

Creation, Power, and Truth

The Gospel in a World
of Cultural Confusion

N. T. Wright

 ZONDERVAN
REFLECTIVE



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Creation, Power, and Truth

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Requests for information should be addressed to customercare@harpercollins.com.

Original edition published in English under the title *Creation, Power and Truth: The Gospel In A World Of Cultural Confusion* by:

SPCK

Publishing part of SPCK Group

London, England, UK

www.spck.org.uk

ISBN 978-0-310-17292-5 (softcover)

ISBN 978-0-310-17294-9 (audio)

ISBN 978-0-310-17293-2 (ebook)

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Printed in the United States of America

SPrintCode

To a Wise and Generous Friend



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Preface

This book is based on the Noble Lectures which I was privileged to give in the Memorial Chapel at Harvard University in the autumn of 2006, as the guest of the Revd Professor Peter Gomes. I was and am very grateful to Peter for the invitation and for his cheerful and engaging hospitality. I have not attempted to add very much to what was said in the lectures, except for some tidying up and light editing, in view of the official ‘responses’ I received at the time from Professors François Bovon, Sarah Coakley and David Hempton. I am very grateful to them all. Harvard has been a special place for me ever since I was a visiting professor there myself in 1999, and it was a delight to renew old friendships and to be able to test out ideas with a friendly but not uncritical audience.

As will become apparent, the book is an attempt to bridge a gulf. People who write about current cultural and political matters, even from a Christian point of view, do not often engage with the Bible in any detail. Biblical scholars regularly repay the compliment. We are all inevitably specialists these days, and we know the dangers of intruding in subject areas where we are less qualified. Nevertheless, the attempt must be made from time to time, and it seemed to me that since I was living at the time with one foot in the world of biblical scholarship and the other in the world of current affairs in both church and state there was something to be said for having a go. When I thought my way through the various issues that seemed to me important and realized that the material would fall nicely into a Trinitarian pattern I decided that the three-lecture invitation from Harvard had found its answer.

Things have moved on, of course. The original lectures were given when the Iraq conflict was in full swing. Dan Brown’s book *The Da Vinci Code* was still being widely discussed. But

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the issues raised thereby have not gone away. If anything, they have intensified in complexity. The topics are still not only relevant but in my view urgent. As this book was going to press, I came upon a new novel by the bestselling Brazilian author Paulo Coelho, entitled *Manuscript Found in Accra* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013). It purports to be a transcription of the wise teachings of a 'Copt', given in 1099 when the Crusaders were about to invade Jerusalem. In fact it contains numerous 'wisdom' sayings, some of which echo Kahlil Gibran, some of which sound a bit like the teaching of Jesus, and most of which sound like classic, dreamy postmodern quasi-spirituality. Coelho writes a preface in which he hints at a tenuous link between this 'document' and the so-called gnostic 'gospels' found at Nag Hammadi. There follows a passage which is pure Dan Brown, suggesting that the four gospels in the New Testament were selected from a much larger set of possible contenders for reasons that many today would regard as spurious. Once again, what we are offered, by implication over and against the teaching of the four canonical gospels, is a soft, squashy version of Gnosticism: 'Who we are, what we fear, and what we hope for the future come from the knowledge and belief that can be found within us, and not from the adversity that surrounds us' (quoted from the book's dust jacket). The immense popularity of this kind of thing shows that the appeal of Gnosticism is as powerful today as when I gave the original lectures.

The Noble lectures were founded by Nannie Yulee Noble. Her stated aim was 'to arouse in young people, and primarily in the students of that great university, the joy of service for Christ and humanity, especially in the ministry of the Christian Church.' I hope I have in some measure contributed to that cause.

Tom Wright

Preface to the North American edition

This book is based on the Noble Lectures that I gave at Harvard some years ago. In it, I am deliberately striking some notes that all too often get forgotten: the doctrine of God's good creation and his intention to remake it. Because these themes have often been overlooked—for instance, when many Christians focus either simply on “making this world a better place” or on “how to leave this world and go to heaven instead”—whole swathes of biblical and theological truth have been ignored, and we are all the poorer for that.

In particular, the Christian doctrine of creation itself—the idea that the one God made a good world and intends to remake it—undermines the fashionable “gnosticism” of much Western culture. “Gnosticism” was all about “discovering who I really am” by introspection in the search for this or that “identity,” which easily leads into forms of narcissism—helped on its way in today's electronic culture. To rediscover what the Bible says about creation is to sense the fresh air of new possibilities that can lead us out of that trap.

“Power” has often been a dirty word in our culture, as many have recognized that politicians and rulers have exercised their power in bullying, cheating, and dehumanizing those at their mercy. But the New Testament offers a vision of true power, which remains paradoxical (St. Paul says that power is made perfect in weakness) but which, when we see its roots in the story of Jesus, emerges as the power, not of self-seeking but of self-giving love.

Likewise, the idea of truth has been at a discount in our culture. We all know about “fake news,” conspiracy theories,

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and the way some people talk of “my truth” and “your truth” as though all truth-claims were simply about “the way we see things” rather than about the real world. But it is that real world—as loved by the God of creation whose power is now focused on bringing healing and new creation—that offers the grounding for fresh statements of truth, truth that (like true power) will challenge self-seeking distortions.

When we look at these three, creation, power, and truth, we discover that they have a Trinitarian shape. God the Father is the Creator; God the Son is the one to whom, for the early Christians, all power has been given, though it remains a power shaped by his crucifixion; the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth, the agent of the new creation that provides the bedrock for new and life-giving truth claims.

This little book, then, offers a series of entry points into some of the key questions of our day. I am inviting readers to consider the crucial ways in which the Christian gospel itself challenges and subverts the intellectual, moral, and political values that pervade our contemporary culture. I hope that people reading this short book will be stimulated not only to fresh thought and prayer but to wise decision-making regarding common cultural assumptions and controlling narratives, past and present. We need to grow a new generation of thoughtful, biblically oriented Christians who know how hear, speak, and live the gospel of Christ in a world of cultural confusion. And I hope this book will help them do that.

