense of our times and speak the gospel into them. He avoids two pitfalls: (1) rejecting critical theory altogether, dubbing it Marxist and therefore offensive, and (2) accepting its insights without endorsing all its presuppositions. Refreshingly, Watkin opts for a third way, a more biblical one: criticism with hope. To substantiate this, he walks the reader through all the episodes of redemptive history, showing how at every point the Bible is “subversive” of the world’s ways, but always with faith. Though there is a good deal here, deep calls forth unto deep, and I would urge readers to wrestle with the depth and develop their own applications of healthy criticism. The gospel is in this.

—**William Edgar**, professor of apologetics at
Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia

Biblical Critical Theory is an ambitious, comprehensive, and thrilling work of Christian apologetics. Written by a scholar of French thought who has built his career not in the seminary but in secular institutions, this book moves well beyond a run-of-the-mill account of the West’s seminal thinkers. Rather, the intellectual architects of modernity are expounded by someone with a subtle, first-hand grasp of their power. The result is a rich, sympathetic, and critical engagement with the gospel’s most powerful rivals. Refusing to abstract a “biblical worldview” from the actual phenomenon of Scripture, Watkin tethers his material to the storyline of the Bible, engaging with Scripture’s own language and thought-forms. Armed with this dual-attentiveness to Scripture and contemporary thought, the result is a vast and breathtaking work of Christian cultural engagement. The book’s structural coherence and biblical-narrative approach makes a cover-to-cover read a rich experience. But having read it, it ought to stay on a shelf with other often-used reference books, within reach for anyone who wants to understand the Bible, contemporary culture, or the relation between the two. It is probably, in my opinion, the most significant work of its kind to appear in a decade.

—**Rory Shiner**, senior pastor of Providence City Church, Perth, author of
The World Next Door: A Short Guide to the Christian Faith

For social scientists immersed in generations of challenging critical social theory, Watkin offers a magisterial alternative thoroughly grounded in the span of biblical literature and the Christian theological tradition into our present. The great master themes and battlegrounds of contemporary ideologies—power, conflict, domination, oppression, freedom, social change, civil society, political and social order, common good, inequality—come under searching critique, not least when they are on Watkin’s intimately familiar terrain of modern critical theory. A work of breathtaking scale, *Biblical Critical Theory* reveals the extraordinary singularity of the Bible as Watkin insistently expresses the magnificent radicalness of Christian thought. Refusing to be captured by simplifying dualities of contemporary discourse, this eloquently written work celebrates the symphony of biblical genres and the millennia of theological reflections that provide thoughtful Christians with a distinctive, powerful, and original critical armory that can reach all corners of our economic, political, legal, cultural, and social worlds. Inspired by the words of novelists and poets, ancient philosophy and literary critics, modern apologists and social observers, Watkin

crafts a richly textured argument with dexterity and power. While no one will agree with everything, every careful reader will be rewarded from repeated immersions in this profound and potentially transformative work.

—**Terence Halliday**, research professor at the American Bar Foundation,
honorary professor and adjunct professor of sociology at Australian National University

Christopher Watkin's expert, timely compendium of Christian Scripture's subversive engagement of dominating themes of our modern age brings welcome healing to our world. Now may we live it!

—**Esther Lightcap Meek**, professor emerita of philosophy at Geneva College,
author of *Longing to Know: The Philosophy of Knowledge for Ordinary People*
and *Loving to Know: Introducing Covenant Epistemology*

A wonderful book bringing the Scriptures—every part of them—into a deep and illuminating conversation with the concerns of culture. I learnt new things about both the Bible and the modern world in each of these twenty-eight fascinating chapters. I will be referencing this work (which is evangelist-speak for “ripping it off”) for many years to come.

—**Glen Scrivener**, ordained minister, director of Speak Life,
author of *The Air We Breathe*

This is a remarkably important book that I wish could have been written thirty-five years ago when the church was struggling to make initial responses to the challenges of postmodernism and the wider, corrosive effects of deconstructionism and critical theory. Watkin both explains the Bible to secular culture and explains secular culture within the narrative framework of the Bible. In other words, he articulates (with a structure and tone not dissimilar to Augustine's unrivalled *City of God*) a biblical social and cultural theory for our day that is enchanting and persuasive yet, at the same time, radical, challenging, and countercultural. The astonishing commitment to “diagonalize” competing insights of culture and Scripture is what makes this work so attractive, convincing, and valuable. Watkin, due to his fully orbed, biblical view of creation and culture, instinctively resists pietistic solutions that make no attempt to connect with experienced reality, but he also resists settling for a forced, and therefore temporary, relevance by simply pandering to current sensibilities around social justice, identity, power, and so on. The refusal to take those easy routes necessitates a longer and slightly more demanding treatment (though not as much as its length and headings suggest), but the rewards offered to patient readers are all the more delightful and important. The framework offered here will not only transform our ability to connect with and challenge prevailing secular mores, but it will also nourish us to the depths of our being as we appreciate the breadth, depth, and goodness of Christ's Lordship in all of life. This is truly the book I have long wanted to read, and I believe it deserves to become a standard text for all Christian leaders, teachers, evangelists, and any serious-minded believer who wishes to out-love and out-think secular culture.

—**Reverend Richard Cunningham**, director of
Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship

Christopher Watkin's *Biblical Critical Theory* is an effervescently brilliant book, that rare volume that excels both in biblical and cultural exegesis. I was consistently challenged by Watkin's arguments even—and especially—when I found myself disagreeing.

—**Bruce Riley Ashford**, senior fellow at the Kirby Laing Centre for
Public Theology, Cambridge, author of *The Doctrine of Creation*



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How the Bible's Unfolding Story Makes Sense
of Modern Life and Culture

**CHRISTOPHER
WATKIN**

 **ZONDERVAN
ACADEMIC**

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Biblical Critical Theory

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For Alison, sine qua non

Eternal Wisdom is tasted in everything tasteable. It is the delightfulness in everything delightful. It is the beauty in everything beautiful. It is the deliciousness in everything delicious.¹

Philosophy is inconceivable with religion, and inconceivable without religion. [. . .] we can no longer give ourselves the belief that former generations gave themselves. And yet we cannot believe the stories that we would like to tell ourselves.²

To the orthodox there must always be a case for revolution; for in the hearts of men God has been put under the feet of Satan. In the upper world hell once rebelled against heaven. But in this world heaven is rebelling against hell.³

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FOREWORD

Tim Keller

I'm delighted to pen a brief foreword to a book that I have been eagerly anticipating for years.

Like many others, I've read various forms of critical theory for decades. However, it is only in the last couple of years that the term (under the heading "Critical Race Theory") has burst into popular consciousness. What should Christians' attitude toward it be? On the one hand, many denounce it as evil and toxic and say it should be shunned like a virus. On the other hand, some say, "Let's learn from it but not swallow it whole." In this book, Chris Watkin "diagonalizes" these alternatives—taking an approach that does not ignore the concerns of either but that is more radical than both.

Critical theory aims to make visible the deep structures of a culture in order to expose and change them. Chris, as a scholar of modern European thought and languages, is thoroughly acquainted with the various forms of critical theory that have arisen over the past century. Most of them are based directly or indirectly on forms of Marxist analysis. Since the middle of the twentieth century and especially since the 1990s, a host of "high theories" in this tradition—literary theory, feminist theory, critical race theory, queer theory—have sought to unmask and undermine the oppressive structures of Western society.

But the term *critical theory* has an older and more basic meaning. It means to not just accept what a culture says about itself but also to see what is really going on beneath the surface. Every culture deploys multiple patterns—narratives, pictures and images, vocabulary—to create a "world" (or "worldview" or "social imaginary"). But the Bible has its own narratives, images, and patterns that enable us to analyze any culture at the deepest level and to both critique and appreciate it, while at the same time preventing us from being captured and co-opted by it.

A biblical critical theory, therefore, can and should be developed and used by Christians living and ministering anywhere in the world. It must first expose the main flaws in the dominant culture's narratives, showing how they fit neither human nature nor our most profound intuitions about life—let alone the culture's moral ideals and aspirations. (As Chris points out, this was the approach Augustine took in the incomparable *City of God*.) Then Christian theory must point to the beauty and truth of the gospel as the source of numerous fulfilling counternarratives.

The contention of this book in your hands is that there is a critical theory in the Bible itself. Chris Watkin travels through the Scripture from start to finish, giving us the outlines of a Christian social theory.

I'm especially pleased that Chris, while exhibiting an extraordinary breadth of learning and reading, wrote this book not only for an academic press or audience but also for educated laypersons and Christian leaders. Certainly I believe that academics, particularly Christian ones, have a responsibility to build on this and speak to peers in their own fields. However, I think preachers (especially younger ones in more secular and pluralistic environments) will be able to benefit enormously from this material. Because the book moves diachronically along the story line of the Bible, it is easy for preachers and teachers who are speaking on particular doctrines to find trenchant applications to social and cultural issues of our day.

I also believe that a lot of younger scholars and PhD students, those beginning their academic careers, will be able to find the kinds of seminal and riveting insights in this book that they could turn into many research programs.

One last thing to note. For the past several years I've called for a "Christian High Theory," and what Chris Watkin is working on in this book is exactly what I had in mind. He prefers to call it a "Biblical Critical Theory," and he convinces me to adopt his terminology. His reasons for it are good: (1) we should not build our critical theory just from theology in general but in direct contact with the Bible, and (2) our stance toward the culture must take into consideration every major "turn" in biblical redemptive history—not just focusing on one part, which many denominations and Christian traditions tend to do. To use the term *biblical* helps us keep this goal in mind.

My prayers are that this book will bear much intellectual and spiritual fruit in many lives over the decades ahead.

PREFACE

The Twenty-Year Itch

For all my adult life I have been searching for a book that marries two of my deepest passions: exploring the subtle richness of the Bible's storyline and making sense of how different people understand the world. After combing the bookshops and libraries of England for fifteen years in vain and finding nothing to scratch my peculiar itch, it began to dawn on me that I might have to write that book myself. The volume you are currently holding in your hands is my best attempt at authoring that book.

My search began back in 1998—though I did not yet know it—when I travelled down from Yorkshire as a fresh-faced undergraduate to study MML (modern and medieval languages, French and German) at Jesus College, Cambridge. What I found, both in the old books I was reading and the new friends I was making, were views of the world very different to my own. The MML course engulfed us in an invigorating and bracing avalanche of politics, philosophy, and literature, and in essay after essay I was challenged to make sense of how a parade of characters from the last seven hundred years of European history made sense of life: What drove the medieval knight to serve his lord with such blind faithfulness? Why was there so much delirious, drunken optimism at the beginning of the Enlightenment? Why did a certain type of boredom become fashionable in the nineteenth century? And why did some avant-garde writers welcome the First World War? Classicism, Marxism, Surrealism, psychoanalysis, modernism, existentialism, deconstruction—movement after movement blew swirling gusts of cultural theory across my desk, buffeting and stress testing my young Christian understanding of the world. I loved it! I felt like a calf being slowly fattened with a rich diet of half a millennium's worth of wisdom and

experience . . . ever aware that the day of slaughter loomed ominously on the horizon in the form of the end of year exams!

At the same time, another blizzard was also lashing me. Week after week my church was laying before us a feast of invigorating truths about the God of the Bible, helping us to shape a distinctive Christian attitude to life, the universe, and everything. I was constantly challenged by Christian women and men who thought deeply about the faith and about life. It was at church and among my Christian friends that I first discovered faith not as a set of ideas to believe but as a true story of the whole universe, a true tale of love, loss, promise, and costly rescue, in which we all play a role.

Caught in the crosswinds of these two gales, I started looking for a way to harness them together. The Bible surely had a contribution to make to the theoretical and societal questions that fascinated me in my university studies, but I was far from sure what that contribution should be. Thanks to the Aladdin's cave of the Christian Heritage library housed in a twelfth-century Round Church in the heart of Cambridge,¹ I began to assemble the first pieces of my jigsaw puzzle: Francis Schaeffer, Herman Dooyeweerd, Hans Rookmaaker. I was hooked.

The university also had its own suite of thinkers trying to bring theology into conversation with cultural concerns: Janet Margaret Soskice and Tim Jenkins alongside me at Jesus College and Sarah Coakley, whom I was later privileged to count as a colleague at Murray Edwards College. The internet—still quite a novelty in those late twentieth-century days!—yielded further exotic-sounding leads to pursue: Cornelius Van Til, John Milbank, Alvin Plantinga.

After a little reading I realized that what I was searching for was a Christian cultural theory. In my university studies I was becoming intimately acquainted with a wide array of cultural movements and social theorists: feminism, postcolonial theory, psychoanalysis; Marx, Foucault, Kristeva, Fanon. But the more I studied this broad range of theoreticians and theories, the more I saw that all these *isms* had certain important traits in common. They all began as something you looked *at*, reading and understanding (slowly, oh so slowly!) their main texts and theorists, but they gradually became something you looked *through* to bring the world into focus, to draw some aspects of the world into the foreground, and to leave others in the background or make them altogether unnoticed, like the doorknob you don't "see" until it comes off in your hands!² They each considered some attitudes and actions important, and others unimportant.

1. For more information about the library (now part of the Cambridge Christian Study Centre), see <http://www.christianstudycentre.org>.

2. The image comes from Esther Lightcap Meek, *Longing to Know: The Philosophy of Knowledge for Ordinary People* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2003), 92.

Some ideas or behaviors were praised, others condemned. In short, they each made certain things visible and certain things valuable. Like a pointillist painting composed of thousands of tiny dots that, seen from a distance, blend together to reveal a tree or a river, each movement and gesture in these theories congealed into a way of thinking and living that encompassed politics, art, relationships, society, and the whole of life.

But I was puzzled. Why wasn't the Bible among them? There was feminist social theory, subaltern social theory, and queer theory. Why not biblical social theory? The Bible certainly had the resources to elaborate such an approach, and I was increasingly convinced that it would have something fresh and surprising to contribute to many of the debates that were raging in the "theory" books I was reading in my courses. Indeed, as I increasingly found out over the years, great strides have been made, both historically and in our own day, towards elaborating just such a biblical "theory." Among all these commendable attempts, I have found none so brilliant nor so elegantly crafted as Augustine's magisterial *City of God*.

I remember where I was when I first read *The City of God*: enjoying a family holiday in a marvelously unrenovated house in the Yorkshire seaside town of Bridlington. The house was filled with a delicious silver and leather smell, with original 1930s light switches, polyester bedsheets, a radio as big as an oak coffin, and a postwar decor that lent the place an almost magical air. Perhaps the feeling of being somewhere old but still lived-in helped me to appreciate how Augustine's *City of God* has stood the test of time and still speaks so powerfully in our own day.

Half of my excitement arose, if I am to be honest about it, from the sheer fact that I was reading Augustine at all. I readily confess that many of the references and names went straight over my head, but running right through this long book with its litany of characters was an unmistakable, glittering, compelling architecture. What so beguiled me—and beguiles me still—in *The City of God* is the coherence between the precise dissection of Roman culture in books I to X and the grand sweep from Genesis to Revelation in books XI to XXII.

The first part, in which Augustine weighs Roman culture on the scales and finds it wanting, is accomplished with an effortless efficiency. Like an expert judoka, Augustine makes Hellenic culture fall under the weight of its own contradictions and absurdities. It is clear that he has a respect for Rome. He knows its culture from the inside: its writers, its poets, its orators, and its deities. He knows why it sparkles, why it causes pride to swell in those who love it.³

3. David Koyzis makes a similar point in relation to political ideologies on *Political Visions and Illusions: A Survey and Christian Critique* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2019), 188.

