

SPIRITUAL *AND* RELIGIOUS



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THE GOSPEL IN AN
AGE OF PAGANISM

N. T. WRIGHT

 ZONDERVAN
REFLECTIVE



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Spiritual and Religious

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Requests for information should be addressed to customer care@harpercollins.com.

Original edition published in English under the title *Spiritual and Religious: The Gospel In An Age Of Paganism* by SPCK Publishing part of SPCK Group, London, England, UK

SPCK

Publishing part of SPCK Group

London, England, UK

www.spck.org.uk

ISBN 978-0-310-17274-1 (softcover)

ISBN 978-0-310-17288-8 (audio)

ISBN 978-0-310-17287-1 (ebook)

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Cover design: Thinkpen Design

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Printed in the United States of America

\$PrintCode

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Preface

The challenges facing today's church often seem insuperable. Those of us who grew up in the UK when churchgoing was still relatively fashionable have watched attendances dwindle, have heard the media laughing at Christians and their beliefs, and have seen Christian values thrown overboard in public life. The same thing has been happening in other parts of the Western world, albeit more slowly in the USA. We know that the church is expanding in the so-called 'developing' countries, but that only makes some commentators sneer at the naivety of such 'unenlightened' societies. In place of an earlier faith, many forms of paganism are now on the rise. It is as well for Christians to be realistic about their present embattled situation.

Two things, however, have to be remembered. First, the early church faced a pagan world far more powerful and entrenched than ours. The gospel of Jesus was born into a world where its central claims were laughed out of court. The message of the crucified Messiah was, as St Paul put it, a scandal to Jews and madness to non-Jews. The wider world was neither expecting nor wanting the kind of 'news' that the early Christians were proclaiming. They already had their own well-developed culture, complete with their own gods and goddesses. Paganism was an entire way of life. Its 'religion' – the worship of the many deities of the ancient world, and the practices that went with that – was simply one way of expressing graphically what human life was supposed to be all about. Our challenges are as nothing to the ones faced by the first Christians. Welcome (they might say) to the normal Christian world.

Second, as the early Christians thought through their faith they saw the death and resurrection of Jesus as the victory of the true God over all the powers of the pagan world. This was paradoxical, to say the least. The pagan world went on persecuting and killing them. But the lived-out message of the gospel made its way none the less. Indeed, the courage of Christians facing torture and death, and above all the love which they showed to one another and even to their persecutors, made people realize that they were embodying a new way of being human. A way which reflected a true God, totally

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unlike the gods and goddesses the world had known before. So when we go back to the first Christians, and especially the writings of the New Testament, we find a message which fits our own times as much as theirs. If we face a resurgent paganism, we face it with the same assurance of victory as our forebears had.

The present book is written to draw attention to the ways in which various forms of paganism have once again become prominent in our world – and to suggest that, when we look at certain things that have been going on in the church, we don't merely see worrying indications of decline; we see exciting signs that God is doing new things. My overall proposal is that the true and living God has been equipping the church in a variety of ways, ways which seem expressly designed to enable us to meet the new challenges we now face.

One way in which this challenge is often posed can be seen when people say that they are 'not religious', but that they are, in some way, 'spiritual'. By 'not religious' they usually mean that they don't go to church, don't regularly pray, and almost certainly don't read the Bible. But when we look more closely at the way our contemporary world actually works we discover, as we see in this book, that today's society is in fact very 'religious'. The signs of this – the worship of Mammon (the god of money), Aphrodite (the goddess of erotic love), Mars (the god of war or violence) and many other deities – are engrained in the way we think, in the assumptions we make about 'how life works'. When people in this world say they are 'spiritual' what they often mean is that they are aware of 'spiritual' dimensions in their lives (perhaps glimpsed in art or music). There are fewer closed-minded materialists around than there used to be. But the 'spiritualities' of today's world often belong, not with the Jewish or Christian traditions, but with the new paganisms themselves. Today's world is 'spiritual' *and* 'religious', even if both those terms are slippery and easily misunderstood.