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Introduction

The subject of this book is the challenge of today's and tomorrow's culture, and the resources in the Christian gospel, and the scriptures Christians read, with which to address those challenges. We are under enormous pressure in these days as the tectonic plates of Western culture slide this way and that, throwing up moral, social and political earthquakes and tsunamis to right and left. I want to reflect on three cultural pressures and the way they interact, and I suggest that this reflection will help us to see where we are in the confusing and disturbing times we face in our church and in the wider world.

I begin with a fascinating reflection borrowed from an article in *The Times* (4 February 2006) by the Chief Rabbi, Sir Jonathan Sacks (now Lord Sacks). Dr Sacks is one of the most highly and widely respected commentators on the contemporary scene in Britain. He writes about the wanderings of the children of Israel through the wilderness, and suggests two images for our own pilgrim pathway.

The first is the new electronic toy, the global positioning, or satellite-navigation, system, which sits in your car and tells you where to turn in order to get where you need to go. He points out that for many men in particular – particularly, he says, Jewish men, on which I couldn't possibly comment – this is counter-intuitive: fancy having someone else's voice, quite possibly a woman's voice, telling you where to turn the car! So, he says, we behave like the Israelites in the wilderness, who had God in their midst to guide them: we hear the voice, but deliberately turn somewhere else, in the wrong direction. There is then a pause, after which the voice says, in effect: Well, this wasn't what we had in mind; but since we're now here, you will now need to turn round, to do this, and that, in order to get back on track. Thank God, says Dr Sacks, that even when

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we take a wrong turning, perhaps deliberately, he will go along with us and pick us up from where we've landed ourselves and get us back on track in the end.

But not always, and not necessarily. In contrast to the image of the in-car navigation system, Dr Sacks points out that there is another kind of wandering which doesn't carry the same guarantee of ultimate rescue. There is a certain kind of ant, he says – again, I wouldn't be able to comment on this but I take his word for it – which, when it's lost, is programmed to follow the ant in front. This normally works fine, because ants are pretty smart and someone up ahead will surely know where we're all going. But sometimes, apparently, the ones up ahead will start to circle round, looking for another ant to follow . . . and another, and another . . . and before too long all the ants will be going round and round, convinced they are marching in the right direction but all merely following one another in a great circle. And the result is catastrophic. They will all die.

The question we face today, inside the church but just as much outside it in our wider Western culture, is whether despite all our blunderings we are still in fact listening for a voice from elsewhere, a guiding voice which will get us out of the mess and back on track to human and Christian flourishing, or whether we are in fact merely following one another round and round in a circle, convinced we're doing the right thing but heading for futility and starvation. Will the church, and the world, do the satellite-navigation thing or the ant thing?

In order to come at this question I want to plot three elements of our contemporary culture and to point out the ways in which they interact with each other, and the ways in particular in which they condition the debates and puzzles we face in the church and the wider world. Unless we reflect on these very different challenges, and the way they shape our society and the lives of the millions of individuals who make it up, we shall be walking around blindfold, shutting our eyes to the hidden but persuasive forces which put pressure on those

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among whom we live and work, and indeed on ourselves too. I choose these three; there are no doubt many others. And I shall then argue, on the basis of the New Testament, that to follow the living Jesus gives us the resources both to face these challenges for ourselves and to enable the work of the gospel and of God's kingdom to go ahead, to get back on track, to find the way to health and life. The three challenges are the contemporary versions of Gnosticism and imperialism, and then the apparently new (but in fact very old) phenomenon known as postmodernism.



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God the creator in a world of neo-Gnosticism

My aim in this book is to raise three key questions about our contemporary culture: to make connections, to suggest an interplay of assumptions and controlling narratives within today's world, and so to offer a rough sketch-map of certain aspects of contemporary culture on which we may discern key trends and link together some powerful ideas. At the same time I shall look afresh at certain aspects of the biblical story and draw out some often unnoticed themes.

I have used a traditional Trinitarian framework. But I approach this 'from below', coming at it through the exegesis of particular biblical passages and themes, rather than imposing it heavy-handedly as a dogmatic stereotype. I aim to re-read familiar biblical material with contemporary concerns in mind. I have increasingly found resonances between ancient and contemporary culture; exploring these is risky, but it remains full of potential.

Glimpses of *gnosis* in Western modernity

We live, I suggest, in a world characterized by certain types of Gnosticism. One of the most glaring recent signs of this is the extraordinary popularity of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*.¹ This book was a runaway bestseller when it was first published in 2004, and it has had an enormous impact on the imagination of a whole generation. In that novel, Brown taps into a deep desire in our culture for *hidden knowledge*, a secret understanding whose possessor can pierce the mystery, find the key



to life, and in particular discover the buried truth about his or her own true identity. In his many books, but particularly in this one, Dan Brown has been saying things people in our day want to hear so badly that they are prepared to swallow ridiculous and unhistorical proposals in large quantity as long as they get the worldview they want.

In form, the book is a seemingly endless sequence of conspiracy theories, of the penetration of one secret after another. In substance, the plot hinges on the great conspiracy theory widely believed today: that Christianity as we have known it (not least Roman Catholicism) is based on a gigantic mistake, a huge cover-up, perpetrated by the second and subsequent Christian generations, including the writers of the canonical gospels, hiding the early and true person and message of Jesus himself behind self-serving ecclesial propaganda. Like many other writers in recent times, Dan Brown has offered us a mixture of seriously proposed scholarly theories and historically ridiculous notions, especially that of Jesus having a child by Mary Magdalene and starting a royal blood line whose current carrier is the unwitting heroine of the novel, who thereby finally discovers 'who she really is'. The average reader, innocent of genuine ancient history, is left with the impression that the church has hushed up the 'real Jesus', not least Jesus' own programme for discovering the 'sacred feminine'.

The phenomenal success of this book is the index of a cultural trend: the pursuit of hidden knowledge whose bearer will have the privileged inside track on the meaning of life, backed up by esoteric traditions purporting to be about Jesus. At this level we notice obvious parallels with ancient Gnosticism.