He can be brutal and even sarcastic about the Roman gods, but never flippant or careless. He had, after all, taught rhetoric in Carthage and Rome. He commends Cicero as “a man most skilled in the art of governing a commonwealth,”⁴ “a most distinguished orator,”⁵ and “a distinguished man and by way of being a philosopher,”⁶ and he acknowledges the virtues of Rome where he finds them. When he critiques Roman culture—as indeed he most certainly does, mercilessly, precisely, with satire and hilarity—it is Rome’s internal contradictions and non sequiturs that he parades: one porter is sufficient to guard a door, but apparently it requires three gods, one for the door, one for the hinge, and one for the threshold; the gods who were supposed to protect Rome themselves needed protection by the temple guards when Rome was sacked; if the time of birth determines one’s destiny, why do some identical twins have such contrasting fates?

In the second part, the north African bishop launches into a journey that takes his reader from the fall of the angels and the creation of the world, weaving its way through the biblical storyline twist by twist, past the kings and prophets, the cross, resurrection, and ascension, until it explodes in the rapture of the new heavens and new earth. There is something breathtaking, something intoxicatingly vertiginous, about this all-encompassing sweep from creation to new creation, like suddenly realizing that the cities and towns where we have made all our fondest memories over the years are part of the same glorious kingdom. The connections between the parts are surprising and illuminating, adding a compound richness to the whole. Perhaps it is the literature student in me, but I find that each moment in the Bible’s plotline gains immeasurably from being set in its narrative context. We like being taken through a story from beginning to end, don’t we? Who, after all, just watches *The Empire Strikes Back* without caring what came before or after, or who is content to read just one act of a Shakespearean tragedy?

As I came across more books on the Bible and culture, I found many insights, some of which I have included in this volume, but never again did I feel swept off my feet as I did in that first heady encounter with *The City of God*. In the present volume I have attempted to take the biblical-theological structure that I find so compelling in Augustine and use it as a way to frame some contributions to a biblical social theory for today. As I have written this book, time and again

4. Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans* 3.30, ed. R. W. Dyson, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 139.

5. Augustine, *The City of God* 14.8, 595.

6. Augustine, *The City of God* 2.27, 90.

this structure has itself enhanced what I have intended to say and revealed to me new connections between ideas. My hope and prayer is that the reflections in these pages can challenge and encourage others who, like I did, feel caught in the crosswinds of Bible and culture. And perhaps, for just a few, it may turn out to be the book you have long wanted to read.

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Writing a book is always a journey, and this journey in particular has been one of those wonderful school coach trips: communal, cheerful, and a little bit crazy.

It all began sometime in 2014, when an old uni friend and then UCCF worker Charlie Butler encouraged me to write on Derrida from a Christian perspective. His gentle email ended up lighting a blue touchpaper, and I am very grateful for the prompt. Charlie and Graham Shearer offered early Barnabas-like backing for this project, soon to be joined by Dan Strange, who has read my work, listened patiently to my arguments, and interacted generously with me over a number of years.

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and teachers over the years, including Murray Campbell, Richard Coekin, Steve Midgley, Carrie Sandom, and Simon Scott. They may perhaps detect their fingerprints in these pages.

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Writing a book in COVID lockdown has not always been a pleasant experience. It has required much patience and sacrifice on the part of my wife, Alison, and our children, Benjamin and Emma. As well as providing some lovely illustrations for the present volume, Benji and Emm are a God-given antidote to my highfalutin theological claptrap and certified expert posers of annoyingly direct questions. In addition to being my delight and my rock, Alison is, bar none, the most careful and astute reader of my work I know, sowing much-needed seeds of encouragement and spotting problems that had completely passed me by. I aspire to be half the encourager of her work that she is of mine.

I have been a Christian since 1993. I was called before the creation of the world. I was crucified with Christ. My sins are forgiven. I have the privilege of knowing the One in whom all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden. I will spend eternity enjoying him. There are some realities in the overwhelming face of which an acknowledgment does not even begin to feel adequate.

INTRODUCTION

*How can we be the question that God puts to the world?*¹

So what? One of the banes of my life as an academic is writing grant proposals. These colossal documents are drafted with the alchemically complex aim of convincing a funding body—commonly a government or private endowment—to finance your research into some laudable area of human inquiry.

I now cringe as I remember some of my early responses to feedback on my applications. At the end of a paragraph in which—to my mind at least—I had painted a vivid and utterly compelling picture of why my research project on this or that obscure French thinker would break new ground, I would receive the irritating comment “so what?” or “why is this important?” These comments would always make me angry. “Philistines! What do you mean by ‘so what?’ It’s discovering new knowledge; isn’t that enough?”

As a mounting pile of rejections eloquently testified, it most certainly was not enough. It became painfully clear to me that there was little value in being the first to discover what person x thought about subject y , or as one wizened colleague once quipped to me, “we don’t need another book on Molière’s underpants.” Funding bodies want to know what difference the new knowledge makes, what it changes, what consequences it has for how we live our lives and engage with each other and the world.

For better or worse, this painful experience has drilled into me the habit of asking, “so what?” I think my students must be sick of me writing it on their essays. As I have discovered, it is also a very useful question to ask of

1. Jacques Ellul, *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man*, ed. and trans. Geoffrey W. Bromley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 142.

2 • Biblical Critical Theory

the doctrines of the Christian faith, and one that, perhaps, we don't pursue quite as often or with quite the rigor we might. Let's take one example. We are taught what the final judgment is. We may well be taught how to explain it to others with some rather quaint analogies and illustrations, and perhaps we are taught how to defend and justify it. But we are less frequently—at least in my experience—taught what difference it makes to politics, to the sciences, to the arts, or to the possibility of knowledge about anything at all. We are taught the “what?” and the “why?” but not so much the “so what?” The same goes for the “so what?” of sin, judgment, promise, covenant, law, prophecy, exile, incarnation, the cross, resurrection, ascension, the last days, and the final things. *So what* for human beings? *So what* for society, for our hopes, fears, and deepest values? *So what* for art, for justice, for history, for the environment? These biblical truths, and many more besides, have far-reaching consequences in all these areas. And what is more, these consequences often bring a fresh and constructive perspective to bear on the abiding social and cultural questions of our day.

When I was a young Christian, two popular books were called *Know What You Believe* and *Know Why You Believe*. They represent well the two main emphases of the Christian culture around me at the time: understand what the Bible teaches, and make sure you can defend those teachings against attack. Or in two words: doctrine and apologetics. What was not adequately emphasized, however, were the implications of these teachings for the rest of life. As a consequence, we were strong on knowing what a doctrine is and why it is well grounded, but less strong on knowing where it takes us.

If it didn't sound quite so clumsy, the current book could be called *Know What Follows from What You Believe*, or perhaps *The Bible: So What?* There are shelves of excellent books summarizing what Christians believe and why they have warrant to believe it, and there are wonderful books on specific consequences of the Bible's teaching for, say, human rights or the scientific enterprise. But relatively few volumes give “so what?” the attention lavished on “what?” and “why?”

This, then, is a book about the “so what?” of Christian belief. My aim in these pages is to paint a picture of humanity and of our world through the lens of the Bible and to compare aspects of this image to alternative visions. It is a book about how the whole Bible sheds light on the whole of life, how we can read and understand our society, our culture, and ourselves through the lens of the Bible's storyline. It does not try to explain and defend the Bible to the culture; it seeks to analyze and critique the culture through the Bible.

This is not a book of apologetics, but it does have an important role to play in the broader apologetic enterprise. In one of his *pensées*, Blaise Pascal writes:

Men despise religion, they hate it and are afraid it might be true. To cure that we have to begin by showing that religion is not contrary to reason. That it is worthy of veneration and should be given respect. Next it should be made loveable, should make the good wish it were true, then show that it is indeed true.²

In a 2020 interview, Timothy Keller references this *pensée* and adds:

So there's really no reason for me to get out the guns on the evidence for the resurrection, which is trying to show that Christianity is true, if they don't want it to be true. But if I get them to want it, if they get to the place of saying, "Gee, wouldn't it be great if that was true, but is it?" then I can do my apologetics.³

The current book contributes to painting a picture of Christianity that may nudge some skeptical readers towards thinking it would be great if Christianity were true and may counterpoint their breezy "whatever!" with a quietly insistent "what if—?"⁴

Part of this task is presenting Christianity so that people can see it with new eyes, for "things that may well be familiar so long as familiarity breeds affection had much better become unfamiliar when familiarity breeds contempt."⁵ G. K. Chesterton muses that most people in the West are so inoculated against what they think Christianity is that we would do well to retell the whole gospel in a Far Eastern setting in order for it to be "admired as a heathen story, in the very quarters where it is condemned as a Christian story."⁶ Insofar as this is a book of apologetics, its aim is not to show that Christianity is true—though I am convinced it is—but to help bring some to the point where they want it to be true, and to present it with a disconcerting unfamiliarity to those for whom it has become a familiar object of wearying contempt.

2. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writings*, trans. Honor Levi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 12; *pensée* 46.

3. See "Tim Keller on How to Bring the Gospel to Post-Christian America," Carey Nieuwhof interview with Tim Keller, May 12, 2020, YouTube video, <https://youtu.be/zNve3Hexh28>.

4. See Esther Lightcap Meek, *Longing to Know: The Philosophy of Knowledge for Ordinary People* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2003), 16.

5. G. K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, in *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton*, vol. 2, *St. Francis of Assisi, The Everlasting Man, St. Thomas Aquinas* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986), 148.

6. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, 51.

A FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING CULTURE

Before I can launch into such a tantalizing task, however, I am afraid I need to deal first with a rather unpleasant matter. I have used the dirty word *culture*, and I must pray your indulgence while I explain myself. Like *democracy*, *culture* is one of those slippery terms that has as many definitions as there are people queuing up to define it. Back in 1948, T. S. Eliot lamented that it is a term often used but rarely defined.⁷ Oh, happy, innocent times! How the pendulum has swung! It seems impossible to advance ten pages into a book on Christian worldview these days without being assailed by a lengthy definition of *culture* (and hot on its heels a lengthy definition of *worldview*!). It has become something of a rite of passage. The book you are reading is no exception, so let us roll up our sleeves and get down and dirty to understand this most elusive of terms.

As Timothy Keller helpfully points out, *culture* has a narrow sense—music, art, literature, theater—and a broad sense that “touches every aspect of how we live in the world.”⁸ The second, broader sense in fact contains the narrower sense within it, and it is this broader sense with which I am primarily interested in this volume.

Some approaches to culture stress its cognitive aspect: ideas, concepts, and worldviews. Others focus on narratives and symbols. Still others stress its behavioral, bodily, habitual dimension or foreground a culture’s objects and artefacts. Each emphasis has merit, and it is sad and unnecessary when they are pitted against each other. The question is not “Which one is best?” but “How do these different facets of culture relate to each other?” If we are to take account of all of them, we must find a way of understanding them together. With this end in view I propose to call these different elements of culture “figures.”

Figures

I am using the term *figures* in two related and complementary senses. The first has to do with figures of speech. We are all familiar with figures of speech: metaphor (“All the world’s a stage”), alliteration (“day doth daily draw my sorrows longer”), simile (“Thy soul was like a Star, and dwelt apart”), and so on. Each figure is a repeatable structure or pattern of language that can be filled with almost any content whatsoever. Thy soul can be like a star, a stone, a sapling, or a salamander. Each figure therefore allows for an almost infinite

7. See T. S. Eliot, “Notes towards the Definition of Culture,” in *Christianity and Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1976), 79–186.

8. Timothy J. Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 90.

variation, while remaining distinguishable from other figures of speech. It is this feature of repeatable patterns (in space) or rhythms (in time) that I propose to expand into an understanding of what we commonly call “culture.”

If figures of speech are patterns and rhythms of language, then figures in the broader sense are patterns and rhythms in creation, whether of matter, language, ideas, systems, or behavior.⁹ This focus on patterns and rhythms echoes God’s work of creation in Genesis 1 and 2. God takes a “formless and empty” reality and creates spatial distinctions (land and sea; and “every kind” of bird, fish, and animal) and temporal rhythms (day and night, evening and morning) to make that formless emptiness into a world. That is what culture does: it creates recognizable and repeatable patterns and rhythms of behavior, of thought, of language, of agriculture, of architecture, of cuisine, of work, and of rest.

The second sense of *figure* comes from the distinction between *figure* and *ground* originally developed in Gestalt psychology. Whenever we look at something (the figure), what we see is surrounded by lots of other things to which we are not paying attention (the ground or background). The same goes for the other senses. There are often more sounds around us than those of which we are aware, but we choose to focus on our friend talking or the birds singing, while the drone of the cars in the background or the dripping tap in the kitchen slips from our consciousness and becomes part of the background. Our perception is always divided into figure and ground; we never pay attention equally to everything that we can see, a point made clear in optical illusions like the image below. (Is it a white vase on a black background or two black faces looking at each other on a white background?)

In the same way that I am enlarging the idea of *figures of speech* to embrace all the patterns and rhythms that shape our lives, I also propose to broaden the figure-ground distinction from a way to describe perception into a theory of knowledge and ethics and a way of understanding how we live in the world.¹⁰

Figures help us get a handle on two further crucial ideas for cultural analysis. The first is what is called the “as-structure” of experience,

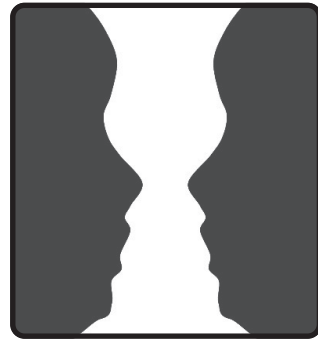


Figure 1: Optical Illusion

9. Figures of speech can also be indicative of certain ways of inhabiting the world. See, for instance, Catherine Pickstock’s discussion of asyndeton on *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 95–98.

10. This project has precedent in Michael Polanyi’s theory of tacit knowledge, expertly developed by Esther Meek in *Loving to Know*.

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or the meaning we give to objects and events that makes us experience them in particular ways. For example, I experience the porcelain object on the desk in front of me *as* something into which I can pour hot, drinkable liquid (jasmine tea, as it happens), and I cannot now experience it without that meaning haunting my understanding of what it is for: my sense that the mug is to be drunk out of is inseparable from my experience of it. I experience a chair *as* something that can be sat upon, and try as I might, I cannot experience it just as a bizarre object with four legs and a platform. But the *as*-structure of experience is not just about mugs and chairs. It is about everything, and without it we would not experience anything at all.¹¹ I may experience the leper on the roadside in India as someone paying the price for her past sins or as someone who has happened upon misfortune and requires my help.¹² Or consider the example a group of people marching down the street holding banners and chanting. Some of us will experience that event as a powerful expression of public democracy, others as a threat to public order, and still others as the promising beginnings of a larger uprising. What we are presented with is exactly the same; what we experience it *as* is radically different. A great deal is at stake in the differences between these experiences, and so the terrain of competing theories today—or what is sometimes called the *culture wars*, a term that is itself a prime example of seeing-*as*—is in large part “the struggle of antagonistic social interests at the level of the sign,” at the level of the meaning we attach to things.¹³ All our experiences follow the *as*-structure, and different figures predispose us to favor some experiences-*as* over others.