The Christian approach to this world, like the early Christian approach to the paganisms of late antiquity, is rooted in the biblical story, focused especially in the story of Jesus himself. The first half of this book therefore follows the double pathway of exploring the world of paganism on the one hand and the story of Israel, with its focus on Jesus and his death and resurrection, on the other. This half of the book follows the journey which many Christians take in Lent each

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year, starting with Ash Wednesday, a time of reflection and penitence, and moving on to stand at the foot of the cross on Good Friday.

The second half of the book begins with Jesus' victorious resurrection on Easter Sunday. It then works forward, exploring the many new things that God has been doing in the church in recent decades, and suggesting ways in which these movements equip the church for a true, rich spirituality, a 'religion' that goes far beyond the outward shell and into a life-transforming encounter with God and an outward-looking confrontation with the paganisms which corrupt and deface his world. The church from ancient times has celebrated this new way of life in the Sundays following Easter, moving on to the Ascension which sees Jesus enthroned as the true lord of the world (over against all rival divinities), to the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and so to the celebration of the life-giving mystery of the Trinity. The second half of the book follows this sequence. The two halves of the book could therefore be used for personal or group studies (for which questions are suggested at the end of each chapter) in the weeks leading up to, and then leading on from, Good Friday and Easter.

This book is a revised version of *New Tasks for a Renewed Church* (in the USA, *Bringing the Church to the World*), originally published in 1992. That book was designed as a gift to the Anglican Diocese of Newcastle upon Tyne in advance of their Diocesan Conference where I was to be one of the main speakers. My prayer now, as then, is that it will help people across the spectrum of Christian faith to glimpse the deeper realities behind today's language of 'spiritual' and 'religious', and to see how the gospel of Jesus enables us to celebrate, and make real in our lives, the new creation which upstages and overthrows all the puffed-up pretensions of paganism.

Tom Wright
St Andrews



Preface to the North American edition

In the West, it is quite common to hear people say, “Well, I’m spiritual, but of course I’m not religious,” by which they mean “I don’t want to go anywhere near a church, thank you very much.”

In my book *Spiritual and Religious*, I’m trying to put the two ideas back together again and show why the worship of God, reading the Bible, prayer, and the other “religious practices” actually feed a genuine and healthy spirituality in ways that many in our generation have all but forgotten. The gift of genuine humanness, both individual and corporate, is found not in some general, vague feeling of spiritual transcendence but in the cross, the resurrection, and the Spirit. As many generations have found, you don’t have to throw out those very specific and Jesus-focused themes in order to become “relevant.” On the contrary, when you allow the story of Jesus, with its shocking and dramatic climax, to get under your skin, then fresh “relevance” will bubble up, often in surprising places. Thus, out of what many will think of as the “religious” world (churches holding worship services, including a biblical focus on Jesus himself) will emerge, again and again, a life-giving and life-enhancing “spirituality” that answers to the deepest longings of human hearts and communities.

The book was originally designed to help one particular community from within my own church, the Church of England. It’s structured around the readings that were given for successive Sundays in the church’s year, providing a natural but quite deep-rooted sequence of thought that enables us to think through many of the key issues facing us in today’s culture.

I really hope that people reading this book will be stimulated not only to fresh thought and prayer, but to wise decision-making. We need to grow a new generation of thoughtful, biblically oriented Christians who know how to navigate their faith in tomorrow’s

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world—to worship the God who is Father, Son, and Spirit, and to find in that worship a renewed courage, a renewed sense of direction, and a renewed hope for the future. And I hope this short book will help them do that.

N. T. Wright
Wycliffe Hall, Oxford

Introduction

The train (for once) was early, and stopped on the bridge over the Tyne for a few minutes before pulling in to Newcastle Central Station. I looked out of the window towards the city centre and tried to pick out the familiar landmark of the cathedral among the other buildings. But where was it? It seemed to have disappeared since I was last there. Then I realized. Where I had been expecting the famous lantern tower, all I could see was scaffolding. The cathedral was in the process of having a face-lift. I couldn't see it at that moment, but when it eventually reappeared it would be all the brighter.