One word about the problem of description. We have recently been cautioned against assuming that there was any one 'thing' called 'Gnosticism'.² The evidence is pluriform and often confusing; generalizations can mislead; we should perhaps talk of 'Gnosticisms', plural, just as some have spoken of ancient 'Judaisms' and 'Christianities'. And yet, for the plural itself to

have any meaning, there must be a corresponding singular, however generalized.³ Certainly, along with those who see multiple varieties of Gnosticism in the ancient world, plenty of equally erudite scholars are still content to speak of several broad defining features – culled from gnostic writings themselves, not simply from their opponents.⁴

Debates abound as to how many key elements it takes before we say ‘Gnosticism’. But the major elements are well known and scarcely controversial – especially since they cohere closely. I highlight four. First, cosmological dualism: the world of space, time and matter is secondary and/or shabby, dangerous and/or downright wicked. Second, this world was made by a secondary deity, at best incompetent and at worst malevolent. Third, the solution is to escape, to some kind of Platonic heaven. Fourth, the escape route is *gnosis*, knowledge, of the crucial secrets – about the world, about the true god and the bad creator god, and, centrally and vitally, about oneself. *Discovering who you really are* lies at the heart of it: more particularly, discovering that deep down you are one of the sparks of light, imprisoned within the present material world but longing to escape. This quadruple ancient worldview took many forms, including some with Jewish features, some with Christian, and some with both. But this fourfold scheme is well enough known and, with significant variations, widespread in the ancient world.

We note other regular emphases: the elitism of those who attain this *gnosis*; the necessary rejection of bodily resurrection and of a final judgment through which the present world will be put to rights; and conspiracy theories about the parent religions (reading the Hebrew scriptures upside down, with Cain as a hero and YHWH as a villain; subverting the Christian gospels with secret teachings of Jesus). There is of course much more to ancient Gnosticism than this, but these features appear frequently.

Early Christian opponents of Gnosticism highlighted the ancient Jewish doctrine of creation. That, indeed, was a major

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reason why the early Christians appropriated and reinterpreted the Hebrew scriptures. They weren't simply snatching texts away from Jewish interlocutors, but were determinedly understanding Jesus and Christian faith in terms of the creational monotheism of Genesis, the psalms and the prophets. What mattered to them, as of foundational importance, was God's kingdom coming on earth as in heaven, with all the political and social implications that flowed from that. For this, they needed a strong doctrine of creation.

With all this in the background, I want to suggest, in line with other contemporary writers, that we should understand some key elements of today's culture in terms of modern types of Gnosticism.⁵ Dan Brown is only the tip of the iceberg. Let me briefly sketch the relevant features. (This isn't, by the way, a matter of picking up a complete package from the second or third century and observing it repeated in our own day. For a start, as we noted, there is no single, coherent pattern of ancient Gnosticism. For another, the relevant features are themselves various, not entirely coherent, with different degrees of correspondence to their ancient counterparts. Nevertheless, with these caveats I believe that we can and should identify, and critique, an overall gnostic mood in our own day.)

To begin with, so obvious that it might be missed, there is the modern self-description: the Enlightenment. We are the enlightened ones, who have emerged from the murky world of superstition like Plato's cave-dwellers coming out into the light. Our science and technology set us apart; our politics are superior by definition; our artistic and cultural achievements are 'the classics'. Our maps place Western Europe in the golden section; our grand narratives of world history lead up to the eschatological moment when humankind 'came of age', leaving behind our ancient and medieval infancy. We are the elite, carrying in nineteenth-century Europe 'the white man's burden' to bring enlightenment to the world, and in twentieth- and twenty-first-century America the 'manifest destiny' to rule

the world as God's chosen people. We have discovered who we are, and are thereby set apart, glimpsing different possibilities from ordinary mortals, and moreover being subject to different rules.

Enlightenment ontology grounds our elitism in a radical dualism. Lessing's ugly ditch between the necessary truths of reason and the contingent truths of history has been broadened into almost all areas of life, resulting in a world where most westerners automatically assume that faith and public life must be held carefully apart. Whole societies, notably that of the United States of America, have been founded on this assumption, which then generates all kinds of debates, from the propriety of school prayers to slogans printed on banknotes. And this dualism has a great deal in common with that of ancient Gnosticism.

Such dualism has expressed itself in two quite different ways, corresponding broadly to the division between asceticism and libertinism with which its critics charged ancient Gnosticism. The ancient Gnostics sometimes regarded the body as trash to be shunned, and sometimes as an irrelevant object which could therefore be used to do whatever one felt like, without consequences on other levels.

Thus we have seen, on the one hand, the 'ascetic' route: don't let your spirituality get entangled with the real world of space, time and (particularly) matter. Nineteenth-century Western Christianity made a virtue of its otherworldly present spirituality and future hope. It is not surprising that the word 'resurrection', which sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Christians well knew referred to an embodied future life, has been flattened into a fancy way of talking about 'going to heaven when you die'.⁶ The author of the *Treatise on the Resurrection* (a gnostic tract most likely from the late second century) would have approved. On a wider level, much religious devotion has regularly kept itself well clear of politics and public life. Part of the shock in the USA of the rise of the 'religious right' – and

part of the shock in the UK of an increasingly vocal ‘Christian left’ – has been the category mistake, as opponents see it, of mixing up what ‘everybody knows’ ought to be kept apart. This is the ascetic route.

Equally, many have gone the ‘libertine’ route: the world is irrelevant to God and to our spiritual agendas, so we can do what we like with it. Within the heaven/earth dualism, those who want to carve up the world with machines, social systems and empires may do so without hindrance. If there is a god, this being is distant, and doesn’t care what we do in or to this stupid old world. This functional atheism, in which society remains immune to a critique which, in any case, the escapist churches had no intention of offering, led increasingly to actual atheism. When A. N. Wilson wrote his book *God’s Funeral*,⁷ he was talking about the nineteenth century, not the ‘death-of-god’ movement of the 1960s.