Second, figures help us get a handle on the fact that each cultural moment has certain broad commitments and assumptions that shape what people can meaningfully think, say, and do. In his early “archaeological” works, Michel Foucault demonstrates how every major historical period (he calls them “epistemes”) has characteristic patterns and rhythms that dictate what counts as truth or as sensible discourse. For example, I am unlikely to wow a scientific gathering today if I begin to speak of “the mad” or “the deranged,” not to mention the “holy fool.” Our age traffics in the language of “mental illness” and “alternative rationalities,” and the patterns and rhythms of a previous age are simply not taken as truthful or meaningful anymore, as no doubt many of our own treasured ideas will be pooh-poohed in a hundred years. Following in Foucault’s wake, though with a very different set of analytical tools, philosopher Bruno

11. See Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (New York: Verso, 1991), 194.

12. The example is taken from Andrew Davison, “Christian Reason and Christian Community,” in *Imaginative Apologetics: Theology, Philosophy and the Catholic Tradition*, ed. Andrew Davison (London: SCM, 2011), 15.

13. Eagleton, *Ideology*, 195.

Latour has shown us how different institutions in society produce different sorts of truth: courts produce legal truth, laboratories and the peer review process produce scientific truth, and so on.¹⁴ Figures describe the sorts of truth that can be produced in a given culture, the shapes and rhythms that must be followed if an idea is to be counted as truth.

There are six broad categories of figures:

- **Language, ideas, and stories:** The words, concepts, symbols, and narratives we use to make sense of our experience and to create patterns in our lives and thoughts. These are the “metaphors we live by”¹⁵ and the “myths we live by.”¹⁶ They include the cultural baggage packed into words like *success* or *beauty*, into phrases like *boys will be boys* and *no pain, no gain*, or in society’s one remaining myth of heroism: the individual asserting her unique and authentic identity in the face of those who would seek to oppress it.¹⁷ These concepts and stories embody and spread the ethical values of a culture.
- **Time and space:** The way we rhythm time is a series of figures, from the 24-7 society to the modern ideology of historical progress. Not for nothing does N. T. Wright insist on the worldview question “What time is it?”¹⁸ The way we divide and pattern space is a similarly important aspect of culture; examples include the modern Western ideas of personal, private, and public space and the way we think of wilderness spaces: Are they to be colonized and made productive or to be conserved?
- **The structure of reality:** Whether we think, along with Western modernity, that we live in a flat “immanent frame” in which there is nothing beyond the world we see and touch,¹⁹ or whether we think there is an afterlife or reincarnation. What is ultimate reality, and how does it relate to the world of our experience? In a more technical register, this could be called “metaphysics.”

14. See, e.g., Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 58.

15. See the classic by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

16. Mary Midgley, *The Myths We Live By* (London: Routledge, 2011).

17. Throughout the current volume I have sought to vary the gender pronouns in my own prose, leading to what (though I have not counted) I assume to be a roughly even spread of *bes* and *sbes*. Where I quote a writer whose use of gender pronouns may grate on contemporary ears, I have preserved the original language.

18. See N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (London: SPCK, 1996), 467.

19. The *immanent frame* is a term introduced by Charles Taylor to describe an experience of the world without transcendence, with no opening onto anything beyond the natural world. See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007).

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- **Behavior:** Culture is expressed in and shaped by bodily habits or “liturgies,” like going to the shopping mall, checking your phone when you have a spare moment, or sitting down (rather than standing or reclining) to eat.²⁰ Some behavioral figures are individual; some are shared.
- **Relationships:** We pattern and rhythm our lives and our world through relationships among family and friends and through relations on social media with their own codes and norms. On a larger scale, institutions like sports clubs, schools, and companies create and sustain patterns of relationships. Our relationship to authority and the state is shaped and rhythmized by norms and laws, by who makes them (e.g., a monarch, an assembly, or a premier in a state of emergency), how they are enforced, and how they can be changed.
- **Objects:** Last but by a country mile not least, our world is figured by the artifacts and objects that surround us.²¹ Objects are receptacles, generators, and amplifiers of meaning²² that rhythm our lives just as much as any of the other categories of figures and often operate in a dialectical relationship with them. These objects can be small (smartphones, chairs), medium sized (cars, houses) or large (cities, the power grid), but they each nudge us towards a particular way of engaging with the world and understanding our place in it. Patterns and rhythms can be expressed and explored just as much in concrete as in concepts.

Figures in each category shape our sense of ourselves and the world around us, express that sense, and transform over time as societies change. Together they form what we might call the *figuration totale* of a particular cultural moment.²³

But what is our relationship to these cultural figures? Perhaps we think of them as a coat we can put on or take off, something outside us that we choose to adopt or resist. But their reality is much closer to home than that. These figures are more like our food, which we take inside ourselves and out of which

20. John Cottingham has an extended discussion of the importance of habit for belief in *How to Believe* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 58–66. The mall example can be found in James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 23–5.

21. Among Christians, this approach has been spearheaded by Andy Crouch, for whom “culture is the accumulation of very tangible things—the stuff people make of the world.” See Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Rediscovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 25.

22. I am grateful to Mikey Lynch for this elegant turn of phrase.

23. The term is adapted from Sarah Coakley’s idea of a “théologie totale” that, among other things, incorporates behavioral norms, contemplation, and artistic expressions alongside theological formulations. See Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay “On the Trinity”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

our body is made. We do not have the luxury of resisting these cultural figures from the outside; they are always already part of us on the inside. They are us. Take away all food, and we have no body left. Take away all culture, and we have no person left. To deny this is to close our eyes to the powerful ways in which culture shapes us and to make ourselves ignorant and naïve about the ways it is forming us.

A perennial temptation is to take one category of figures and make it control all the others. Some commentators will try to make out that we are storytelling animals first and foremost, and everything is most fundamentally a narrative. Others think that concepts are the most basic figures, and everything is at bottom a discrete rational idea. Still others will say that behaviors or habits are upstream of everything else. Certainly, we are not brains on sticks, but neither are we brainless. No single category of figures controls all the others. To assume that it does, as we shall see later, is a particularly modern pathology. Each category of figures can say something about everything, but none of them can say everything about anything. As I have written elsewhere, each of them is “extensive,” but none of them is “exhaustive.”²⁴

The Bible, too, has distinctive figures, many of which we will meet in the following chapters. In the same way that, if we know an author well, we can read a page and say, “That’s so Ernest Hemingway!” or in the same way that we can see a pant suit in a shop window across the street and know immediately that it is a Chanel, the Bible has signature patterns and rhythms that repeat throughout its pages in what John Frame calls the canon’s “glorious redundancy.”²⁵ As a flavor of what I mean, here are some examples:

Language, ideas, and stories: the biblical concept of covenant, or repeated narratives embodying the “first shall be last” motif

Time: the rhythm of promise and fulfilment

Space: the biblical idea of God as the ruler over all space, not like one of the localized gods of the ancient world

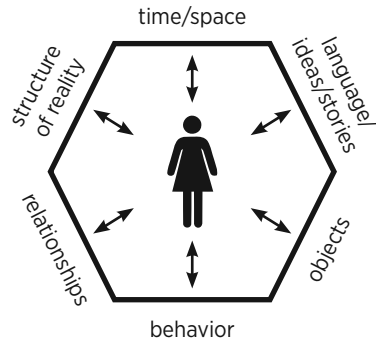


Figure 2: Figuration Totale

24. See Christopher Watkin, *Michel Serres: Figures of Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 119–21.

25. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 10.

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Structure of reality: the biblical distinction between the kingdom of this world and the kingdom of God

Behavior: the first Christians meeting together on the Lord's day to sing, break bread, pray, and hear teaching

Relationships: the unity of all believers in Christ, and God as the lawgiver

Objects: the location and architecture of the tabernacle, or available modes of transport for Paul's missionary journeys²⁶

It is these biblical figures, these patterns and rhythms of experience and reality, that I propose to bring into conversation with some of the major figures of late modern culture and society.

Worlds

The language of *figures* allows us to move between ideas, stories, behaviors, institutions, time, and space. But what should we call the cluster of figures that characterize a particular cultural moment and milieu? A worldview? Perhaps, though it does suggest, as Martin Heidegger and others have pointed out, a particularly modern understanding in which the detached individual looks out on reality laid out in front of her.²⁷ Many Christian thinkers, a little uncomfortable with worldview language, have suggested a suite of alternatives, each with a particular emphasis. The Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck talks about a "world-and-life view,"²⁸ Francis Schaeffer evokes a "total view,"²⁹ Cornelius Van Til "totality picture,"³⁰ Abraham Kuyper "life system,"³¹ Al Wolters "life perspective" or "confessional vision,"³² and Herman Dooyeweerd "ground motive."³³

Perhaps richest of all these alternatives to worldview is Charles Taylor's notion of a "social imaginary." According to Taylor, a social imaginary is "something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may

26. These categories are not mutually exclusive. For example, covenant has implications for time, the structure of reality, relationships, and language.

27. See Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture," in *The Question Concerning Technology: And Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Garland, 1977), 115–54.

28. Herman Bavinck, *Christian Worldview*, trans. Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, James Eglinton, and Cory C. Brock (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019), 11–13.

29. Francis A. Schaeffer, *A Christian Manifesto* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005), 61–2.

30. Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 4th ed., ed. K. Scott Oliphint (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 47.

31. Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 11, 20–26.

32. Al Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 2.

33. Herman Dooyeweerd, *The Roots of Western Culture: Pagan, Secular and Christian Options*, ed. Mark Vander Vennen and Bernard Zylstra, trans. John Kraay (Toronto: Wedge, 1979), 9–11.

entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode.”³⁴ It is not a catalogue of thoughts people have about the world, but “the ways in which they imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations which are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images which underlie these expectations.”³⁵ A social imaginary is a cluster of “images, stories, legends, etc.” that legitimate common practices. It is not a map of a place, but an implicit grasp that allows me to get around a place in the same way that I can find my way around my house I know well even in the pitch dark.³⁶ Finally, a social imaginary is not opposed to theory. Sometimes it is shaped by theories even as it transforms them (Taylor mentions the theories of Locke and Grotius as shapers of the social imaginary), and in its turn it informs the construction of theories,³⁷ though no explicit doctrines can ever quite capture its complexity.

Each alternative to worldview has strengths, and like an assortment of tools in a toolbox, each comes into its own to accomplish certain tasks. Nevertheless, I want to propose something a little simpler and, I hope, a little more flexible than *social imaginary*: the best way to describe an ensemble of figures is as a *world*. The term has an intuitive, everyday sense—and it’s always nice to use an everyday word to describe an everyday thing. We speak, for example, of “the Victorian world,” “my world,” “the world of model car making,” and “the world of the New Testament.” Furthermore, the language of worlds bridges texts, films, and visual art on the one hand and experience, behavior, and life on the other. We speak of “Shakespeare’s world” or “the world of *Star Wars*” but also “the world of work” and “the world of stamp collecting.” In each case we have something similar in mind: a set of particular figures that give a rhythm to the space, time, ideas, reality, behavior, and relationships in a particular sphere of life, among a particular community, or in a particular artist’s work, giving them a distinctive style. This idea of style, or of the world appearing in a particular way, is also present in the sense of the New Testament Greek term for world, *kosmos*, a term that Oliver O’Donovan reminds us “points not simply to everything there is, but quite specifically to its manner of appearing to us” in the sense we mean when we say “my world” or “our world.”³⁸

34. Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 23–4.

35. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 171–2.

36. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 173. In this it has significant affinities with Ludwig Wittgenstein’s notion of a “form of life,” central to which is the principle that “words have meaning only in the stream of life” (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology*, volume 1, ed. G. H. von Wright and Heikki Nyman, trans. C. G. Luckhardt and Maximilian A. E. Aue [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996], 913).

37. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 176.

38. Oliver O’Donovan, *Finding and Seeking*, *Ethics as Theology* 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 73.

The language of worlds, then, helps us to move between texts, behavior, ideas, metaphysics, objects, and institutions without any of these exerting a controlling influence over all the others. A world is composed of many different types of figures and is reducible to none. It is a mix of artifacts, ideas, styles, institutions, and attitudes; it bridges narratives, behaviors, laws, and relationships. Worlds are in part a function of our biology: my world is shaped by the fact that I can see certain wavelengths of light and not others, hear certain pitches of sound and not others, have a relatively poor sense of smell compared to other animals, two arms and two legs, and hands with opposable thumbs, am diurnal, and have the most developed brain of any species on earth.

The phenomenologist Edmund Husserl put forward the notion of a life-world (*Lebenswelt*),³⁹ but this concept is always anchored in the individual consciousness and its perception in a way that the notion of *world* need not be. Our world does not simply revolve around human beings, as recent social theory has been at pains to point out.⁴⁰ A world is not only what is perceived by a human consciousness; it can include networks of machines or ecosystems that rhythm and pattern reality just as effectively or extensively as any human actor.

The philosopher Paul Ricœur writes helpfully about the relationship between what he calls “the world of the text” and “the world of the reader.”⁴¹ A text, for Ricœur, does not so much have a meaning behind it as a world in front of it. In what he calls “the kingdom of the *as if*,”⁴² the text proposes an imaginary world for us to inhabit.⁴³ Because this world is not quite the same as the one in which we go about our day-to-day lives, it requires of the reader a new “mode of being,” a new “way of inhabiting in the world”⁴⁴ with particular attitudes, assumptions, expectations, hopes, and fears, just as if we were travelling to a country with a culture very different from our own.

Now the reader herself, of course, also comes to the text with her own world: her sense of how things work, how life is patterned and rhythmized. Ricœur calls this the “world of the reader.” What happens when the world of the text and the

39. Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 138–40.

40. See, e.g., Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

41. The terms are discussed in three of Ricœur’s works: *Time and Narrative*, vol. 2, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 5–6, 99; *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 157–79; *Cinq études herméneutiques* (Genève: Labor et fides, 2013), 68–74, 104–6.

42. Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 64. Emphasis original.

43. Ricœur, *Cinq études herméneutiques*, 69.

44. Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, 2:5.

world of the reader meet is a three-fold process of prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration.

- **Prefiguration** is the world that I, as a reader, bring to the text: my sense of how the world is, how people are, and how things usually play out.
- **Configuration** is the way in which the text, with its own figures, tinkers with my prefigured expectations and assumptions, brushing up against, challenging, or reinforcing them.
- **Refiguration** is then the integration of the textual world into the reader's world, what Hans-Georg Gadamer would call a "fusion of horizons"⁴⁵ and for Ricœur is a "fusion but not confusion,"⁴⁶ in which my sense of the world is nudged by the world I have encountered in the text, perhaps strengthened or perhaps shaken. When I leave my encounter with the text, I am living in a different world to the one I inhabited before I engaged with it, sometimes only slightly different but on occasion radically transformed.

This "threefold mimesis," as Ricœur calls it, is not a one-off process but an ongoing dialectic,⁴⁷ or a dialogue⁴⁸ between reader and text. But what Ricœur claims for texts is also true of life in general. The refiguring of our world occurs in each category of the figures listed above. Every figuring of reality that I encounter (the layout of a lecture room, the operating system of my phone, the governmental structure of the country in which I live, the slang I use with my closest friends, the Bible passages on which I meditate) is a configuration that refigures me—we might say, shapes me—in some way.

Threefold mimesis is also a helpful idea because it stresses that figures are not static: we are always being refigured, to some extent, by the language, ideas, stories, behaviors, objects, and relationships in our world and also by the rhythms of time, patterns of space, and structures of reality that fill our lives and our culture. Who doesn't have a memory of a house they visited or a person they met that opened for them—just by the way the house was furnished or the way the person held themselves—a whole different way of being in the world? And we, also, are constantly refiguring those with whom we come into contact.

Encountering another world (in a novel, film, institution, or the Bible) is far from mere entertainment or a way to pass the time. Encountering another world

45. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 305, 337.

46. Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, 3:179.

47. Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, 3:177.

48. Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, 3:171.

can be a disruptive, subversive experience, and this is the mode in which I want to engage the Scriptures in these pages. I want to explore how the world of the Bible refigures our contemporary world with all its priorities, values, assumptions, and desires.⁴⁹

Finally, I am most emphatically not seeking to argue that Christians always (or even mostly) think and behave according to the biblical figures I will discuss. No student of church history needs persuading of the stubbornness, selfishness, and downright sinfulness of Christians. What I am presenting in this book is Christianity at its best, the Christianity of Christ, which is all too often not the Christianity of Christians.⁵⁰ Though I do not engage the church's failings, I by no means want to sweep them under the carpet; it is simply that this is a book about biblical figures, not primarily about flawed and sinful people.

ENGAGEMENT AND DIAGONALIZATION

When we talk about Christianity and culture in the same breath, it is customary to use the term *engagement* to describe their relationship. I want to avoid the basic error of letting this metaphor of engagement take on a life of its own, conveying the idea that Christianity and contemporary culture comprise two completely distinct sets of figures, like oil and water separated in a bottle, and that we can make them engage with each other by shaking the bottle a little. The relationship between them is, as we shall see time and again in the following chapters, much more complex and much more interesting than that, not least because biblical figures have spilled beyond the Bible's covers to deeply influence our own society, habits, and values. T. S. Eliot sums it up perfectly with the quip that "bishops are a part of English culture, and horses and dogs are a part of English religion."⁵¹ Culture and religion are entangled, to the point where we find it hard to work out which idea or behavior belongs to which.

Biblical figures can syncopate or harmonize with cultural figures, can clash with them, and on occasion can transform them and take them over, but the one thing they cannot do is become completely distinct from them. Besides, so many of the figures of our own culture are so thoroughly derived from biblical patterns and rhythms, and the figures of the Bible are so clothed in their cultural contexts, that seeking to divide them would dismember the culture and

49. I know that the idea of a single "world of the Bible" is problematic. I explore the complexities of the Bible's plural perspectives in the chapters on wisdom literature below.

50. For a detailed and often painful elaboration on this crucial point, see John Dickson, *Bullies and Saints: An Honest Look at the Good and Evil of Christian History* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021).

51. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture*, 105.

sell short the Bible.⁵² As Tom Holland has so eloquently demonstrated, even our culture's antipathy to Christianity is so thoroughly . . . well, Christian.⁵³ Trying to separate Christianity from culture is like trying to extract the flour from a baked cake: it is a fool's errand that destroys what it examines and only creates a useless mess.

So how are we to explore the complex relationships between the figures of our culture and the figures of the Bible? We live at a peculiar moment in history when our culture's assumptions and values retain a deeply Christian imprint but when the teachings of the Bible are largely unknown, misunderstood, or condemned. This makes for a strange and at times amusing situation in which society increasingly sets itself against Christianity but does so by using distinctively Christian arguments and assumptions. Yet the Christianity that our culture retains is a poor photocopy of the real thing: streaky, partial, and distorted. Often, principles that harmonize beautifully in the Bible are wrenched apart and set up as absolutes on opposite sides of a debate by the "divorce artists" of contemporary politics and cultural theory,⁵⁴ with the result that opposing sides in the debate both contain fragments of the biblical truth but fail to grasp the whole. As G. K. Chesterton wryly notes: "The modern world is full of the old Christian virtues gone mad. . . . The virtues have gone mad because they have been isolated from each other and are wandering alone. Thus some scientists care for truth; and their truth is pitiless. Thus some humanitarians only care for pity; and their pity (I am sorry to say) is often untruthful."⁵⁵

Given a choice between two camps or positions in our culture, the Bible frequently settles for neither and presents us with something richer than both, a subtler solution that neither position has the resources to imagine. Time and again we see that the Bible's figures cut across the range of options presented to us, only to find on further inspection that those options were themselves distorted and dismembered versions of biblical ideas.

This move of cutting across and rearranging false cultural dichotomies will return throughout these chapters, and I will call it *diagonalization*. It can vary from case to case, but it usually comprises four elements:

52. This does not mean that the Bible's teaching is "merely" cultural or that biblical figures are only valid for the culture in which they arose. See the discussion of the "transcultural" in chapter 28.

53. See Tom Holland, *Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2019).

54. The term *divorce artists* (*Scheidekünstler*) is used by Georg Hamann to describe the Enlightenment thinkers who divided thought from feeling, reason from revelation, and philosophy from life. See John Betz, "A Radically Orthodox Reformer: J. G. Hamann as a Metacritic of Enlightenment and Secularization," *Modern Theology* 33, no. 4 (2017): 647. Jacques Ellul develops a similar argument in relation to the thought of Edgar Morin in *The Technological Bluff* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 221.

55. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 233.

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1. It begins with a complex of interrelated biblical truths. For example, that God is both just and loving, both merciful and truthful.

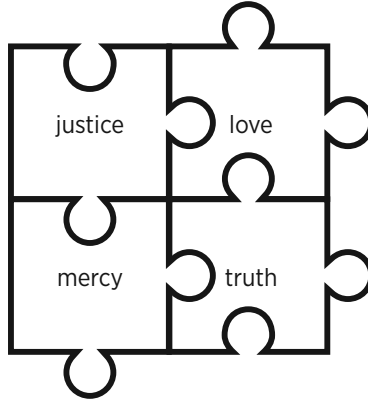


Figure 3: Complex Biblical Reality

- 2a. It then shows how a cultural dichotomy splinters this rich biblical reality and offers it in fragmented form as a series of mutually exclusive choices . . .



Figure 4: False Cultural Dichotomy

- 2b. . . or as an unsatisfying compromise

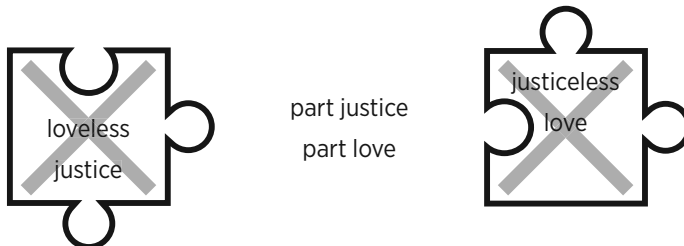


Figure 5: Unsatisfying Cultural Compromise

3. Drawing on the complex truth of (1), diagonalization presents a biblical picture in which the best aspirations of both options are fulfilled, but not in a way that the proponents of those options would see coming.

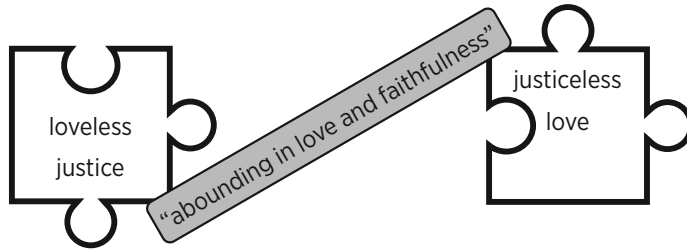


Figure 6: Diagonalization

Variations on this movement of diagonalizing have a long history in Christian thought. Its paradigmatic example is in 1 Corinthians 1, in which Paul shows how the Greeks’ love of wisdom and the Jews’ desire for powerful signs can find their ultimate fulfilment only in the “foolish” and “weak” cross of Christ, which is “the power of God and the wisdom of God.”⁵⁶ A similar idea of reclaiming or fulfilling secular truth can be found in Augustine’s *On Christian Doctrine*, in the injunction that “any statements by those who are called philosophers, especially the Platonists, which happen to be true and consistent with our faith should not cause alarm, but be claimed for our own use, as it were from owners who have no right to them.”⁵⁷

Once our antennae are out for this shape of thinking, we see it all over. It resonates with the following ideas, some of which will be explained in the coming chapters:

- Augustine’s move of retortion, playing off one pagan view against another to show their inconsistency⁵⁸
- Martin Luther’s *Destruktion*⁵⁹
- John Milbank’s “counter-fulfilment”⁶⁰

56. See my *Michel Foucault* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2018), esp. 103–18.

57. Augustine, *On Christian Teaching* 2.40, ed. R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 64.

58. See M. B. Simmons, *Arnobius of Sicca: Religious Conflict and Competition in the Age of Diocletian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 243ff.

59. For a brief account of Luther’s *destructio* in the *Heidelberg Disputation*, see Mark A. Lampert, ed., *Encyclopedia of Martin Luther and the Reformation*, vol. 2 (Lanham, MA: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), 628–29.

60. See David Cayley, “The Myth of the Secular,” part 6, CBC Radio, 2015, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/the-myth-of-the-secular-part-6-1.2920704>.

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- Cornelius Van Til’s affirmation that all non-Christian thought falls into a dialectic, neither pole of which is true⁶¹
- Herman Bavinck’s organicism, showing, for example, how the “autonomous thinking” that “oscillates between materialism and spiritualism, between atomism and dynamism, between nomism and antinomianism” is not merely opposed but fulfilled by a Christianity that “preserves the harmony [between them] and reveals to us a wisdom that reconciles the human being with God and, through this, with itself, with the world, and with life”⁶²
- Peter Leithart’s definition of contextualization as “proclaiming the gospel as the fulfillment (and therefore radical transfiguration) of an existing culture’s best hopes and intentions”⁶³
- Daniel Strange’s notion of “subversive fulfillment” in which the gospel both “subverts in that it confronts, unpicks and overthrows the world’s stories” and “fulfills in that it connects and is shown to be worthy of our hopes and desires,” encouraging us to exchange our old stories for new ones which turn out to be “the originals from which our false stories are smudged and ripped fakes”⁶⁴
- the “subversive mimesis” of Augustine’s *City of God*, which comprises taking a pagan figure—say, the “spectacle” of the amphitheater or the stage—and presenting Christian liturgy as a holy antispectacle that undermines the discourse of power and pomp that underlies pagan spectacle, unmasking its illusion⁶⁵
- John Frame’s observations that “God’s Word has a way of surprising us, of not fitting into our prearranged categories” and “understanding God’s will rarely means falling into lockstep with some popular ideology”⁶⁶
- the idea of Christianity as a “third way” that eschews dichotomized ideologies⁶⁷

61. This summary is made in an editorial note by Scott Oliphint, commenting on Van Til’s argument that non-Christian thought must be both determinist and nondeterminist. See Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 293n41.

62. Bavinck, *Christian Worldview*, 29.

63. Peter Leithart, “Don Richardson and Contextualization,” Theopolis, June 22, 2004, https://web.archive.org/web/20210311224856/https://theopolisinstitute.com/leithart_post/don-richardson-and-contextualization/.

64. Daniel Strange, *Plugged In* (Epsom: Good Book, 2019), 102.

65. Karl F. Morrison, *The Mimetic Tradition of Reform in the West* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 83.

66. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life, A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 6–7.

67. See Scot McKnight, “The Third Way,” *Jesus Creed* (blog), December 2008, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210126184729/https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2008/12/08/the-third-way/>.

- John Stott’s “balanced Christianity,” which, when faced with a dichotomy such as that between conservative and radical, intellect and emotion, or form and freedom, finds truth “not in the middle, and not in one extreme, but in both extremes”⁶⁸
- what C. S. Lewis calls “the blessedly two-edged character” of Christianity⁶⁹
- Paul Ricœur’s “second naïveté”⁷⁰
- Lewis’s idea of reenchantment in his essay “Talking about Bicycles”⁷¹

I do not claim, therefore, to be bringing anything new to the table of Christian thought when I discuss diagonalization. But I do hope to show how this tool with such a rich pedigree can do more heavy lifting in Christian cultural engagement than we often give it credit for. In giving it a label, I hope to make it visible and available to anyone who wants to understand how the Bible relates to our culture.

Before we go any further, we need to dispel two possible misunderstandings about diagonalization. First, let us not make the mistake of thinking of it as a cardigan-and-slippers-wearing, middle-of-the-road compromise between two bold options. Once again, Chesterton hits the nail on the head:

We want not an amalgam or compromise, but both things at the top of their energy; love and wrath both burning. . . . I need not remind the reader that the idea of this combination is indeed central in orthodox theology. For orthodox theology has specially insisted that Christ was not a being apart from God and man, like an elf, nor yet a being half human and half not, like a centaur, but both things at once and both things thoroughly, very man and very God.⁷²

As we shall see, diagonalization is not a safe compromise option but “a positive and viable third way”⁷³ and most often a radical intervention, subverting accepted commonplaces and challenging us to reconsider our assumptions, leaving the initial dichotomized options appearing distinctly bland and unappetizing by comparison.

68. John Stott, *Balanced Christianity* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2014), 11.

69. C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock*, ed. Walter Hooper (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 1994), 156.

70. Paul Ricœur, *Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 351.

71. C. S. Lewis, “Talking About Bicycles,” in *Present Concerns: Journalistic Essays* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2017), 83–90.

72. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 296.

73. Esther Lightcap Meek, *Loving to Know: Covenant Epistemology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), 54.

It also has the virtue of confounding the entrenched rivalries that characterize much cultural and political discourse today, where opposed sides fight among themselves and succeed only in becoming ever more entrenched. More precisely, it undercuts the tendency of dichotomized opposites to define themselves as the negative image of their enemy. The danger of thinking in dichotomies and placing yourself on one side of them is that you become shaped by what you oppose and hate. You occupy the space left vacant by it, desperate to distinguish yourself from it in what often comes down to what Freud called the narcissism of small differences. If your opponents are *for* something, then you must be *against* it; if they *reject* it, you must *embrace* it. The relationship becomes symbiotic, and little by little, you become dependent on what you oppose.

But biblical diagonalization undermines these insidious dichotomies, and its subversive dynamic makes Christianity not just revolutionary, nor simply counterrevolutionary in the sense of seeking to maintain the status quo, but what Os Guinness and N. T. Wright both call “a revolutionary way of being revolutionary,”⁷⁴ a way that departs from the accepted canons of revolutionary action in that it substitutes love of neighbor for the violence and power of brute opposition.

The second misunderstanding to avoid is thinking that diagonalization is some cheap imitation of postmodernism, mixing the black and white colors of truth to make an indistinct, muddy grey. In fact, quite the opposite is the case. The Bible only challenges the dichotomies and false clarities of our culture because it rests on fundamental black and white distinctions of its own: first, between God and everything else, and then between what Augustine calls the “city of God” and the “earthly city,” which, as he repeatedly stresses in the *City of God*, are “entangled and mingled with one another; and they will remain so until the last judgment shall separate them.”⁷⁵

Here’s how it works: If our ultimate measure of what is true, good, and beautiful is found beyond this created universe, in the creator God, if “no one is good but God alone” (Mark 10:18 NRSV), if no one is thoroughly unredeemable but the devil alone, and if the two cities are intermingled until the final judgment, then the Christian will be predisposed to expect any and every aspect of human culture to contain some mixture of good and evil, beauty and ugliness, truth and falsehood, and will refuse to give absolute allegiance to any

74. Os Guinness, *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling God’s Purpose for Your Life* (Nashville: Nelson, 2018), 273; Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 564. Wright uses the phrase to characterize the Christian ethic of love for enemies, itself a fine example of biblical diagonalization.

75. Augustine, *The City of God* 1.36, 49.

human ideology, value, or institution. That refusal and the affirmation of God on which it rests give the Christian a wonderfully open but critical mind to engage with culture in all its diversity. In other words, if we begin and end with a black and white antithesis (God and creation, city of God and earthly city), we find many fine shades of grey in between.