Writing about God, the church and the world – in other words, writing theology – can be a bit like erecting scaffolding round a spire. For some of the time, it may seem to obscure the sharp image of the church's witness etched against the secular images all around it. But theology, and biblical study, do not exist for their own sake (though, like a good scaffolder, we theologians sometimes take pride in our work). They exist in order to get the church back into shape for the tasks it needs to perform. There is fabric to be inspected, and some bits need repairing. There are features that ought to be standing out clearly which have been worn smooth by the wind and rain of contemporary thought and pressure. The outline as a whole needs sharpening up. If this book can contribute to the process, I shall be pleased.

The argument I want to advance is quite simple:

- 1 I believe that our current society presents a new set of challenges to the church. These are significantly different from the challenges that Christians have perceived, and responded to, in recent decades. Fortunately, although these challenges are new to us, they are not totally new in themselves, and we are able to draw on wisdom from the past in addressing them.
- 2 I believe that the various movements of renewal which have been taking place in the church in the past few decades have been preparing us to meet exactly these challenges. There has been a renewal of Christian interest in ecumenism, in liturgy, in the Holy Spirit, in biblical study, in social and political action, and many other

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things. Taken by themselves, these movements can become the hobbyhorses of single-issue fanatics, while the rest of the church wonders what all the fuss is about. But give the church a new sense of direction, a new vision of the challenges that it now faces; show it that, to meet these challenges, it needs to draw on the best that all these renewal movements have to offer; and instead of being the hobbyhorse of a few they become instead the resource-kit of the many. There are new tasks facing us, and a renewed church can face up to them in the knowledge that, through the wise provision of her Lord, she is in principle equal to them.

- 3 These new tasks for the church demand a new look at, and perhaps understanding of, the question: What is our gospel? It is my firm belief that the answer to this question is found in a new examination of the basic story of Jesus, understanding it within the Jewish context of the time.

Putting these things together, we arrive at the shape of this book. If we are to grasp our present task, we need first of all a clear vision of two entities that at first sight look very different but which in fact have a lot in common.

On the one hand we need to see more clearly what exactly is going on in the modern world, not least the modern Western world. T. S. Eliot, writing in his book *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939), argued forcefully that societies do not stand still; if they do not embrace a positive ideal (he was advocating the Christian one) they will drift in some other direction. Since Eliot wrote this, we have seen his predictions come true. Those who flatter themselves that they still live in a Christian society today are simply out of touch with reality. We have been drifting towards various sorts of paganism, and it is time to call spades by their proper names.

On the other hand, we need to see more clearly the shape and significance of the central gospel events: the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Without that we're stuck with a diagnosis and no treatment.

These two things, therefore – analysis of our contemporary culture, and analysis of the gospel events – march side by side through the first half of the book, coming together in Chapters 6 and 7 in a treatment of the cross and resurrection as the divine answer to the plight of the whole world, past, present and future.

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The second half of the book applies this more specifically to the details of the present day. If we are to confront the new paganism, we need to worship the true God whose image we are called to bear. Armed with the Bible – and using it responsibly, not as a railway timetable! – we are to address the gods of our day with the news that their time is up. This task cannot be done simply by saying things to one another behind locked doors, and we need to explore some suggestions for hammering it out in practice. If the church is to *be* the church for the world, in any way that makes sense today, it must constantly celebrate and announce the lordship of Jesus in appropriate, constructive and telling ways; and it must do this conscious of the sustaining, humbling and directing power and presence of the Holy Spirit. Ultimately, if the church is to be the church for the world it must recapture a vision of the God who is the true God. This set of issues is our concern in the second half of the book.

I have included a final chapter, as an epilogue, suggesting one particular prayer, and a way of praying it, which picks up the major themes from the book. Some might wish to read this chapter first, and to allow it as it were to pervade and deepen the reading of the rest.