Thus Western society, in contrast to many other societies including those of Native North Americans, has seen itself as having carte blanche to treat the created order as if it were our private gold mine – or oil well! – on the one hand and our private rubbish dump on the other. At the individual level, the great controlling myth of our time has been the belief that within each of us there is a real, inner, private ‘self’, long buried beneath layers of socialization and attempted cultural and religious control, and needing to be rediscovered if we are to live authentic lives. When we ‘discover’ this ‘true inner self’, we must do whatever it dictates, even if it means ignoring the norms of the ‘unenlightened’ society all around us. Perhaps half the novels written today, perhaps two-thirds of the Hollywood movies, have this as their subtext. More worryingly, perhaps three-quarters of contemporary Western religion has gone along for the ride. In terms of the image I quoted from Jonathan Sacks in the Introduction to this book, I regard this trend as bearing the marks of a society copying the ants rather than the satellite-navigation system.

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At the centre of this theme we find that classic gnostic move, the appeal to ‘experience’ over against other authorities, resulting in the relentless quest to ‘find out who I really am’. The word ‘experience’ is of course very slippery, with echoes on the one hand of the Reformers’ appeal to a living and vital religion over against a dead formalism, and on the other hand of the Wesleyan insistence on an actual *experience* of sanctification as a fresh gift from God. But in our day this same word, with its quite proper overtones of real personal faith as against sterile outward conformism, is placed within a quite different narrative, that of the Gnosticism which declares that the outer world, both the wider world of society and the church and the outward world of my physical body, are irrelevant and indeed misleading, and that I must find within myself the spark of life and truth by which to reorder my whole existence.

But there is no room for complacency on the orthodox front. Those of us who argue for classic Christian belief and morality in today’s church must come to terms with the fact that we, too, have all too often colluded with the gnostic imperative. It is sadly possible to tick all the ‘correct’ doctrinal and ethical boxes, to learn to pronounce all the shibboleths, but to put them all within the wrong controlling narrative – like a child who manages to join up all the dots in a follow-the-dots picture but produces a donkey instead of an elephant. Precisely because, in the world of the Enlightenment, abstract doctrines and rules have often predominated over narratives (despite the fact that the Bible itself would suggest that it should be the other way round), the church has often simply not noticed that you can affirm the Trinity, the incarnation, the atonement, the resurrection, the call to bodily holiness, and still work within a narrative which colludes with Gnosticism. That is precisely what happens when orthodox Christians think, speak, pray and live as though the main aim of the game were simply to ‘go to heaven when you die’, embracing a private, detached spirituality in the present and a world-denying and escapist

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eschatology in the future. We can criticize the second-century Gnostics for their redefinition of the word 'resurrection' so as to mean, not a new bodily life after a time of being bodily dead, but a spiritual life in the present and hereafter; but this position is, worryingly, held just as much by those post-Enlightenment pietists and evangelicals whose major and overriding concern was to stress 'heaven' as the Christian's true home, and who used the word 'resurrection' as a metaphor for going to that home at last. It is thus possible to hold the essentially gnostic narrative while also affirming the great Christian doctrines, without noticing that all of them, not least the incarnation and the resurrection, actually tell heavily against it. And we can do so without noticing in particular how this deconstructs the prayer Jesus taught us to pray, which no gnostic could ever pray, that God's kingdom will come on earth as in heaven. The enormous resistance to this line of thought, and the insistence on escaping from the messy world of politics and culture in favour of a 'spiritual' gospel, shows, I'm afraid, that a great deal of orthodoxy, not least the orthodox evangelicalism which I know rather well from the inside, has to look in the mirror and admit that it has colluded with Gnosticism. And this very same Gnosticism, paradoxically, also drives the cultural and theological agendas which orthodoxy quite rightly, in my view, is currently opposing. Significantly, too, this is the kind of orthodoxy which insists that it alone knows the way to heaven, so that you have to believe what you're told and do what you're told to go there; the classic powerful system, in other words, against which so many on the left in today's churches have explicitly and angrily reacted. Unless we are prepared to get inside this whole model and rethink not only our orthodox doctrines but the orthodox narrative within which they make sense, our debates will collapse into dialogues of the deaf, and we shall be deaf, too, to the divine navigation system which would lead us out of the mess. God save us from the circular ant-trap of Gnosticism, ancient or modern.

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The results, after all, are obvious. They have been chronicled by various commentators over the last two or three decades. In particular, Tom Wolfe pointed out a generation ago in his novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities* that this kind of Gnosticism leads directly to the confusion, which has grown apace since he wrote, over sexual identity and behaviour⁸. If the outside world, including my own body in its male or female particularity, are not the good creation of a good and wise God, but rather the inessentials made by a blind and stupid creator, and if instead my inner 'experience' is what really counts, then I not only can but must be true to the spark of light, and indeed of desire, which I find most deeply within myself, even if it goes contrary to the apparent order of creation, the norms of traditional society, and the teaching of the Bible and the church. What is more, in doing so I do not need to claim some space for myself out on the left margin of morality. On the contrary, I am a religious hero for acting as I have. The power of that rhetoric today, in church and world alike, shows that Gnosticism is alive and well. And unless we see it for what it is, and learn how not only to answer it but to answer truly the deep longings which drive people towards it, we shall be ministering the gospel, and debating the key issues that face us in the church, with one hand tied behind our backs. It isn't simply a question of whether this or that behaviour is right or wrong. It's a question of the large, implicit controlling narratives to which our culture, and our church, has become enthralled.

Notice, indeed, how this works out within the church. Many in our churches declare themselves scandalized by the kind of argument I have just described; but look under the surface and you may find the same thing in a different guise. If you regard the present space-time universe as a dark, bad place, the abode of evil forces, what you will need is an escape mechanism. That is precisely what is offered by the highly popular 'Left Behind' theology, which forms the most obvious right-wing variety of contemporary Gnosticism. The elect will be snatched away to

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glory, leaving the world to stew in its own juices. This then justifies ecological carelessness on the one hand and military conquest on the other, not least in the Middle East, since the promised Armageddon needs to happen anyway and the sooner the better.