By contrast, if we find our ultimate references for good and evil, truth and falsehood, beauty and ugliness within the created order—in the distinction between reason and faith, or profit and loss, or pleasure and pain—then there are some aspects of human culture to which we will have to remain close-minded (precisely those faith-inspiring, loss-making, or pain-inducing ones), lest we compromise our ultimate reference points. Such people have “with a marvelous shallowness, sought to find their blessedness in this life,” quips Augustine.⁷⁶ We start with an undifferentiated grey, but we soon cannot stop ourselves creating zones of crude black and white within culture. As James K. A. Smith points out, “It’s precisely when your ultimate conviction is that there is no eternal that you’re most prone to absolutize the temporal.”⁷⁷ This is why the Bible not only encourages us to place our absolute confidence in the promises and purposes of God but also—and at the same time—predisposes us to be unusually open and nuanced cultural critics.

OUT-NARRATING

The move of diagonalization is part of what John Milbank and others have called the Bible “out-narrating” its cultural rivals—theology positioning, qualifying, and criticizing other discourses before they position it.⁷⁸ Or in Esther Meek’s vivid image, “Regarding biblical studies as ‘content’ is the ultimate castrating irony” because “the inherently transformative message of the Christian gospel . . . should be apprehended as centrally epistemic, the paradigmatic example of knowing.”⁷⁹ Out-narrating is not about telling the better story in the sense of being the most gripping or necessarily satisfying; it is about telling the bigger story, the story within which all other stories find their place, like Augustine’s

76. Philip Schaff, ed., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 1, vol. 2, *St. Augustine: City of God, Christian Doctrine* (New York: Cosimo, 2007), 401. The Cambridge edition translates this passage in a rather dull way.

77. James K. A. Smith, *Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 29.

78. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (New York: Wiley Blackwell, 2008), 1.

79. Meek, *Loving to Know*, 135. See also Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 210.

City of God that “attempts to situate all of human history within a Christian reading of the Bible”⁸⁰ and “includes . . . and explains” the earthly city.⁸¹

C. S. Lewis reflects on this capacity of Christianity to out-narrate other stories when he writes about the way our waking reality contains the worlds of fairy stories, but the latter does not contain the former:

I know that a man of my reading might be expected to dream of dragons. But while in the nightmare I could not have fitted in my waking experience. The waking world is judged more real because it can thus contain the dreaming world: the dreaming world is judged less real because it cannot contain the waking one. For the same reason I am certain that in passing from the scientific point of view to the theological, I have passed from dream to waking. Christian theology can fit in science, art, morality, and the sub-Christian religions. The scientific point of view cannot fit in any of these things, not even science itself. I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see it but because by it I see everything else.⁸²

There are a number of variations of out-narrating among contemporary Christian apologists. We have Francis Spufford’s explanation of “Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense,”⁸³ N. T. Wright’s similarly worded defense of “Why Christianity Makes Sense,”⁸⁴ and Timothy Keller’s claim that Christianity makes better sense of the world than the alternatives because it can account for more phenomena; more of human complexity and identity; more cultural diversity; more of our experiences of longing, fullness, and hope; and more of our desire for justice, satisfaction, and wholeness.⁸⁵ James K. A. Smith translates the notion of out-narrating into the grammar of modes of behavior and liturgies when he writes about *liturgical capture*, a term describing what happens when the patterns and behaviors of the culture “seek to absorb the rites of the church as merely a subvenient, qualified expression that can be disciplined by market forces—either by

80. James Wetzel, *Augustine’s City of God: A Critical Guide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 5.

81. Etienne Gilson, *The Metamorphoses of the City of God* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2020), 31.

82. C. S. Lewis, “Is Theology Poetry?,” in *The Weight of Glory: And Other Addresses* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 139–140.

83. Francis Spufford, *Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense* (London: Faber & Faber, 2012).

84. N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (New York: HarperOne, 2020).

85. Timothy Keller, *Making Sense of God: An Invitation to the Skeptical* (New York: Viking, 2016).

compartmentalizing the religious to the merely ‘spiritual’ or by privatizing the religious to interior, domestic life (both of which amount to the same thing).⁸⁶

Left to its own devices, the Bible does out-narrate other stories. In the words of the literary critic Erich Auerbach it “seeks to overcome our reality: we are to fit our own reality into its world, feel ourselves to be elements in its structure of universal history.”⁸⁷ However, modernity has done its best to out-narrate this out-narration. In *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, Hans Frei describes how the Bible slipped from being the story in terms of which we understood our world to being one story within the world that was itself to be understood by new framing narratives of psychology or science. Frei places the tipping point around the end of the eighteenth century, when theologians began to subject the Bible to analysis from the perspective of exterior critical frameworks. He describes this as “the distancing between the narratively depicted world and the ‘real’ world,”⁸⁸ but of course it was only the distancing between *one* narrative world, the Bible’s, and reality. We still understand the “real” world and ourselves through stories,⁸⁹ just no longer the Bible’s story.

Like killing a butterfly and pinning it to a display board in a museum, this radical reframing of the biblical story transformed it from a living and active agent into a curious and awkward object. Between the eighteenth century and today, the stories that have been used to make sense of the Bible have no doubt changed, but the basic structure remains constant: the Bible needs explaining by a story outside itself, and the story that is used to explain Christianity does not even have to be a true one,⁹⁰ as Dan Brown has proven abundantly.

Out-narrating is essential if we are not to end up with a bowdlerized, neutered Christianity that fails to challenge or subvert cultural assumptions and thereby forfeits any chance of substantially transforming society. As missiologist Lesslie Newbigin explains:

We accept something as an explanation when it shows how an unexplained fact fits into the world as we already understand it. Explanation is related to the

86. Smith, *Awaiting the King*, 179.

87. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), 15.

88. Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974), 6.

89. See, for example, Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (Boston, MA: Mariner Books, 2013) and the theories of narrative identity elaborated by Paul Ricoeur, Charles Taylor, and Daniel Dennett.

90. See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

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framework of understanding we inhabit, the firm structure of beliefs we never question, our picture of how things really are. Explanation puts a strange thing into a place where it fits and is no longer strange.⁹¹

To explain the gospel to our culture in that culture's own terms and within its own stories is to domesticate its strangeness, to shave off its sharp corners and make it fit. It is to lose the gospel and fail to serve the culture. Newbiggin holds out a greater vision for Christians:

As people who are part of modern Western culture, with its confidence in the validity of its scientific methods, how can we move from the place where we explain the gospel in terms of our modern scientific worldview to the place where we explain a modern scientific worldview from the point of view of the gospel?⁹²

Taking up a recurring metaphor, Newbiggin insists that “the Christian story provides us with such a set of lenses, not something for us to look at, but for us to look through.”⁹³ The aim of the present book is to explain not only the modern scientific worldview but also many more aspects of the modern and contemporary world through the lens of the gospel.

Out-narrating has two parts, both important but very different from each other. Together they comprise what Joshua D. Chatraw calls an “inside out” method to commending the Christian faith.⁹⁴ They correspond, in fact, to the two halves of Augustine's *City of God*. Augustine begins his masterwork “inside” Rome's story, scrutinizing and critiquing the late Roman culture around him, showing it in a blistering exposé to be a small, incoherent, and self-defeating story that cannot live up to its own aspirations.

In the second part of the book—the part that first set my pulse racing when I first read it—he leads the reader “out” of Rome's story and into the biblical plotline from Genesis to Revelation, demonstrating and illustrating how life lived in the context of this true story meets our highest aspirations, satisfies our deepest desires, and makes the best sense of our world and ourselves.

Taken together, the two parts of Augustine's *City of God* embody what John Stott calls “double listening”:

91. Lesslie Newbiggin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 21.

92. Newbiggin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 21–2.

93. Lesslie Newbiggin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 38.

94. Joshua D. Chatraw, *Telling a Better Story: How to Talk About God in a Skeptical Age* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021).

We are called to double listening, listening to both the Word and the world. . . . We listen to the Word with humble reverence anxious to understand it, and resolved to believe and obey what we have come to understand. We listen to the world with critical alertness, anxious to understand it too, and resolved not necessarily to believe and obey it, but to sympathise with it and to seek grace to discover how the gospel relates to it.⁹⁵

Similar two-fold structures are present in many accounts of apologetics today. Francis Schaeffer would call the first part “taking the roof off” Roman culture,⁹⁶ and Oliver O’Donovan evokes the intellectual challenges of interpreting the Scriptures (the second part), the culture and the times (the first part).⁹⁷ To use Daniel Strange’s language of subversive fulfilment again, the first part of the city of God “subverts” the Roman world, and the second part shows how its deepest aspirations are “fulfilled” in the gospel; in Timothy Keller’s lexicon, the first part “confronts” Roman culture, and the second part “completes” or “consoles” it.⁹⁸ Both parts contain arguments, but these arguments are suspended (not dissolved) in the solution of the narrative that gives them context.

Augustine separates these two tasks and places them in different parts of *The City of God*.



Figure 7: Two Parts of the *City of God*

I have chosen to weave the two parts together, using a biblical theological structure like the second part of *The City of God*, and interweaving reflections on the unfolding biblical storyline with examinations of modern life and culture:



Figure 8: Structure of the Present Volume

In this way I hope to show that the Bible has much that is fresh, surprising, and subversive to contribute to important social and cultural debates. Certainly for

95. John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 27.

96. Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2020), 156–60.

97. Oliver O’Donovan, *Self, World and Time*, Ethics as Theology 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), x.

98. Keller, *Center Church*, 130–32.

Augustine, and I hope for the present volume as well, the two parts of the project are inseparable, “completing, interpreting, and reinforcing each other.”⁹⁹

Another advantage of interweaving biblical and cultural comment is that it allows—as much as possible in a volume of this length—each moment in the Bible’s storyline to have its say, not unduly privileging, for example, creation over sin or redemption over judgment. Out-narrating cannot be accomplished through the “drag and drop” approach of taking isolated proof texts or even single passages and using them as lenses through which to understand or intervene in a particular cultural debate; it requires that we begin at the beginning of the Bible’s story and keep right on until we have reached the end. No doubt some readers will cavil at the relative proportions I have accorded to different biblical moments, and I am aware that my reflections on the biblical wisdom literature in particular would benefit from expansion in a supplementary volume. Nevertheless, it has been my intention to put into practice the wise advice of D. A. Carson in *Christ and Culture Revisited*:

That stance is most likely to be deeply Christian which attempts to integrate all the major biblically determined turning points in the history of redemption: creation, fall, the call of Abraham, the exodus and the giving of the law, the rise of the monarchy and the rise of the prophets, the exile, the incarnation, the ministry and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the onset of the kingdom of God, the coming of the Spirit and the consequent ongoing eschatological tension between the “already” and the “not yet,” the return of Christ and the prospect of a new heaven and a new earth.¹⁰⁰

A capacious grasp of the biblical storyline will also equip Christian students, pastors, and laypeople to think biblically about the whole of life and defend the faith in the face of hostile attack more fully and more deeply than even the best prepared suite of individual arguments.

The rhetoric of out-narrating is helpful in clarifying one important point: the aim of this book is not to offer piecemeal arguments on this or that burning issue but to unfold a connected story that diagonalizes dominant contemporary cultural alternatives. In other words, rather than either brushing away modern cultural figures or falling into lockstep with them, the task of out-narrating is a way of allowing the Bible to diagnose and heal them, fulfilling all that is good in them and everything that makes for flourishing.

99. Wetzel, *Augustine’s City of God*, 29.

100. D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 81.

Out-narrating is no demolition job. If Christians approach our culture merely with the aim of denouncing or humiliating it, they are unlikely to make any impact, will almost never bring healing, and are more at risk of not recognizing where their own thoughts and instincts are more cultural than biblical. Similarly, if they approach our culture only with the goal of affirming or even praising it, they are signing up for biblical unfaithfulness and cultural irrelevance. The Christian story is not engaged in an out-narration catfight with all the other competing stories in our culture, nor is it there just to purr at them approvingly. There is a particular Christian way of out-narrating, a way that can both hurt and heal but that does neither unthinkingly, that can both critique and compliment but never does so just to play to the gallery or to curry favor.

What is required is a patient, compassionate, open-eyed engagement with culture that seeks culture's flourishing and assumes—unless and until proven otherwise—that those who have helped build it are also seeking the good, as they understand it.¹⁰¹ This disposition towards culture is summed up in the Latin maxim *audi alteram partem*: listen to the other side. The sort of deep listening required cannot be accomplished in a quick skim through a text or website. Christians engaging with cultural theorists must understand not only what they are saying but also why they think it is a good thing to say. Until we can walk a mile in someone's shoes and see why their position is not only true but good and beautiful to them—or indeed why they think it good to have reached a point of despair where they have concluded that the good and the beautiful are no longer justifiable or viable goals to pursue—and until we can explain it in terms that they would be happy to own, then we have not yet come to a point of being able to critique it.

I am not claiming that anything I am saying in this book is radically new, but I hope to be making two contributions. First, I am giving labels to ideas and moves that others have used in a way that is liable to go unnoticed and thereby extending the language and conceptual repertoire of Christian cultural engagement and Christian social theory. Second, I am bringing together in a coherent biblical-theological framework many different figures and arguments that may otherwise seem fragmented or unrelated. Like jewels set side by side in a crown, the figures gain in luster and brilliance by appearing in proximity to each other.

101. This is not to deny that at the deepest level of theological anthropology, the unregenerate human is blind and hostile (e.g., Rom 1:12–3). And yet Scripture can still speak of an unregenerate person seeking or desiring good and noble things (e.g., Rom 10:1–3; Matt 7:11).

BIBLICAL SOCIAL THEORY

A further consequence of my choice to inter-weave reflections on politics, culture, and society with a biblical-theological framework is that it will help to clarify how the Bible can inform and shape a Christian social and cultural theory. A social theory, broadly conceived, is a “large and diverse body of ideas concerned with what society is and how it works,” which usually acknowledges “the complex determinations between power, ideology, and economic forces in constituting social life.”¹⁰² Theories, like religions, make a complex world somewhat comprehensible.

There are many social theories on the market today; some of the most prominent are feminist theory, psychoanalytic theory, postcolonial theory, queer theory, eco theory, and Frankfurt school critical theory, or “cultural Marxism” as it has sometimes been called. These social theories deal in figures. Some of their figures are explicit (e.g., concepts, language), and others are more implicit (e.g., habits, modes of dress, and behavior characteristics of those who espouse the theory in question). As I began to sketch in the preface, these social theories have a number of features in common:

- They address themselves to everything, seeking to explain everything in their own terms.
- They bring some objects, events, and values into focus, making them the *figure* of our attention, and relegate other objects, events, and values to the *ground* of our peripheral vision, tracing constellations and connected dots in our manifold perceptions.¹⁰³
- They bring with them a particular set of questions and concerns, in terms of which they seek to understand, explain, and transform society.
- They are not just theoretical or philosophical, but they span both high and low culture and often fuel activism and lobbying for social change.

In this sense, cultural theories train perceptions, thoughts, and actions in a 360-degree catechesis. They are the “authoritative guides” that “teach us what is there,”¹⁰⁴ providing for those who follow them a way of being in the world, a “skilled coping with the world through achieving a coherence, an integrated pattern, a making sense of things, that opens the world to us.”¹⁰⁵

102. Noel Castree, Rob Kitchin, and Alisdair Rogers, eds., *A Dictionary of Human Geography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 474.

103. Meek, *Longing to Know*, 88.

104. Meek, *Loving to Know*, 79.

105. Meek, *Longing to Know*, 56.

Social theories can engage with each of the six types of figures, but their task is not simply descriptive. They also seek to influence the ways our world is figured, indicated by the bidirectional arrows in figure 9. This is where the term *theory* might be somewhat misleading. Social theories also shape and influence social praxis: they are an exercise in *seeing-as*.