Part 1

THE MODERN WORLD AND
THE CHRISTIAN MESSAGE



1

The kingdom and the church

Announcing the kingdom

It was a hot, sticky afternoon in early summer. I sat in a traffic jam in downtown Montreal, wishing, not for the first time, that the car had air-conditioning. I turned on the radio. A news bulletin slotted itself in between other items. Out in Vancouver a big international exhibition was getting under way. It was the turn of the Russian pavilion to put on its display. There were dignitaries, receptions, speeches. Then, all of a sudden – and this was why it had made the news headlines – a young Jewish man rushed up from the audience and grabbed the microphone. ‘I have a message for the Russian people,’ he shouted. ‘And it’s this: there is a God, and he is calling them to account. He will bring them to judgment for . . .’ – but the rest of what he wanted to say was drowned by officials hurriedly snatching back the microphone and bustling him out of the way. I sat there in the traffic jam, listening to the commotion, and the thought struck me with peculiar force: that man was announcing the kingdom of God. Then the second thought: *he doesn’t even know the name of the King.*

The ambiguities of his action were plain for all to see. Is that the way to make a protest? Won’t it do more harm than good? Surely it’s better to work through the normal channels? But the normal channels are just as problematic. And what about the church? Is the church supposed to be standing up and saying something? If so, what? Which microphones should it be grabbing, and what announcement or message should it be getting out before the microphone is snatched back? And, if that young Jew was right in calling the Russian people to repent because of the coming judgment of God, how does his message apply (if at all) to the church or world elsewhere? What ought we to be repenting of, and what difference might it make?

The poignancy of that moment was heightened for me by a second experience, again to do with Vancouver. I was lecturing in the

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city later that same summer, and had a chance to visit the exhibition. Each country had its own pavilion, displaying different aspects of the national culture. Most striking, to me, were the displays of countries like Pakistan and Saudi Arabia: no sooner did we walk in than we were reminded in symbols and words that these were Islamic countries, running their societies according to the Book, the Qur'an. Everything else was arranged so as to reflect this basic conviction.

And what was the parallel in the pavilions of Western Europe and North America? There was no sign that these countries were (or had been) in any sense 'Christian', except for the odd picture of a cathedral, included as part of the cultural heritage. Instead, what was communicated, as powerfully as the Islamic symbols and words communicated their basic stance, was a commitment on the part of the Western nations to a particular set of cultural symbols: the factory, the industrial complex, the technological innovation. The message came over loud and clear: these countries were basically into the business of making money. Industry and technology were the names of the game, and we were playing it better than anybody else.

And what about the Christian gospel, which used to be, however ambiguously, at the centre of Western culture? Well, at one end of the exhibition site there was a pavilion different from all the others. It was a Christian pavilion. It was attractive, bright, well organized. Inside were books, films, tracts, an amazing variety of presentations and material, inviting people from any nation to find in Jesus Christ that which they could find nowhere else.

Once again I was powerfully struck by a question which has stayed with me, and which is partly responsible for the genesis of this book. Is that really the church's task? Is the church really to sit on the margins of the world, offering a salvation which is an escape, which seems to leave the world to go its own way? Is there no sense in which the gospel has to challenge the central position of technology and business in modern Western society, which has made these the Western equivalent of the Qur'an? Is there no sense, for that matter, in which the gospel has to challenge the central position that the Qur'an itself has in many countries in the world? Is the only purpose of the gospel to offer people a private religious option which, at least at first sight, seems to leave the rest of their lives untouched?

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These two vignettes from Vancouver set the scene for the questions we need to address. What are the tasks to which the church is called within society today? How are we to go about grasping them and implementing them? The church, in the Western world at least, has oscillated between two understandings of the task. Are we to leap with both feet into the political pit of snakes, issuing denunciations to left and right, and getting ourselves a bad name for mingling religion and politics, or are we to offer the world a salvation which seems to mean escaping from the world into a private sphere? And, even supposing we could solve this problem at the level of the church's 'official' policy, what does this mean for the ordinary Christian, who carries no political clout and has no particular evangelistic gift?