But when churches get involved in all this – as they most surely do – it makes sense to ask: which ‘god’ might we be talking about, anyway? This double-edged dualism, the ascetics on the one hand and the libertines on the other, highlights a controversy which has become increasingly ironic as it has rumbled on. Do we or don’t we believe in a good god who made the world? This was a key element in much ancient Gnosticism, for whose adherents the creator of the universe was muddled or even malevolent. The pains and sorrows of life within the present world could therefore be explained not as the intrusion of evil into a good creation but as the result of bad planning, workmanship and management. Today’s leading Darwinian, Richard Dawkins, regards the Old Testament’s creator God in pretty much the same way. YHWH, he declares, is

arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.

He is, suggests Dawkins, the ‘most unlovely instantiation’ of the ‘God hypothesis’, along with his ‘insipidly opposite Christian face’, that of ‘Gentle Jesus meek and mild.’⁹ Dawkins refers, as he often does, to Thomas Jefferson, who stated that ‘the Christian God is a being of terrific character – cruel, vindictive, capricious and unjust’. This denunciation of the ancient Hebrew God belongs with second-century thinkers such as Marcion and Valentinus. But life then gets more complicated, since Darwinians don’t think that this god actually made the world. They have produced a new version of the old dualism: creation and its

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natural processes are good, and the god who *pretended* to have made them is bad – thus projecting on to the hypothetical creator the bloodletting and selfishness of natural selection. Tellingly, Dawkins speaks of himself and other evolutionary biologists as those who have had their ‘consciousness raised’ so that they can see things others can’t. Even some of his fellow-scientists, not least some of the leading physicists, have apparently not realized that natural selection will explain more or less everything: they have not had their consciousnesses raised. This is the classic language of Gnosticism. Dawkins even proposes a new name for those who have learned the secrets of the world: they are the ‘Brights’. They are the elite, understanding the mysteries of the universe. Even their as yet unsubstantiated hypotheses about life itself are, a priori, superior to all others.

But here is the further irony. Those who objected to Darwin in the first place, and those who still fight against his theories in the name of ‘creationism’ or ‘intelligent design’, regularly show that they, too, live within the split-level world of contemporary Gnosticism. It is no accident that our continuing debates about creation and evolution have rumbled on alongside the gnostic tendencies in our culture. But the problem has then been that, just as some (certainly not all) evolutionists have had their eyes firmly on the deconstruction of the Christian doctrine of creation, so some (certainly not all) of the creationists have thought simply of validating the Bible for its own sake, while continuing paradoxically to hold some form of Gnosticism at the level of the larger narrative. The anti-evolution agenda (to generalize for a moment) is driven by those who claim, and seek to prove, that the Bible is literally true. But when they have proved a six-day creation, they do not leave us with the fully biblical theology in which the creator God will redeem the world, renewing it so as to make new heavens and new earth, but essentially with the same dualist, even gnostic, theology: an otherworldly spirituality in the present, an otherworldly

hope in the future, and a vacuum where there should be serious political critique.¹⁰ So-called 'creationism' is, in my experience, wrongly labelled, because it does not take seriously, as the second- and third-century Christian teachers did, the full meaning of the assertion that the God we know *in and through Jesus Christ* remains committed to his creation and will one day put it to rights, renewing it from top to bottom. My point is this: that the debates about creation which have characterized Western culture have largely taken place *within* an essentially gnostic framework, an assumed dualism which has itself largely gone unchallenged.

Note, too, the paradox that then arises. There are would-be religious 'conservatives' in today's Western culture who oppose Darwinism on the grounds that it is anti-biblical. But that same society, often with the enthusiastic support of the same people, regularly insists upon a large-scale *social* Darwinism in which the doctrine of the 'survival of the fittest' is applied relentlessly to the global rights of the superpower. To do this means either that you rescue an apparent allegiance to one part of the Bible while ruthlessly denying and suppressing the larger biblical narrative and imperative, or that you invoke the blind forces of social evolution, which, like the forces that produced the dinosaurs, can just as easily remove those at present in power. Back to the large circle of dead ants.

The cosmological dualism which has permeated all these debates has generated a religious mood which some writers have seen as the default mode for Western culture, with the USA leading the way and Western Europe eager to follow: the cult of self-discovery. Finding out 'who I really am', delving deep to discern hidden identity underneath social conditioning and traditional belief, is assumed to be central to the religious quest, corresponding to the ancient gnostic notion of salvation not by a gift of grace from outside oneself but by the revelation of buried truth within. Here we note the cultural imperative towards psychology and its offshoots. As Carl Jung famously

said, 'Who looks outside, dreams; who looks inside, awakens'. The result, exactly in line with ancient Gnosticism, is that the real locus of authority is neither in the creator God, nor in the world that he made, nor in the Bible, nor even in Jesus, but in oneself and one's own 'experience'.

This became almost comically clear in the early comments on the translation and publication of the ancient gnostic tract which has been named *The Gospel of Judas*. The editors of the newly discovered text made it clear that for them this wasn't just an interesting historical document, but rather a vital clue to a more exciting form of Christianity than dull, boring old orthodoxy. The canonical Jesus instructed his followers to deny themselves and take up their cross. The gnostic Jesus tells you to discover yourself and follow your own star.¹¹ Considering how obscure, and actually how depressing, many of the ancient gnostic texts are, it is remarkable how readily people today grasp at them in the conviction that they offer a viable and indeed vibrant way forward over against what are assumed to be the stultifying and sterile pathways of mainstream Christian faith.