Theories mediate the world to us, but in a sense they also create the world for us because their patterns and rhythms precede the different elements of perception that they integrate. As Meek explains:

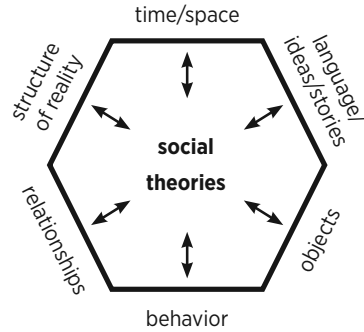


Figure 9: Social Theories

There’s a kind of backwardness to our integrative pattern making. We’ve said before that it’s not as if you could begin with the particulars relevant to the pattern and then reason your way to the pattern, as from premises to a conclusion. In a profound and curious way, the pattern comes first. It does not come first in time. But it comes first in priority, and then the moment of integrative success has a kind of retroactive power.¹⁰⁶

This is why these theories are so potent: once we have begun to look not simply *at* but *through* them, we start seeing their patterns and rhythms everywhere because the theory conditions us to find them everywhere. What I “see” is always shaped by my commitments.

These same features of making visible and making valuable also characterize a biblical view of the world. They are present on every page of the Scriptures, in terms of the sorts of things the Bible writers habitually draw attention to and the sorts of things they usually ignore, what they tend to praise and what they customarily condemn. Indeed, they provide Augustine with a distinctive interpretation of Roman culture in *The City of God*. So why don’t we just reread Augustine today, or perhaps Francis Schaeffer’s *How Should We Then Live?* Why do we need a new book like this one, telling the Bible’s story and bringing it into conversation with our cultural figures yet again? Because, as Alvin Plantinga argues, we must write in our own way and from our own historical perspective, not from that of the late Roman world, the 1950s, or our parents’ generation: “The precise relationship between the *Civitas Dei* [City of God]

106. Meek, *Longing to Know*, 149.

and the *Civitas Mundi* [Worldly City] constantly changes; the form the Earthly City itself takes constantly changes; an account of the fundamental loyalties and commitments of the *Civitas Mundi* that was correct in Augustine's day, now some 15 centuries ago, does not directly apply at present."¹⁰⁷ So a biblical social and cultural theory is both possible and important today if we are to refresh the agenda for Christian cultural engagement in our generation, as we must in every generation.¹⁰⁸ But there is also a sense in which a biblical social theory should be radically different from other social theories. It is not just like critical theory or feminist theory with different labels. Reflecting the patterns and rhythms of the Bible itself, a biblical social theory should be distinct not simply in its content but in its manner and mode of engagement.¹⁰⁹

First, it should present a positive agenda, not just a tool of critique. It will not just analyze contemporary society but provide a vision for its future flourishing and renewal. Second, it will present a challenge to customary and fashionable ways of thinking. It will not merely take whatever happens to be the current flavor of the month in intellectual circles and dress it up in ill-fitting Christian clothing. That is how we ended up with the Marxist Christ of the 1960s, the hippie Christ of the 1970s, and the postmodern Christ of the 1990s. What our culture needs is not a model of Christ made in its own image (it has shelves full of those already) but the real Christ, who comes in grace and truth to confront, complete, and console every culture for its good and his glory. Christ should not fit comfortably in any culture, and if he nestles snugly into our own, then we have almost certainly lost sight of the biblical Christ. We should maintain what C. S. Lewis calls a "scrupulous care to preserve the Christian message as something distinct from one's own ideas."¹¹⁰ This is why I fervently hope that every reader finds at least one thing in this book that she profoundly disagrees with and why I am open to critique and correction from readers who, in a collegial spirit, point out moments in the pages that follow where I have made Christ fit a little too comfortably with my own understanding of the world.

Third, a Christian social theory should be nonpartisan. It will not be a tool to promote the interests of a single political party or interest group in society,

107. Alvin Plantinga, "Augustinian Christian Philosophy," *The Monist* 75, no. 3 (1992): 291–320, 295.

108. This is different from the idea of a Christian philosophy, which is not what this project is about. The claim that one particular philosophical starting point (idealism, realism, etc.) is more Christian than the others is not only a hard one to justify in the detail but also commits the error of beginning with the extant categories of philosophical inquiry rather than beginning with the Bible. For more on the pitfalls of a Christian philosophy, see Meek, *Loving to Know*, 149.

109. See the discussion of this point in O'Donovan, *Finding and Seeking*, 112.

110. C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: HarperOne, 1994), 88.

and it will not be just one more turn of the emancipation narrative crank, with Christians portrayed as a downtrodden minority, victims of discrimination who need liberating and who demand equality. It will be radically conservative and conservatively radical, traditionally progressive and progressively traditional, soberly optimistic and optimistically sober, because these oppositions are too reductive to contain the complexities of biblical figures and their relation to culture. Biblical diagonalization cuts across reductive oppositions; Christian social theory must not reinscribe itself in their unhealthy and moribund binaries.

Finally, Christian social theory, as it seeks to conform to the image of Christ, has the capacity to be both humble and strong, loving and truthful. Christ could treat a woman caught in adultery with tender compassion yet call Pharisees “vipers” and “whitewashed tombs.” If a Christian social theory aspires to represent Christ in the theoretical sphere, then it must not hammer away rebarbatively at only one or two of Christ’s modes of engagement with his hearers, but it must be able to play every octave of his expansive keyboard and—the hardest thing of all—know which note to strike at which moment. Its heroes should not be its authors but the Christ whom it exegetes; its goals should not be to impress or to conquer but to serve and, by God’s grace, to save; it should not be too proud to accept correction from those who disagree with it where that correction is warranted; and its animating dynamic should not be an ethic of violence but an ethic of love.¹¹¹ In other words, it must live out the biblical patterns and rhythms it expounds.

In *The City of God* Augustine does not merely explain the Bible to Roman culture, he explains Roman culture within the framework of the biblical story. In other words, he elaborates a biblical social and cultural theory for his day. At our own moment in history it is not enough for Christians to explain the Bible to our culture. We must explain our culture through the Bible as we pray for the raising up of a new generation of thoroughly Christian social theorists.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. **Hot Take:** Quickly write down your top three takeaways from this chapter. Don’t think about it, just write what first comes into your head.
2. What features do different cultural and social theories have in common?
3. Briefly describe *figures* and *worlds* as the terms are used in this book.

111. For an explanation of the ethic of violence and the ethic of love, see chapter 1 below.

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4. “A biblical social and cultural theory is both possible and important today if we are to refresh the agenda for Christian cultural engagement in our generation.” What reasons are given for such a claim? Do you agree or disagree with them, and why?
5. “Trying to separate Christianity from culture is like trying to extract the flour from a baked cake.” Explain this claim. Do you agree or disagree, and why?
6. In your opinion, what are the five most important bullet points to explain “diagonalization.”

TRINITY

Confession time. Have you ever borrowed a book from a library or a friend, only to leave it on your shelf for years, knowing you should read it but never quite building up the courage to start? Here's my own story of shame. When I was an undergraduate new to exploring Christian ideas, I remember borrowing a book called *Trinity and Truth* from my own Library of Alexandria, the magical Christian Heritage book collection housed in the Round Church in Cambridge. I remember it vividly, with a blue and orange cover, sitting on the shelf frowning down at me. *Trinity and Truth* made its way to my room and nestled imperiously among my French and German literature collection for years. Whisper it quietly, but I think I was well into my PhD by the time I returned it to the Round Church, horribly overdue.

While I had a hunch that the book must contain an important message, I could never bring myself to read it. After all, the Trinity is a complicated Christian doctrine all about leaves of clover and boiling water in a kettle, and as for truth, well, that was a philosophical idea. What could Jerusalem possibly have to do with Athens? What could the fact that God is one God and three persons, Father, Son, and Spirit, have to do with truth and falsehood? As I later found out, and to quote Paul, “much in every way” (Rom 3:12), but I didn't know that yet.

I still don't think I've read *Trinity and Truth* from cover to cover, but over the years I have come to see that we commit a grave error when we put the doctrine of the Trinity in the “too hard” or “too controversial” box of Christian doctrines. It is indispensable and foundational for a Christian understanding of reality, and one of the key distinctives that makes the Christian perspective so unique, rich, and satisfying. It is also where we need to start this journey through the Bible, because even before God created the world, the Scriptures give us glimpses of Trinitarian richness.

There is a sad irony in many Christian attempts to intervene constructively in intellectual and social debates today. The irony is that the biblical truths and passages that Christians avoid and over which they feel embarrassment are often precisely those that can most decisively and innovatively shape fresh thinking in key areas. Surely few doctrines today cause as much confusion and as many blushes among Christians as the Trinity. And yet in this chapter I want us to see that far from being an embarrassment to sophisticated debate and creative social and cultural insights, the Trinity provides thoughtful Christians with a springboard to engage constructively in some of the most important philosophical, political, and social questions of our time.

NO VANILLA GOD

There are many gods and many religions of the world, but not all gods are the same. There is no such thing as a generic, vanilla-flavored god. All the gods of the world religions and all the foundational realities of the world's philosophies have profound and differing implications for who we are, what we can know, how we should behave, and what we can hope for.

Among the world's cornucopia of deities, the God of the Bible is unique, and therefore the Bible offers a unique understanding of society and culture, one that reflects who that God really is. In this chapter I focus on four features of the biblical God that make Christian engagement with culture distinctive and beautiful: God is personal, God is absolute, God is relational, and God is love. These features are interconnected, and each complements the others.

This chapter is about what God was like before he created the world, a starting point that requires a little explanation. You would be quite within your rights to ask how on earth we can know such a thing. The simple answer is that we on earth can only know because God told us. A surprising amount of material in the Bible concerns the precreation God (so to speak, given that time itself was part of the creation). We learn that Jesus and his Father shared a glorious existence (John 17:5); that the Father loved the Son (John 17:24); that God was in relationship with a character called Wisdom, whom many commentators take to be the second person of the Trinity (Prov 8:22–31); that Jesus, the Word of God, was already with God when he began to create the universe (John 1:1–2); that God foreordained his Son Jesus Christ would die on the cross (1 Pet 1:19–20); that God decreed the gospel message that was eventually preached in New Testament times (1 Cor 2:6–7); that God promised eternal life to his elect (Titus 1:1–3); that God chose those who would come to believe in Christ

(Eph 1:3–4); and that their names were written in the book of life (Rev 13:7–8). All in all, that is a remarkable amount of information about God’s existence before “the beginning.” But so what? What difference does it all make to the way we think, feel, and live in the world? The answer is that it makes a huge difference, and here are some of the reasons why.

ULTIMATE REALITY IS PERSONAL

What is at the origin of everything? There have been many candidates in the history of philosophy for the most basic, original reality. When we follow all the causal chains back to their origin, or at least to as far back as we can go, what do we find staring us in the face? When we dig down to the bedrock of reality, deeper than everything else, what does our spade strike against? The pre-Socratic philosophers Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes are famous for suggesting, respectively, that everything is fundamentally made of water, an unlimited substance (*apeiron* in Greek), or air. Many scientists today think that, to the extent that we can talk about a “most fundamental” level at all, it may be composed of strings, wave-packets, quantum fields, or simply mathematics generated by an original big bang.

But what about the Bible? The Bible’s answer is as revolutionary as it is brief: ultimate, original reality is the personal God, the God we are taught by Jesus to call Father (Matt 6:9), the God Augustine can address in the second person in his *Confessions*, the God who speaks, acts, plans, promises, and even repents (Gen 6:6; Jonah 3:10).¹ There is nothing before God, nor is there anything more basic and fundamental than God. His personalness—the fact that his existence is irreducibly personal—cannot be broken down into more simple building blocks (such as atoms, forces, emotions, or ideas). Fundamental and original reality is not an abstract idea but God’s specific, concrete personality and character. It is before matter, before energy, before space and time, before ideas. Personalness goes all the way down and all the way back (Col 1:17 captures both truths with admirable brevity).

1. I am grateful to Nathaniel Gray Sutanto for drawing my attention to the fact that there is some debate as to whether the language of personality can legitimately be ascribed to God (see Herman Bavink, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *God and Creation* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004], 50, 299–300). This is a significant debate in its own terms, but it is not my concern here. God is presented in the Scriptures with many personal qualities, some of which I mention in this chapter. To claim that he was not understood as personal until the influence of Fichte and the German idealists is a footnote to this Scriptural witness, not the whole ballgame.

In the landscape of worldviews today, this commitment to fundamental personalness is odd, it is weird, it is distinctive. And the truth of God's irreducible personalness is also a dynamite with the potential to revolutionize the way that the Christian thinks about absolutely everything.

The Reality and Dignity of Persons

Right out of the gate, God's personalness makes sense of our concrete universe. As C. S. Lewis explains:

Unless the origin of all other things were itself concrete and individual, nothing else could be so; for there is no conceivable means whereby what is abstract or general could itself produce concrete reality. Bookkeeping, continued to all eternity, could never produce one farthing. Metre, of itself, could never produce a poem. Bookkeeping needs something else (namely, real money put into the account) and metre needs something else (real words, fed into it by a poet) before any income or any poem can exist. If anything is to exist at all, then the Original Thing must be, not a principle nor a generality, much less an "ideal" or a "value", but an utterly concrete fact.²

Not only does God's personalness make sense of a universe full of individual things, but it also bestows a weight and a dignity on individual persons: on you, on me, and on every last person living in the favelas of São Paulo. If personalness is something that just happened to emerge somewhere along the evolutionary line and that, who knows, will perhaps disappear again sooner or later, then persons are like the waves on the ocean: temporary configurations with certain ephemeral and sometimes curious characteristics but no lasting cosmic significance. And if the universe is most fundamentally some combination of matter, time, and chance, then it becomes very hard to argue that one combination of those three (e.g., you) is necessarily and of itself better or more valuable than another combination (e.g., a rock or an ice-sheet). It cannot be argued coherently in any way that gets deeper than a gut feeling or an unjustifiable decision that life is better than death or that treating persons kindly is better than treating them horribly. In such an impersonal universe, many things can *happen*, but nothing is ever truly *done*.

But if personalness is irreducible and fundamental in the universe, then all persons have worth and dignity that cannot be taken away. We have this dignity not because we are intelligent or strong or powerful but because our

2. C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 138–39.

personalness, by analogy with the personal God, by his grace and by virtue of our existence beyond this present age, is enduring. Which means that everyone has the same dignity, however unintelligent, weak, or powerless we may be.³

These are the options: either we live in a universe in which everything personal eventually reduces to the impersonal, or we live in a universe in which everything impersonal can be traced back to the personal God.⁴ Those are two very different universes to live in. Which one do you find more satisfying? Which provides a basis for a fairer, more compassionate society: a universe where everything personal reduces to the impersonal, or a universe where everything impersonal is transfigured by the reality and the will of the personal God?

ULTIMATE REALITY IS ABSOLUTE

The God of the Bible is far from the only god of the ancient or modern worlds to be personal. The ancient Greeks and Romans for example had as many personal gods as you could shake a stick at (and, as Paul discovered in Athens in Acts 17, even more that you couldn't!). But what makes the biblical God stand out from other deities is that he is not merely one personal god among a pantheon of personalities like Zeus, Athena, or Poseidon, but his personalness is absolute, where absolute means (1) self-sufficient, not relying on anything outside himself for his existence, and (2) fundamental or “simple,” not able to be broken down into more basic parts. This compound of personalness and absoluteness, or what John Frame has called “absolute personality” theism,⁵ is distinctive of the biblical God.

Diagonalizing the Absolute and the Personal

The absolute and the personal is one of those many cases in which the biblical account diagonalizes the options offered to us in other systems of thought, indicating that those systems are themselves heretical reductions of a more complex biblical truth. In this case, it is the choice between ultimate reality being absolute but impersonal—the position of many philosophies from Aristotle’s Prime Mover onwards—and ultimate reality being personal but not absolute—as in animist belief systems, what the West calls “Hinduism,” and the Greek and

3. This does not mean that only persons are valuable, or that we can treat animals and the environment in any way we please, as we shall see in chapter 3.