These are the questions that drive me to reflect, in this first chapter, on repentance, on contrition, on turning away from evil. There is no doubt that something is wrong with our world, and with us as human beings; but what is it that's wrong? How do we go about putting it right? What, in other words, should we be repenting of?

I want to suggest that the church must indeed summon the world to repent, but in a different way from that normally imagined by preachers of either the 'social gospel' of political activism or the 'simple gospel' of personal piety. The modern world is in a crisis of identity. We are like the absent-minded professor who sent a telegram to his wife: 'Am in Coventry. Where should I be?' We have forgotten where we were going. We receive plenty of advice, but whom can we trust? This crisis, I suggest, has produced a state of *paganism* in the modern Western world. That is what the world needs to be told to repent of. This is not how modern Western Christians have normally conceived of their task, and I shall take a little while to spell out what I mean.

In parallel with this, I suggest that the church itself is called, by the same gospel, to repent of its own failures, shortcomings, and folly. Indeed, the church can only really summon the world to repent if it is itself putting its own house in order. This is not to say that we must wait to address the world until we have the church sorted out. We might wait for a long time. Both things have to be done, however imperfectly, at the same time.

I want, therefore, to suggest that at a deep level what matters are the basic assumptions that we make about the way the world is, about what's wrong with it, and about where the solution might

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be found. People have analysed the world in different ways, and, equally importantly, people who wouldn't be able to articulate such an analysis nevertheless assume it in the way they live. We must look at the two main types of analysis that are offered, and then suggest where they go wrong and what can be done about it. Some people like to cut the world in two. Others like to lump it all untidily together. There are big problems in each way of going about things. If we understand both of them we will have a vital clue to help us through several of the important questions that will occupy us in the rest of this book.

Cutting the world in half

An angry MP writes to *The Times* to complain about a cleric who has 'mixed up religion and politics'. A businessman goes ahead with a money-making scheme despite the constraints of humanitarian ethics. A preacher urges the congregation to leave the worldly concerns of politics and society and discover a 'spiritual' message which is not to be corrupted or compromised by contact with the messy details of political and social life.

In each of these instances, we are seeing a world split in two, with one part labelled 'good' and the other 'bad'. The shorthand word for this is *dualism*. This line of thought goes back to the Greek philosopher Plato. It is still very popular in the Western world, having received a new impetus around three centuries ago through the movement in Western culture known as the Enlightenment. This system divides reality into (a) the world of physical phenomena, and (b) the world of timeless truths, the truths of 'reason'. And it claims that *you can't jump the gap between them*.

It is not difficult to understand why this system, whatever form it takes, is so popular. Humans in general are aware of the contrast between good and evil. They are also aware of the contrast between the material world and non-material values, and can see that some obvious forms of evil are closely associated with the material world. What could be more natural than to identify the two? But this shallow analysis carries all sorts of problems in its wake, as we shall see.

One of the results of dualism is actually atheism. Within much Enlightenment thought, 'God' is a nuisance: he keeps on interfering;

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and people who are presuming to speak for 'God' are simply clinging to power for themselves, power which they are using to feather their own nests. So 'God' is (initially) kicked upstairs, and allowed a place, if at all, as an absentee landlord: he may have made the world, and may still take a passing interest in it, but he doesn't do much about it, and we have to get on and fend for ourselves as best we can.

But once you make God an absentee landlord you are half way to making him an absentee. The atheism of Marx and Freud, of Voltaire and John Lennon (who asked us in one of his songs to imagine there was no heaven, saying it would be easy if we tried) is the logical end-product of the absentee-landlord theology, the 'deism', of the eighteenth century. Many in the churches went along with this deism quite happily, since it allowed them to get on quietly with a private or semi-private religion, with no outside interference. A church that has rested content with that compromise has only itself to blame if the world around it regards it as more and more irrelevant. And a good deal of the Western church has not only acquiesced in dualism; it has often mistaken it (as we shall see) for the gospel itself.