All this is held in place, within the contemporary church and world, by a massive conspiracy theory which I have elsewhere described as a new 'myth of Christian origins'. This widespread narrative, enthusiastically propagated by many books, magazine articles, television programmes, and (not least) sermons and apparently 'Christian' teaching, serves to support the prevailing worldview. In this myth, Jesus was just a good man who did not see himself as the son of God, nor his death as redemptive; he did not rise from the dead. Instead of announcing the inbreaking into this world of the kingdom of the creator God, he taught a new type of gnostic or spiritual wisdom, a path of spiritual self-discovery or even self-improvement. The canonical gospels were written much later, and were then canonized as a deliberate move to squelch that early and exciting spirituality and to offer instead a formalized and institutionalized

religion, on its way to conformity with the Roman empire. They, along with the rest of developing 'orthodoxy', were anticipating the Constantinian settlement and trying to become more socially and culturally respectable. They thus modified and falsified the original message of Jesus. We must therefore, according to this new myth, get back in touch with the original message of Jesus, in order to reconnect with a wisdom or *gnosis* less like traditional Christianity and more like other, wider movements of spirituality.

This leaves you with what the ancient Gnostics were offering: a religion of self-discovery in which one acquires the 'knowledge', or *gnosis*, that one is already a spark of light, and can thereby escape from the wicked world of space, time and matter, and enjoy a private and detached spirituality in the present and an escapist heaven hereafter, relating not to the wicked creator God, the God of Israel, but to some quite different and higher deity. This is an enormously attractive prospect, not least for many who were brought up within traditional Catholic or Protestant homes, and who see themselves as having escaped from hard-edged and constricting forms of Christianity precisely by embracing some kind of neo-Gnosticism.

Such people were the primary market for a book like Dan Brown's, which not only expounded the new myth of Christian origins and the large-scale conspiracy theory which it presupposes, but did so with a plot which was itself a labyrinthine series of interlocking conspiracy theories. At the level of both content and structure, therefore, the book has been enormously attractive to many in our society, for nameable and quantifiable reasons. Many who feel alienated either from the church of their youth or from the wider society of power and money are eager to believe that it's all a plot, that there is after all a better way for them to live, and that the rich and powerful have hushed it all up in order to stop us having a good time, to prevent us getting in touch with what 'Jesus' really taught. No

amount of pointing out that what Brown writes is historical nonsense has prevented people wanting his underlying message to be true, both in its structure and in its content. Many of those people are in our churches today. The worldview into which they have slid, often without realizing it, shapes their perception of what being Christian is all about.

In fact, as various writers have shown, Gnosticism is the default mode for modern Western religion in general. I think of such different works as Philip Lee's remarkable book, *Against the Protestant Gnostics*, Harold Bloom's *The American Religion* and Cyril O'Regan's *Gnostic Return in Modernity*. For all that such writers sometimes exaggerate, and leave themselves open to challenge at various points, the overall case remains very strong. The Enlightenment assured us that we Westerners were indeed the 'enlightened' ones, set apart from the rest of humanity. And the religion sanctioned by the Enlightenment was precisely a variety of Gnosticism: leave behind the messy world of the public square, of politics and business and government, and escape into your private relationship with God now and in the ultimate future. The prevailing secularism, in fact, produces Gnosticism as its co-operative bedfellow: secularists can run the world while the religious cultivate their private spirituality. Both will then react angrily against any attempt to get religion back into public life, and will sometimes label such attempts as 'fundamentalist' – which isn't surprising, because there is such a thing as fundamentalism and it's on the rise. So the split between the real world and the spiritual aspiration continues. The new 'myth of Christian origins' is designed to escape the former and embrace the latter.

This isn't the place to argue historically against this new myth. I have done that elsewhere.¹² Sufficient to note two things in particular.

First, on persecution and social acceptability. The second-century Christians who were being thrown to the lions and burnt at the stake were not reading *The Gospel of Thomas* or *The Gospel*

of *Judas* or other similar documents. They were reading Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and were finding in those books, not a socially acceptable or culturally conformist faith, but one which declared that Jesus was Lord and that Caesar wasn't – the faith we shall examine in more detail in Chapter 2. The Gnostics were sometimes persecuted, but by and large they escaped: escapism was, after all, what they were about. Even if some did see themselves as Christians, the Romans were not likely to regard them as subversive. They were not, in fact, interested in God's kingdom coming on earth as in heaven, but rather in a non-confrontational heavenly kingdom. And in the last two centuries of our own era this new myth of Christian origins has grown up precisely where the church has colluded deeply and explicitly with the secular Enlightenment in accepting the great gulf between faith and real life.¹³

Second, on resurrection: part of the rhetoric of the Enlightenment has been to claim for itself the discovery that dead people do not rise. I have often heard this trumpeted as a new thing, whereas of course everyone from Homer to Virgil, from Plato to Pliny, knew that dead people stayed dead. We didn't need Copernicus, Newton, Rousseau or Voltaire to tell us that. Belief in Jesus' resurrection always was, in the early church, not a matter of people believing in odd miracles because they didn't know the laws of nature, but rather of believing that the creator God had acted afresh within his world to launch his new creation in and through Jesus himself. The rejection of Jesus' resurrection (and, usually, of the final resurrection of all God's people) within post-Enlightenment theology is therefore not, as it often makes itself out to be, the result of new knowledge or fresh insight. It is, rather, a structural necessity within a world where belief in God as creator, and in God as final judge – the twin beliefs which together entail resurrection – have been rejected in favour of some kind of Gnosticism. It is high time to turn the modernist critique on itself, and to enquire what interests, social and cultural, have been served by

the frantic insistence both that Jesus cannot have been raised and that we know this today with a new kind of certainty.

As with creationism, however, so with the resurrection: at this point there emerges the irony of a fundamentalist Christianity that affirms bodily resurrection but for the wrong reason and with the wrong result. It is possible to tick the boxes that constitute formal orthodoxy but to join them up with a narrative which undermines or flatly denies what a fully biblical orthodoxy would actually affirm. That is the underlying critique, at a structural level, which I would offer of today's right-wing Christianity on both sides of the Atlantic.¹⁴ When the fundamentalist affirms that Jesus was raised bodily from the dead, this is not normally seen as the ground for a belief in new creation, but rather simply as evidence for a dualistically conceived supernatural divine intervention, leading to the conclusion that (among other things) there really is a heaven and a hell and that one's destination is determined by one's belief. In other words, the resurrection is invoked in support of a *conservative* Platonic modernism over against a *radical* Platonic modernism. Nothing there about new heavens and new earth; nothing about the bodily resurrection of God's people to share in that new world. Likewise, when the fundamentalist declares that God will indeed judge the world, this is more likely to be conceived in terms of God blasting this wicked universe to smithereens, condemning the wicked to hell and snatching the righteous up to heaven; whereas the biblical picture, from the Psalms right through to Romans and Revelation, is of God the creator judging the creation in the sense of setting it right at last, not destroying the world of space, time and matter but administering restorative, healing justice. Fundamentalism in its various forms thus regularly shares in the gnostic worldview at a structural level even while affirming the doctrines – creation, resurrection, final judgment – which, if taken in their full biblical context, would critique it and propose the early Christian alternative.