4. See Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 26.

5. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, A Theology of Lordship (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010) 8–9.

Roman pantheons. Outside biblical absolute personality theism, we are forced to choose between a cold, impersonal absolute reality and a personal but local and finite deity.

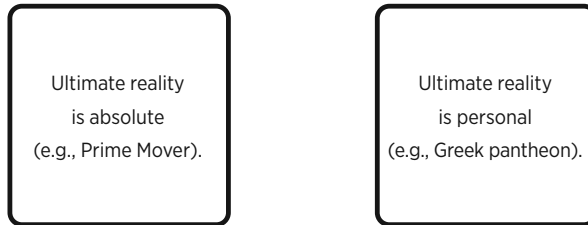


Figure 10: Absolute-Personal Dichotomy

This choice does not perhaps sound so terrible, until we see that the absolute is necessary if we are to have the universal, law, justice, predictability, stability, and order in the universe, and that the personal is necessary for dignity, humanitarianism, creativity, relationship, meaning, love, compassion, and freedom. What a choice to have to make!

But, wonderfully, the Bible shows us that this is a false dichotomy, and absolute personality cuts across it, conforming neither to the impersonal absolute nor to the nonabsolute personal.

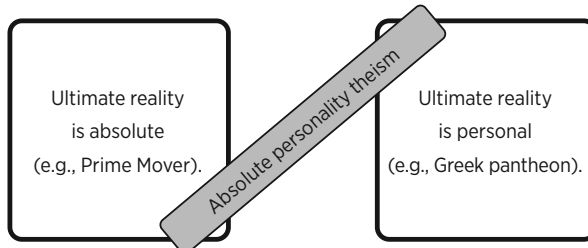


Figure 11: Absolute-Personal Dichotomy Diagonalized

We are going to see this move of diagonalization again and again in these chapters. It is just what we would expect if the Bible presents an exceptionally rich, complex, and finely balanced account of reality, in relation to which the extrabiblical alternatives are partial, derivative, and lopsided.

We need to hold both the absoluteness and the personalness of God together if we are to see the wonder of the biblical account, for neither of them is more ultimate than the other, and neither acts as a foundation for the other. They are equally radical, equally basic, and utterly inseparable. It is not that

God is part absolute and part personal; there is no compromise of personalness to accommodate the absolute, nor of the absolute to squeeze in the personal. In God, both the absolute and the personal are “at the top of their energy.”⁶

The Personal, the Absolute, the Arts, and the Sciences

Christian apologists have often made the point that God’s absoluteness and universality are the basis for the study of the sciences, and rightly so. But this is only half the story. We must also acknowledge that God’s personalness—the fact that he speaks, feels, promises, interacts, expresses a particular character, and does many other things characteristic of persons—provides a basis for the study of the arts and humanities.

The sciences rely on the assumption that the universe is relatively stable, allowing our reason and calculations to get some purchase on reality. This is not quite as obvious for others as it may sound to us who have grown up in a culture fundamentally shaped by Christianity. If different gods rule over different parts of the world, why would we expect the same actions to produce the same results everywhere? We would find ourselves in a world in which Pascal’s quip becomes a disturbing reality: “It is an odd kind of justice to have a river as its boundary. Truth lies on this side of the Pyrenees, error on the other.”⁷ The premise that the universe is rationally investigable is a world-transforming assumption that both Tom Holland and Rodney Stark have shown to be at the root of Western technological progress and social development since the middle ages. “Real science,” Stark argues, “arose only once: in Europe,” and while other cultures had “highly developed alchemy,” it was only in Europe that alchemy transmuted into chemistry, and while many societies developed elaborate astrological systems, “only in Europe did astrology lead to astronomy.”⁸ Historian of philosophy and science Stephen Gaukroger concurs: “A distinctive feature of the Scientific Revolution is that, unlike other scientific programmes and cultures, it is driven, often explicitly, by religious considerations: Christianity set the agenda for natural philosophy in many respects and projected it forward in a way quite different from that of any other scientific culture.”⁹ It was theological reasoning about the character of God that developed into scientific reasoning about the nature of the universe, and the wonder of modern science was born.

6. G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, in *The Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton*, vol. 1, *Heretics, Orthodoxy, the Blatchford Controversies*, ed. David Dooley (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986), 296.

7. Pascal, *Pensées*, 23; pensée 94.

8. Rodney Stark, *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success* (New York: Random House, 2005), 14. See also Holland, *Dominion*.

9. Stephen Gaukroger, *The Emergence of a Modern Scientific Culture: Science and the Shaping of Modernity 1210–1685* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 3.

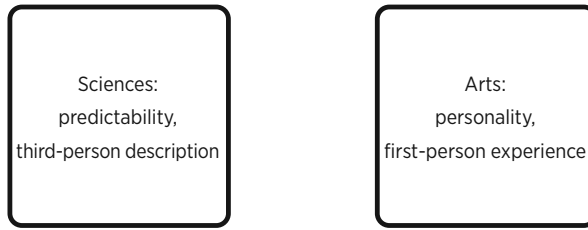


Figure 12: Science-Art Dichotomy

The fact that the Bible’s account of the world furnishes a strong basis for the study of the sciences is already wonderful. That it simultaneously provides a powerful justification for the study of the arts is doubly affirmative of human striving and culture. If God is personal, then personalness matters. If God has a character, then character is no illusion that can be reduced to a “real” impersonal substrate. Exploring what it means to be a person is no less worthy a pursuit than exploring the nature of the universe, and it is the same absolute-personal God who underwrites both endeavors. Third-person description and first-person experience; novels, nouns, and naming ceremonies; test tubes, turbines, and telescopes—the arts and the sciences both derive their legitimacy and dignity from the same God. It follows that, because neither absoluteness nor personalness is the ground of the other, the sciences cannot claim to be the hidden truth of the arts any more than the arts can foolishly dismiss the sciences.

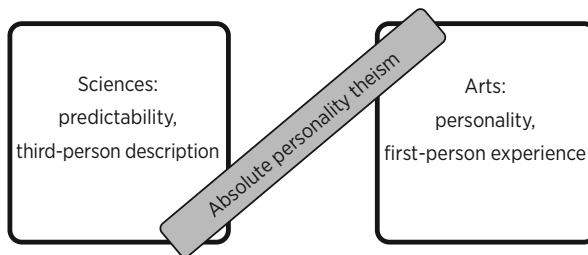


Figure 13: Science-Art Dichotomy Diagonalized

Most views of the world, most academic disciplines, and indeed most people overemphasize either the absolute—chaining themselves to a cold, inhuman, inflexible logic—or the personal—casting themselves adrift on a capricious and dangerous swell of emotion and intuition. Both these unbiblical emphases reflect a partial and lopsided view of reality. But for the Bible there is no zero-sum game between the personal and the absolute, between order and creativity, between law and love, between the arts and the sciences. They are

perfectly complementary in the absolute-personal God, and later in this book we will see similar complementarities when we come to discuss the incarnation and the simultaneous blossoming of the individual and the universal in the Pauline epistles.

ULTIMATE REALITY IS RELATIONAL

As well as being absolute and personal, God is also Trinity. Before we think about the implications of this richest of truths, let us briefly deal with the question of vocabulary. *Trinity* is not a word that appears in the Bible. Nor are *person* or *personalness* for that matter . . . or *Bible* in the singular, referring to the combined books of the Old and New Testaments. Should we therefore refrain from using these terms? That would be a strange principle to follow; we use many words to describe the Bible that are not in the Bible. A rather indignant John Calvin puts the point in his characteristically forceful way:

Now, then, though heretics may snarl and the excessively fastidious carp at the word “person” as inadmissible, in consequence of its human origin, since they cannot displace us from our position that three are named, each of whom is perfect God, and yet that there is no plurality of gods, it is most uncandid to attack the terms which do nothing more than explain what the Scriptures declare and sanction.¹⁰

In other (less pugnacious) terms, vocabulary that is itself derived from biblical truth can be helpful in giving us accurate ways to express what is taught in biblical revelation, even when it uses words that are not themselves to be found in the Scriptures, though we should be careful not to assume that everything we mean today by words like *person* and *relationship* in modern English usage are directly reflected in the Godhead.

The biblical God, then, is one God in three persons. So what? For one thing, it means that, just as personalness itself is basic and not an emergent property, so also relationship is part of the fabric of reality right from the beginning, not something that enters the story of this universe later on. God is not a Robinson Crusoe deity, all alone on a precreation island, who only afterwards enters into relationships; his being is relational from before the very beginning.

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 1.13.3, 64.

The One, the Trinity, and the Many

One of the far-reaching consequences of this irreducible relationality is that it provides a distinctively Christian take on what is perhaps the most enduring and fundamental of all philosophical questions: the problem of the one and the many. As Cornelius Van Til notes, “The whole problem of knowledge has constantly been that of bringing the one and the many together.”¹¹ If ultimate reality is many (many deities, many elements, or many principles or independent forces), how can we meaningfully group individual things under common categories, and if ultimate reality is one (one all-encompassing deity, one element, or one unified principle or force), how can we account for difference and the seeming plurality of things?

The Bible sets up the question a little differently: both the doctrine of the ultimate unity of the universe (monism) and the doctrine of its ultimate diversity (pluralism) are heresies equally reductive of a more complex reality; creation is both one and many because the God who made it is both one and many with an “equal ultimacy” in which neither the one nor the many predates or contains the other.¹² So the Bible never feels the need to “bring the one and the many together” for the very good reason that they were never separated in the first place. As David Bentley Hart emphasizes, to see the Trinity simply as a solution to the one-many problem in its own terms “misses what is genuinely of interest in the matter” because “the truly unexpected implication of Trinitarian dogma is that Christian thought has no metaphysics of the one and the many, the same and the different, because that is a polarity that has no place in the Christian narrative”¹³ as a foundational dichotomy from which everything derives.

This is why the Trinity is one of those biblical realities we simply cannot force into our existing categories; it is a new wine that breaks our old philosophical wineskins. We need to let the Trinity take apart our old categories at the seams and remake them in a more sophisticated way. If we let the Trinity provide us with a blueprint for reality, we find that we are living in a universe where “everything may be what it is and not another thing, but it is also what it uniquely is by virtue of its relation to everything else.”¹⁴ Singularity and plurality, uniqueness and community, share a peaceful coexistence in a Trinitarian model of reality.

11. Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979), 10.

12. Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 231.

13. David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 180.

14. Colin E. Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 173.

Another way of framing the dynamism of the Trinity is that it combines what is desirable and productive in both polytheism and unitarian monotheism, combining in one coherent reality the reasons why those two dichotomous positions are attractive to those who hold them. Biblical Trinitarianism is the subversive fulfilment of Unitarianism and polytheism, or in the words of Gregory of Nyssa, the Trinity is distinguished by “destroying each heresy and yet accepting everything useful from each.”¹⁵

Trinity and Society

It would be selling the Trinity unpardonably short to imply that its implications are exclusively philosophical. It provides us with tools to help us think about and inhabit society in ways that have very deep and far-reaching consequences too. In fact, the Trinity presents a way of successfully navigating a dichotomy that characterizes traditional and modern societies alike.

Many traditional societies value communal, shared identity at the expense of the welfare of the individual, stifling personal expression and insisting on a deadening conformity for the sake of the collective. In Charles Taylor’s terms, the self in such societies is “porous,” defined by outside influences, by its place and station in society, and by “inherently living socially.”¹⁶ I get my identity from my location in the whole, and heroism is found in sacrificing one’s desires for the good of the community. Why do pre-Renaissance portraits make little effort to represent the distinctive features of the individual? Why, for that matter, are there relatively few pre-Renaissance portraits of living individuals? The reason, in part, is that the individual matters relatively little; the social structure is of prime importance.

Modern Western societies, by contrast, value the atomized individual at the expense of the welfare of the community, focusing everyone on personal self-expression and self-actualization often at the expense of some of the weakest and most vulnerable among us. This is one feature of Taylor’s “buffered” self, for whom “my ultimate purposes are those which arise within me, the crucial meanings of things are those defined in my responses to them.”¹⁷ According to this experience of the world, the modern paradigm of heroism is defining your own identity in the teeth of a “them” who want to stifle you and make you conform.

15. Gregory of Nyssa, *The Great Catechism*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, vol. 5 (New York: Cosimo, 2007), 477.

16. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 42.

17. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 38.

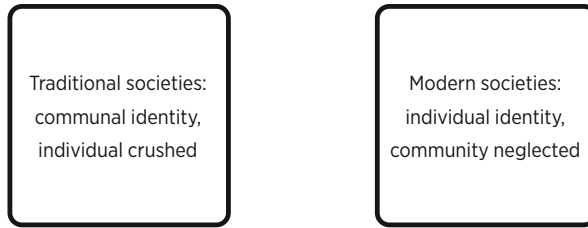


Figure 14: Traditional-Modern Dichotomy

But the pattern of the Son serving the Father (John 6:38) and of the mutual glory-giving in the Christian Trinity (John 17:1) neither crushes the threeness under the weight of the oneness nor destroys the oneness for the sake of keeping the three distinct. Instead, it sets relationships of mutual service, mutual respect, and mutual flourishing at the heart of reality.

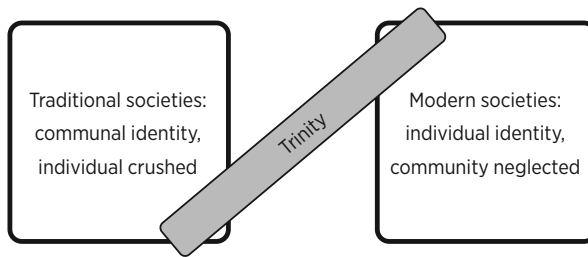


Figure 15: Traditional-Modern Dichotomy Diagonalized

Trinity and Politics

The Trinity also issues a challenge to prevailing political paradigms.¹⁸ Modern political thought has a tendency to resolve into a dichotomy of the one (the state) and the many (the individuals within the state), with relatively little regard for families and the nonstate organizations and groups that go by the name of “civil society.” This is true of social contract theory¹⁹ and of Marxist-influenced political theories, both of which tend to see civil society groups as a potential threat to efficient and unencumbered social change.

18. It is perhaps worth saying that I do not intend these remarks to represent a wholesale metaphysical revisionist program of the Trinity, or to make a case for the exclusivity of the Trinity in determining the normative pattern of society. My case is that fundamental ontology—which, in the case of the Bible, is Trinitarian—is one of the influences on normative views of society. This is assumed among almost all philosophers, from Plato through Spinoza, Kant, Hegel, Deleuze, and Derrida.

19. In chapter 8 of *The Social Contract* (the “civil religion” chapter), Rousseau is quite explicit about the danger of institutions like the church getting in the way of the unmediated relationship between the state and the citizen.

This has led to what has been called “the ontological and political complicit collusion of the one and the many”²⁰ that characterizes both right-leaning and left-leaning totalitarianisms, both of which share “a hierarchical dualism whereby the sovereign one holds supreme sway over the disempowered many” or “an inverted hierarchical dualism whereby the many are now superior to the one.”²¹ The philosophical dichotomy of the one and the many translates into “the similarly enduring ethical temptation of either absolutism or relativism.”²²

The Trinity, however, disrupts this unappealing dichotomy and gives us the tools to insert a third term into its core, a term that John Milbank, following Joseph Ratzinger, calls *the few*: a commonality small enough for meaningful mutual relationships, but not so small as to be reduced to atomized individuals. The few is neither the one (the individual) nor the many (the state), but in its Christian guise, what Milbank calls the “extended few,” it is those “mediating organizations” of civil society that act as a bulwark against the seesaw antagonism between the one and the many and that in some measure protect the individual from facing the state in atomized—and therefore vulnerable—isolation.