But, as G. K. Chesterton remarked, people who give up believing in God don't believe in Nothing. They believe in *Anything*. And Anything has included a large number of alternative systems of belief, some of them bizarre (astrology, fortune-telling and the like); some of them apparently 'normal' and undramatic (materialism, gross national products, and so on); some of them revolutionary (Marxism). We shall look at some of these in Chapters 3 and 5. For the moment, we turn to the mirror image of dualism. Some people are trying hard to put the world all together with no splits at all.

A grand universal theory?

Splits in the world are messy. It is much tidier to hold everything together in one big heap. But how might we do this? Usually it has been done by maintaining the Enlightenment split but arguing that one side is really an aspect of the other. Thus, in the past hundred years, some have tried to argue that everything is reducible to materialism. Everything that *seems* to speak of different dimensions to reality, of a spiritual or transcendent world, is simply the result of social or psychological forces, which can then be reduced

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to terms of physics, chemistry and biology. Others have tried to argue that the physical world is simply an aspect of the mental world, or perhaps of a great single Mind. If splitting the world in two is called 'dualism', putting it back together again like this is called *monism*.

Of the two sorts of monism just mentioned (Mind-monism and Matter-monism), it is materialistic monism that has ruled unchecked in the Western world for much of recent history. Yet there are huge problems in this way of looking at the world. However hard they may try to be good materialistic monists, most human beings are conscious in some way or other that the world in which they live is not just a place of material objects which can be analysed by scientists, but a place of mystery which invites awe and wonder. The scientist can tell me why a piece of horsehair pulled across pieces of catgut stretched at a certain tension produces a certain note; he cannot tell me why Beethoven's Violin Concerto is so beautiful. The scientist can tell me why the setting sun looks redder than it does for the rest of the day; she cannot tell me why I find the sight of it so evocative. The scientific historian might, in principle, be able to tell me the precise day and hour at which Jesus died; but science in the usual sense will never explain what Bunyan discovered, namely, that the sight of the cross caused his burden to fall off his back. What will the monist make of all this?

The answer is ready to hand in modern Western culture. We must work out a new form of Mind-monism. The modern monist rejects all explanations of the mysteriousness of the world that would take us back to dualism, to the split between the physical world and the non-physical. Rather, in one of the biggest cultural shifts for hundreds of years, we are now living at a time when the material world itself is being looked at with new eyes. It is being invested with the properties that used to be projected on to a reality beyond it: it is the world itself that is God, the One God. Pantheism is the new religion of the masses. There is a great Mind, and it is identified with the world.

Putting the church on the map

At this point someone may express surprise that I have been using abstract terms, without reference to positions that can be explicitly

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defined as 'Christian' and 'non-Christian'. This is quite deliberate. It is my impression that the majority of Christians in the West hold beliefs about the world, themselves, their god, and their neighbours which may receive 'Christian' labels, but which are in fact simply variations on one or other of the themes I have discussed, none of which are in themselves specifically Christian but are rather part of broad cultural and philosophical strands of development. Where, then, do Christians belong on the cultural map I have been sketching?

Many Christians from a more traditional background are basically dualists. (I am not talking about official theological positions, so much as about the subconscious worldviews of ordinary practising Christians.) They have been taught that the 'world', usually associated strongly with the physicality of creation, is essentially evil; that God sent his Son from beyond the world to rescue us out of it; that (perhaps) God intends to bring the physical world to a well-deserved end, after which we will all finish up either in a non-physical heaven or a non-physical hell.

Those who have grown up with teaching like this, and have been bruised by it, are often the readiest converts to the new monism. They have known in their bones, almost literally, that physicality is not inherently evil, but is a good gift of a loving God; and, after years of attempting to suppress or marginalize their own embodiedness, it comes as a great relief to discover 'creation spirituality'. It offers a new integration, a new wholeness, which the old traditional dualisms had kept at bay.