It is to that more fully biblical narrative that we now turn, in the second part of this chapter.

Creation and new creation

One of the startling features of modern New Testament scholarship has been the relative absence of major work on the early Christian view of creation and new creation.¹⁵ There are some significant exceptions, but they have tended to come from the margins of the mainstream discussion and have not, by and large, transformed the mood of the whole. And when we even begin to make good this deficiency, we discover that Gnosticism, ancient and modern, is confronted at every point by a theology, and a praxis, in which creation and new creation are the basis of revolutionary good news. The announcement that the creation is good, that the God who made it is good, and that this God will one day put it to rights, rescue it from its corruption and decay, and fill it with the knowledge of his glory 'as the waters cover the sea', needs to be heard once again in a way which, by and large, it has not been in the Western world and church. These are the twin doctrines of creation and judgment, which come together in the belief in resurrection. It is no accident that all three have been under sustained attack in the Western world over the last two hundred years. Nor is it an accident that the church has so often soft-pedalled all three, fitting in with the prevailing culture rather than finding fresh and creative ways to challenge it.

We begin with John. John's gospel is rooted so firmly in the story of Genesis 1 and 2 that it is hard now to imagine how any scholar could offer a gnostic interpretation or explanation of this remarkable book, as some, such as Bultmann, used to do. The prologue, with its overt and striking evocation of Genesis 1.1, is carefully balanced by chapter 20, which highlights 'the first day of the week', in other words, the starting-point of a new creation in which the old is taken up and transformed,

not least by the echo of Genesis 2 as Jesus breathes into the disciples his own commissioning Spirit. John thus belongs on the map of those many Jewish texts which, following the scriptural narrative, envisage God's fresh work as the healing, not the unmaking, of the original creation.

But creation, for John, is to be understood in terms of a Christology which grows out of the Jewish wisdom tradition, cast into the tantalizing and highly evocative mode of the *logos*. The essential purpose of the prologue is to introduce Jesus in such a way that the reader knows from the outset that he embodies, incarnates, the Jewish figure of wisdom, and thereby upstages the *logos*-speculations of other contemporary philosophies. But, in announcing Jesus thus, the writer affirms the line of thought which runs back through the Wisdom of Solomon, Ben-Sira and other sources, through Proverbs 8 in particular, right back to Genesis 1 and 2. This enables John to propose (unlike much modernist would-be creational language) that the creator creates not as it were at a distance, but precisely by intimate activity *from within* creation itself. Part of the point of shaping the doctrine of creation, via the wisdom traditions, in terms of a 'word' through whom all things came into existence is to evoke passages like Isaiah 40 and 55.¹⁶ In those passages the divine Word goes out from the transcendent creator in order to bring about a new world, not by manipulation or 'intervention' from without, but (though its source remains in the wise energy of the transcendent God) from within. The 'word' affords John, as it afforded Isaiah, a unique combination: the word of command, as in Genesis 1, but also the warm breath through which God's own life breathes into the life of the world. The world is made *fruitful* through the Word. Learning to see creation through the lens of incarnation gives the doctrine a rich suppleness which is lost when, as so often, we are faced with the crude either/or of, on the one hand, a detached God who occasionally may 'intervene' in the world and, on the other hand, a purely immanent process in which no divine power is involved.

John's gospel should not, therefore, be understood in terms of a quasi-gnostic dualism. When John says 'the world', in a negative sense, we should not understand him in terms of, say, the Platonic matter/spirit antithesis. John does not write, 'God so *hated* the world that he sent his son so that all the pre-existent sparks of light might discover their true identity and be rescued for a disembodied salvation.'¹⁷ No: 'the world' consists of the good creation as it has been spoiled by sin and rebellion, and thence the people of Israel insofar as they have joined in the rebellion of creation.¹⁸ And when Jesus declares to Pilate, in a passage to which we shall return in the next chapter, that his kingdom is 'not of this world', we should note that that translation has regularly obscured what the text actually said, which was *ek tou kosmou toutou*, not 'of' this world but 'from' this world. The point is that Jesus' kingdom does not *originate with* this world, certainly not with the way the world now is; but it is definitely and concretely *for* this world. That, again, is why the resurrection matters, within both the structure and the overall purpose of John's gospel.

I retain an open mind as to whether John's gospel was written to address incipient Gnosticism – not least because of the difficulty in settling the date either of the gospel or of the rise of serious Gnosticism itself. But John's gospel clearly rules out the main elements of Gnosticism. The world remains God's world, created through the Word made known as Jesus of Nazareth; or, to put it the other way round, the God who savingly addresses Israel and the world through this Word is none other than the creator God. And God's saving purpose is not to rescue people out of creation, but to renew creation itself, rescuing it, and its human inhabitants, from evil. God's people are not an elite, chosen for a privileged life in which they can escape the world and look down on everyone else (as John's gospel has often appeared to say, not least to Christians hankering after that kind of soteriology), but rather the spirit-filled and suffering agents of new creation themselves.

And though of course ‘knowledge’ is important within John’s gospel,¹⁹ this ‘knowledge’ is not a secret *gnosis* whose possessors thereby escape the world, but a faith-knowledge which commissions them to go *into* the world with the message of new creation.²⁰

Much the same is true, I believe, of the writer who was once called ‘the greatest of the gnostics’: Paul.