Milbank argues that modern political theory on both the left and the right “is characterized by an attempt to excoriate and remove the role of the few, regarded as the seat of privilege, of non-consensual power, of debatable claims to ethical value and as a threat alike to overall unity and individual liberty.”²³ The irony of the situation, to which Milbank alludes, is that the state is itself always already a particular “few,” a particular seat of privilege, of nonconsensual power, and of dubious ethics. Those who operate the levers of the state do not seek to eliminate privilege per se; they attempt to eliminate privileges that rival their own, the checks and balances on the state’s protected position. This is an erosion of freedom in Milbank’s eyes because “no individual possesses any real liberties unless he can express these through the relative freedom of the local corporate body—the school, the club, the hospital, the trade union, the co-operative association and so forth.”²⁴ It is instructive, in this respect, to reflect on the important role of Christianity in the origins of the trade union movements in Britain and elsewhere, along with the idea that “the [British] Labour party owes more to Methodism than Marx.”²⁵ The Trinity provides the blueprint and mandate for the mediation between the one and the many that is often lacking in modern political life.

20. Adrian Pabst, *Metaphysics: The Creation of Hierarchy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 426.

21. Pabst, *Metaphysics*, 426–27.

22. Pabst, *Metaphysics*, 453.

23. Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 159.

24. Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 160.

25. Harold Wilson, *The Relevance of British Socialism* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964), 1.

ULTIMATE REALITY IS LOVE

Thus far we have seen that God is personal, absolute, and relational. But just as there is no vanilla-flavored generic god, so also there is no blank relationship. Relationships can be distant or intimate, explosive or cool, complex or formulaic. What sort of relationship, then, characterizes the persons of the Trinity? If we cast an eye over the verses in the Bible referring to God's activity before creation, we see that intra-Trinitarian relations are characterized consistently not by discord, competition, or rivalry, much less by apathy or a functional focus on just "getting things done," but by love. This means that we live in a universe in which love, as the Bible understands it, is fundamental and original.

Had it not been for the stubborn presence in the Bible of 1 John 4:8 and 16 ("God is love"), I think I would have entitled this section "Ultimate Reality Is Loving." But in the light of John's repeated statement (in case we missed it the first time!), I feel I am selling the Bible short if I do not make the stronger claim: ultimate reality is not simply loving, but love itself. After all, John could easily have written "God is loving." Elsewhere in the Bible, God and his ways are indeed described in that way (Ps 32:8; 144:2). But John didn't write that. He wrote "God is love," "the most daring statement that has ever been made in human language."²⁶ God is not one example of love, not even the greatest example of love, but love itself. As Augustine notes, when we reflect on God as Trinity, we do so with the question, "What is true love, nay, rather what is love?"²⁷

So, what *is* love? It is an important question to ask, because many conflicting definitions circulate in our society. God's love is not everything that goes under the banner of love today.²⁸ The love of God has particular contours. Three times John writes, "This is love":

This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. (1 John 4:10)

In fact, this is love for God: to keep his commands. And his commands are not burdensome. (1 John 5:3)

26. Emil Brunner, *Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1950), 185.

27. Augustine, *On the Holy Trinity* 8.7.10, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 1st series, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 3 (New York: Cosimo, 2007), 122.

28. Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us that, while we can affirm that "God is love," the inverse "love is God" is not a biblical position. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Ilse Tödt et al., trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* 6 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 334.

And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in love. (2 John 1:6)

I shall be discussing the Greek term *agapē*—translated “love” here—when I come to the cross. For now, let me draw some brief conclusions from the very statement that “God is love.” For John, love is not defined in the abstract but embodied in action. Each mention of “this is love” is followed not by a definition but by an exemplary action. We know love by what it does. God loved so he sent (John 3:16); we love so we obey (1 John 5:3; 2 John 1:6). When God loves, he does not act to acquire or accumulate; he gives his Son, his very self, for unworthy others (Rom 3:10–12). Trinitarian love is the Father sending the Son and the Son obeying the Father. God’s love “does not seek value, but it creates value or gives value; it does not desire to get but to give; it is not ‘attracted’ by some lovable quality, but it is poured out on those who are worthless and degraded.”²⁹

Brunner argues that “the message that God is Love, is something wholly new in the world”; to call Zeus, Jupiter, Brahma, or Allah love would be “obviously wholly impossible.” As for Plato, he “would have met the statement ‘God is Love’ with a bewildered shake of the head,” because for Plato “a god does not have any intercourse with men.”³⁰ This wholly new idea that God is love has far-reaching implications for relationships and society, two of which I shall now explore.

Alterity, Violence, and Love

The Trinity sets the cat among the pigeons in one of the defining distinctions in twentieth-century thought and society: the ethics of sameness and alterity. In philosophical guise the stakes of this distinction are summed up in Jacques Derrida’s phrase “every other is wholly other” (the French is a little more elegant: “tout autre est tout autre”),³¹ and in the warning that everything I might try to say about “the Other” is necessarily violent because I am reducing—or “totalizing”—their unique alterity by forcing it into language’s general categories. To speak plainly: I shouldn’t presume to know who you are or what you want or are thinking because that reduces your alterity to my idea of you: I assume that you—indeed that everyone—is just like me. At its height, this fear of totalizing the Other became something of a fetish; in book after book I have read from the 1980s and 1990s it seems that the author fears he or she will

29. Brunner, *Dogmatics*, 1:186.

30. Brunner, *Dogmatics*, 1:183.

31. See for example Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999), 77–78.

not be taken seriously unless they mention alterity or totalization—preferably both—on every other page!

Stylistic excesses aside, there is a very serious and very important impetus behind this recourse to the language of alterity. The danger of totalization comes into clear focus when we consider the politics of phrases like “Oh, she’s a Jew, and careful with her money too” and “The shooting was carried out by a black man.” Wagon loads of cultural baggage, history, and prejudice are freighted in those brief statements, inevitably framing the person who is being spoken of in a particular way by highlighting certain aspects of their identity and not others. Their individuality is reduced to a symbol, their uniqueness to an idea. In its everyday guise, this logic of sameness and alterity has filtered its way into the dominant social imaginary in phrases such as “no one can judge me” and “you do you.”

There is undoubtedly something vital and necessary in resisting totalization. Yet there is a problem with this desire not to do violence to the Other, and David Bentley Hart puts his finger on it. The work of writers who resist tying the Other down by our categories and assumptions, such as Emmanuel Levinas, leads to “a selflessness so hyperbolic that it must ultimately erase everything distinct, desirable, and genuinely other in the other in order to preserve itself from the contamination of need, dependency, or hope.”³² The Other is left without totalization but also “without theme, context, contour, identity” and therefore is not really other at all. The good becomes identified with an abstract indeterminacy that can never embrace the richness of intimacy.

In contrast to this obsessively cautious honoring of an abstract and distant other, the love relationships of the Trinity provide tools that help us to understand sameness and difference in a way that provides for distinctness, distance, and honoring, as well as intimacy, knowledge, and mutuality. As John Frame points out, for a Christian view of the world “there is no unity without plurality, and no plurality without unity.”³³ The other person is infinite (in the sense that I can never fully understand them) but not infinitely removed from me in inaccessible loftiness as in the logic of sameness and alterity. In a Christian frame, the infinity of the other is found in “the free and boundlessly beautiful rhetoric of a shared infinite” that comes from seeing the other “within and by way of Christ,” as “the object of [God’s] love, the splendor of his glory.”³⁴ This infinity both draws me and the other together and also makes us utterly irreducible to

32. Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 82.

33. John Frame, *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2015), 30.

34. Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 300.

one another: the other is both my fellow beloved creature and an utterly unique and irreplaceable singularity.

The Trinity provides a model of relating that marries inalienable dignity with incomparable intimacy, distinctiveness with mutuality. As Gilbert Meilaender notes, “In the mystery of that life none of the persons lives independently; yet, distinction remains. Within the life of God something analogous to society exists.”³⁵ Approaching the Other is no longer an act of threatening violence like Derrida supposes it to be; it is now a doxological rejoicing in a gift. To say that the other is a gift is not to reduce him or her to a possession with which I can do what I want; it is to say that my first mode of encountering the other is a posture of wonder and glory-giving to the God of lofty intimacy.

My language, furthermore, is no longer a totalizing threat to the Other but a means of hospitality and receptivity. Hart explains that “the mediation of thought and language may be conceived not simply as a reduction of alterity to the Same, but as a charitable venture, in accord with an infinite that reveals itself as beauty, and hence the continuous enrichment of difference through peaceful supplementation and discovery.”³⁶ Thought and language are part of the way in which, to use Miroslav Volf’s metaphor, I open my arms to invite embrace, so as not to seize the other, and re-open my arms at the end of the embrace so as not to absorb them.³⁷ Now of course, words can still wound, stereotypes still exist, and no human relationship embodies this plenitude of peaceful praise. Alienation and abuse are real, and they will be discussed at length in the chapters on sin. The point I am making here is that the Trinity locates, at the very bedrock of relationality, deeper and more foundational than abuse and slander, not an “original violence” but the openness of irenic wonder, a “determinate word of peace, which loves” and which “corresponds to and participates in and is nourished by the infinite rhetoric of God’s Trinitarian discourse of love.”³⁸

The Ethic of Love and the Ethic of Violence

In views of the world where love is not primary, it is often violence that takes its place of ultimacy. Many ancient creation myths imagine the world born out of a war between the gods or from a violent act (see the discussion of creation

35. Gilbert Meilaender, *The Taste for the Other: The Social and Ethical Thought of C. S. Lewis* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1978), 62. Meilaender is summarizing an argument in Lewis’s *The Problem of Pain*.

36. Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 142.

37. See Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996). I am grateful to Mikey Lynch for drawing my attention to Volf in this context.

38. Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 300.

below). Ancient societies enshrined violent power exercised through coercion every time they invaded, conquered, or laid waste another territory or murdered, raped, abducted, or subdued other nations. Thousands of years later, wars the world over still predictably follow the same horrific playbook.

This primacy of violent power is sadly not confined to the barbarities of war. Thomas Hobbes, one of the founders of modern political theory, grounds his idea of political community on the unconstrained “sovereign power” of an authority (called Leviathan) that can take life as it pleases and answers to no higher power. As for the later writing of Friedrich Nietzsche, everything is reducible to an exercise of the “will to power.” Milbank writes, “There emerges to view a hidden thread of continuity between antique reason and modern, secular reason. This thread of continuity is the theme of ‘original violence.’”³⁹ Modern political thought, then, is built on an “ontology of violence.”⁴⁰ When love appears within this fundamentally agonistic view of reality, it does so only as the temporary privation of violent coercion; nonviolence is only the passing absence of otherwise ubiquitous force. By contrast, it is no exaggeration to say that in the Trinity the Bible gives us an ontology of love, that for a Christian Trinitarian view, love is “the original law of human social being,”⁴¹ and that violence is its negation.⁴²

This difference between love and violence is not quite the same as a difference between love and power.⁴³ God’s love is not an abnegation of power; on the contrary, it is the deployment of overwhelming power to rescue his people (Deut 7:8), overpowering the mightiest “powers and authorities” in creation (Col 2:15). The difference is not between power and love but between power expressed in and as violence and power expressed in and as love. These positions are not symmetrical. All that needs to happen for power to become violent is that it be removed from the context of love in which it finds itself in God’s character. Modern social theory has developed an idea of power stripped of all love—a Christian heresy that Milbank traces back to William of Ockham, who thought

39. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 5.

40. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 4.

41. John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (New York: Wiley Blackwell, 1997), 252n10.

42. This evocation of an “ethic of love” is not intended to imply that love is the only relevant concept in a Christian ethic; it is meant to reflect its central place in Jesus’s teaching and the witness of the New Testament. For a discussion of the dangers of a Christian ethic based exclusively on love, to the exclusion of faith and hope, see Oliver O’Donovan, *Entering into Rest*, Ethics as Theology 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), viii.

43. This is contrary to what I have previously argued. See Christopher Watkin, *Thinking through Creation: Genesis 1 and 2 as Tools of Cultural Critique* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2017). I am grateful to Mikey Lynch for pushing me to think more about the relationships between power, love, and violence.

that God's power was absolute, unconstrained, and unmediated—and a biblical idea of loving-power, that is, power always expressed in and through love.

It is only when we begin with the Trinity that love, not violence, is primary and fundamental. Milbank again argues that “Christianity, uniquely, does not allow violence any real ontological purchase.”⁴⁴ In fact, it introduces an attractive alternative to the reduction of relationships to will and of will to power. Instead of a will-to-power, Christian Trinitarian theism has a will-to-charity (*agapē*), and this inscribes self-giving rather than the *libido dominandi* (will-to-power) at the heart of reality.

We can also note that power is not the only element of God's character that the modern world extracts and isolates from its integrated biblical context. Just as there can be a loveless, brute power that expresses itself in violence, there can also be an impotent, ineffectual love or compassion, something like the feeling experienced by Mrs. McGillicuddy in Agatha Christie's *4.50 From Paddington*, horrified to witness a murder through a train carriage window and utterly powerless to intervene. This is also the love of the “beautiful soul,” lampooned by Hegel. This beautiful soul is so in love with the idea of itself as loving that it “lives in dread of besmirching the splendor of its inner being by action and an existence; and, in order to preserve the purity of its heart, it flees from contact with the real world, and persists in its stubborn impotence to renounce its self which is reduced to the extreme of ultimate abstraction.”⁴⁵ There is perhaps an analogy here between Hegel's beautiful soul and those ostentatious displays of compassion and love on social media that do more to bolster the poster's sense of their own loveliness than to effect any change.

CONCLUSION

As we look back on these four distinctives of the biblical view of God, we can see that our understanding of ultimate reality has real, far-reaching, and practical consequences for our approach to society and culture. It determines whether we think that everything personal is reducible to the impersonal, or that everything impersonal is caught up with the personal. It determines whether we believe in a balkanized reality where each jurisdiction has its own bespoke reference for the good, true, and beautiful, or in a unified reality with universal truths and measures of the good. It determines whether we think that the atomized individual, the group, or the individual in relationship is the basis of society, and

44. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 440.

45. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 400.

whether we understand violence or love to be the fundamental force shaping social relations. It has consequences for everything from the organization of the family through politics to whether we think that love creates or rewards value.

We have also seen a stark opposition between a Christian Trinitarian conception of God in which love is the most fundamental way of relating in the universe and a view shared by ancient pagan and much modern secular thought in which violence is the most basic dynamic of reality, of the will, and of society. Next we turn to the opening two chapters of Genesis to explore how God created and what he created. Once more we will encounter in these chapters signature biblical figures that shape a Christian view of culture, of society, of ourselves, and of the world.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. **HOT TAKE:** Take one thought from this chapter and write a note that will travel back in time to *yourself* five years ago. The note begins “You really need to think about this because . . .”
2. “We commit a grave error when we put the doctrine of the Trinity in the ‘too hard’ or ‘too controversial’ box of Christian doctrines.” Why?
3. Explain in your own words the difference between living in a universe where everything personal reduces to the impersonal and living in a universe where everything impersonal is transfigured by its personal origin.
4. When theologians say that biblical religion is an absolute personality theism, what do they mean?
5. How does the biblical God provide the basis for both the sciences and the arts?
6. How does the Trinity diagonalize the overemphases of both traditional and modern views of society?
7. How does the Trinity address the problem identified by postmodern thinkers like Derrida that language is violent?
8. How is biblical loving-power different to the brute power of Roman law and modern social theory?

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