Somewhere in between the dualists and the monists come the New Theologians of the 1960s (it is always silly to call a movement 'New'), who rejected the old dualism of various fundamentalisms and who went instead for practical or political theology, finding God in the rough and tumble of attempts to carve out a more just and fair society. The theology of the 1960s (one thinks, for instance, of a book like John Robinson's *Honest to God*) looks fairly passé now, but there are still plenty of people around who were brought up on it, and who may now be wondering where to go next.

All of these groups use Christian language; they read Christian texts, particularly the Bible; they practise Christian worship, celebrating the sacraments in one way or another; and they think of themselves, often enough, as the *true* Christians over against the other sorts.

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This is where party spirit comes in; and party spirit has been the name of the game in Western Christianity for quite long enough. Many 'evangelicals' are still taught to reject 'liberals' on the grounds that they are 'anti-supernatural'; and, despite old antagonisms, they sometimes team up with catholics of various sorts in defence of 'supernatural religion' against its detractors. But what if the 'natural/supernatural' distinction were itself a legacy from a movement (the Enlightenment) which was not itself particularly Christian, but in fact often specifically anti-Christian?

Equally, many 'liberals' are taught to be afraid of 'evangelicals', on the grounds (for instance) that they hold as certainties things which are not in fact certain, and that they pigeonhole people in unhelpful and dehumanizing ways . . . and the liberal falls into the trap himself, despising 'evangelicals' as being a lesser breed of Christian, and believing quite certainly that we can't know these things for certain. So we could go on.

British culture, in particular, has an unlovely tradition of suspicion and antagonism based on class, region, education and accent; the result is the attitude that says, 'You're different from me, and I resent you for that.' This tendency within our society spills over all too easily into church life, producing divisions that claim to be theological, but which, by making nonsense of so many Christian claims and biblical passages, reveal all too clearly their real nature: they are nothing more nor less than cultural prejudice strutting along in borrowed Christian language. This is not, of course, to say that there are no such things as serious theological debates and divisions; only that a good deal which appears to come under this heading is nothing of the kind. And nothing makes and sustains a 'party' within the church nearly so well as a shared ideology which is in fact not particularly Christian, but which has learnt to use Christian language to give itself legitimacy.

Getting back on track

What are we to make of all this confusion, difficulty and division? The following passages may have something to suggest:

The kind of fasting I want is this: remove the chains of oppression and the yoke of injustice, and let the oppressed go free.

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Share your food with the hungry and open your homes to the homeless poor. Give clothes to those who have nothing to wear, and do not refuse to help your own relatives. Then my favour will shine on you like the morning sun . . . my presence will protect you on every side. (Isaiah 58.6–8, TEV)

‘Rend your hearts and not your garments.’
Return to the Lord, your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,
and repents of evil . . .

Blow the trumpet in Zion;
sanctify a fast;
call a solemn assembly;
gather the people . . .
(Joel 2.13, 15–16, RSV)

But the tax-collector stood a long way off, and didn’t even want to raise his eyes to heaven. He beat his breast and said, ‘God, be merciful to me, sinner that I am.’ Let me tell you, he was the one who went back to his house vindicated by God, not the other. Don’t you see? People who exalt themselves will be humbled, and people who humble themselves will be exalted.

(Luke 18.13–14)

These passages speak of repentance. Repentance is all about getting back on track, after wandering off in various wrong directions. It involves a serious recognition of personal and collective evil, and a serious determination to behave differently in the future. I suggest that we as a church need to recognize the ways in which we have gone off track, pursuing dualism on the one hand and monism on the other, and to determine, in ways outlined in the rest of this book, to re-order our lives and agendas around the gospel itself.

To the dualist we must say that God’s world is an *integrated* whole. The Bible does not envisage a distinction between the physical world on the one hand and the sphere of God’s interest and concern on the other. In the Isaiah passage, the prophet is specifically condemning a religious practice that exists simply in a private sphere, unrelated to justice in society. Is he therefore watering down ‘spiritual’ truth by

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compromising it with social action? Of course not: 'my favour will shine on you like the morning sun.' God's people are invited – indeed, summoned, – to an *integrated* spirituality.

To the monist we must say that within God's created order two necessary *differentiations* must be made. These are not to be confused with the dualisms we have been discussing. They are:

- (a) the proper differentiation *between God and the world*. God is the creator; the world is the creature. They are not the same thing. The creature is made to reflect and indeed be flooded with the glory of God; the world is created good, full of blessing and richness; but God and the world are not the same. We might develop this by pointing out that the world is made good, but *transient*. From the beginning it was subject to change and decay, and the Bible always envisages God as having more in store for his creation than has yet been revealed.
- (b) the real differentiation *between good and evil*: between goodness seen as human obedience and its consequences, and evil seen as human rebellion and its consequences. This moral differentiation has nothing to do with being created, or being physical; it has everything to do with the choices we humans make, and their results, for ourselves and for the world.

Dualists characteristically mistake these two for each other. We find it all too easy to imagine that being evil and being physical are bound up together. Conversely, the monist, avoiding this trap, begins by confusing God and the world, and ends by denying the difference between good and evil.

To steer a course between dualism and monism requires a good deal of skill. What we will need, as a church, is a better view of God and the world, a view grounded firmly in the gospel of Jesus and addressed clearly to the situation in which we find ourselves.

Luke's parable of the Pharisee and the publican ought to stand as a dire warning against the phenomenon we have observed, of different religious people using their religiosity as a weapon against one another. It is people like the Pharisee who drive other people into atheism: 'If that's what religion is like,' (we can feel people saying), 'I don't want it.' But the picture of the publican is one which the church could do well to adopt. We have little to be proud of. If we are to make a start at any new tasks – if indeed we are to be renewed at all

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for those new tasks – then the one thing we must *not* do is to begin them by rubbing our hands with glee at all the wisdom, skill, maturity, insight, knowledge, spirituality, vision or anything else that we already possess, either as individuals or (heaven help us) as parties. That would be to shoot our project in the foot before we'd started. We can only begin with the admission of failure: God have mercy on us, sinners that we are.

We need, then, to repent of our half- and sub- and semi-Christian ideas (dualistic, monistic, or whatever), and of the muddles which have enabled us to imagine we were sound or substantial in our faith when in fact we were half-baked and half-hearted. And we need to repent of having made our muddled and half-grasped theologies into weapons of attack against those we did not like or understand.

If we are to grasp a truer theology it can only be by renouncing, in the manner of a fast, some at least of our old attitudes. Food is good, but we fast in order to learn not to abuse it. Christian doctrinal sensitivity is good, but there may come a time when we have to put it on hold for a while, to check that we aren't abusing it, using 'theological' arguments to support us in battles which have more to do with our cultures, our sub-cultures, our temperaments or our intellectual pride than anything specifically Christian. Let us place ourselves, and our particular theological traditions, firmly in the position of the tax-collector: God have mercy on us, sinners that we are. We are part of the crisis, part of the confusion; let's admit it. Only so may we begin to learn from Jesus himself. And that brings us to our next chapter.

Questions for reflection or group discussion

- 1 Where does your church stand in the 'theological' spectrum? Are you more inclined to dualism or to monism? Or have you got the balance about right?
- 2 In what ways do the things your church stands for reflect the things your particular bit of society stands for?
- 3 Read Isaiah 58.1–8 again. Are there immediate and practical tasks in your local community that would correspond to the things God requires of his people there? How many of them is your church already doing, and how many would it be practical to attempt?

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- 4 In what way is modern Western society failing to heed this same call? Are there ways, in your wider area, in which you could realistically campaign for the alleviation of poverty, homelessness, and injustice?
- 5 How might you, in your church, integrate those tasks with regular worship?