The battle over the possible relationship between Paul and Gnosticism, which was still raging when I began doctoral work, was usually conducted in terms of *derivation*: did Paul derive lines of thought, poems, key technical terms, and above all theological emphases, from an incipient Gnosticism?²¹ That historical battle has obscured the possibility, for which I have argued elsewhere in relation to other themes, of an analysis not of *derivation* but of *confrontation*. A parallel, to which I shall refer in the next chapter, is that Paul did not *derive* his Christology from the language and ideology of Caesar and his cult, but rather discovered that, as he derived it from his Jewish sources, he was simultaneously *confronting* imperial claims. In the same way, I suggest, Paul did not *derive* his view of the world, God, salvation or ‘knowledge’ from Gnosticism (whatever that might have meant in his day). Rather, he allowed his Jewish, creational theology to stand over against incipient *gnosis*.

The clearest example in the undisputed Pauline writings is 1 Corinthians 8. The letter as a whole is rooted in Genesis 1, soaked in Paul’s theology of creation and new creation. This reaches full flower in the long discussion of resurrection in chapter 15, where several of the scattered earlier themes are brought together – or, to put it another way, where it becomes clear that Paul understands the apparently disparate earlier problems as manifestations of a deep misunderstanding to which a theology of bodily resurrection is the appropriate answer.²² Within this context, we ought not to be surprised at the sharp opening to chapter 8:

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When it comes to meat offered to idols, we know that ‘we all have *gnosis*’. *Gnosis* puffs you up, but love builds you up. If someone thinks they ‘know’ something, they do not yet know as they ought to know; but if someone loves God, they are known by him.

Gnosis here is clearly a Corinthian slogan used to justify visiting pagan temples and joining in their practices. It sustains a worldview within which (it seems) one’s actions in the material world are unimportant, leaving one free to go anywhere, to eat anything, to do what one pleases. Paul picks up the word *gnosis*, addressing it in its own terms but from his Christologically redefined Jewish base. The real *gnosis*, it seems, is not your knowledge of God but God’s knowledge of you; other claims to possess special *gnosis* will ‘puff you up’ (a favourite term in this letter), allowing you to pose as one of the elite.

Gnosis, however, is only one of the problems Paul faces here. We should not allow this rhetorical opening flourish to mislead us otherwise. He faces the complex, many-sided world of ancient paganism, and is helping the church navigate the largely uncharted waters of what it means to live as a member of the Christ-family within that puzzling and often hostile world. But, though his positive theological argument goes wider than the challenge of Gnosticism, it certainly includes it. No dualism here: ‘there is no God but one’; in other words, Paul appeals to the most basic Jewish monotheistic confession, the *Shema*. This is explicitly *creational* monotheism, challenging Gnosticism at the root, as is clear from his breathtaking Christological rewriting of the prayer, a move which brings him within touching distance of John’s prologue:

For us there is one God – the Father, from whom are all things and we to him; and one Lord – Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and we through him.²³

In other words, we not only discover Jesus at the heart of the central confession of Jewish monotheism, but we thereby

discover the *agency* of Jesus, as God's pre-existent second self, conceived on the model of the figure of wisdom in Proverbs 8 and elsewhere. This offers the explanatory grid for understanding not only *that* the world is the creation of the one God but *how* it comes to be so, and hence how one should behave within it. As with John, the Christological character of creation undergirds the Christologically grounded new creation. And, as Paul comments wryly, not everyone has *that* bit of *gnosis* (v. 7)! And this Christologically monotheistic doctrine of creation then enables him to mount, step by step, his argument that, despite superficial similarity between gnostic freedom and Christian freedom, the differences are profound, and produce radical differences in behaviour. This then sets the tone for the rest of the letter and similar passages elsewhere.

I do not think, actually, that even an incipient Gnosticism troubled Paul very much. I see no trace of it in Galatians, Romans or the Thessalonian letters, and only a possible hint in Philippians. First Corinthians, though, indicates that if and when Paul did meet some kind of early Gnosticism, he did not *derive* his argument from it, but drew on his Jewish traditions, Christologically reinterpreted, to propose *against* it a worldview in which the created order is the good handiwork of the one God, and in which therefore salvation consists not in being rescued from creation but in being rescued from the evils – ultimately, sin and death themselves – which have defaced that creation. That is what final judgment, and resurrection itself, are all about.²⁴

Matters look somewhat different in Colossians and Ephesians. (I believe that when the various 'new perspectives on Paul' have worked their way into historical exegesis, they will compel a re-evaluation of the dogma that Paul could not have written these two letters.) True, the author uses some gnostic language (*plērōma* is the normal example). But this, once more, does not mean that the theology of the letters is derived from Gnosticism.

Rather, it means if anything that these letters confront it head on. Ephesians opens with a Jewish paean of praise, echoing Genesis and Exodus, stressing that God's secret hidden purpose, so far from being to snatch people away from earth to a detached heaven, is 'to sum up all things in heaven and on earth' in Christ (1.10). This is worked out, not by the 'elite' discovering 'who they really are', but by all people discovering themselves to be 'children of wrath', in need of rescue by grace alone (2.1–10). This salvation is then to be worked out in concrete, physical ethical obedience.

Colossians emphasizes the organic harmony of creation and salvation. The poem in 1.15–20 shares with John 1 the double root of Genesis 1 and Proverbs 8. Its very structure, with its obvious parallelisms, declares that the same God is both creator and redeemer, and that redemption necessarily therefore means new creation. The poetic exploitation of possible meanings of the first word of Genesis (*bereshith*) indicates a kind of fascinated delight with the truth of creation, interpreted once more through and through Christologically.²⁵ Salvation, therefore, is for Colossians a matter of sharing in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and working out what that means in the practice of personal and communal living. I do not think that the Colossian 'heresy', even supposing there was one, was a kind of Gnosticism. It seems, rather, to be some form of Judaism, described ironically by the author in terms of pagan religious practices.²⁶ But the letter as a whole, with its strongly creational basis, rules out any form of Gnosticism in any case.

The final scene of the book of Revelation, with the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven to earth, constitutes the ultimate argument against all kinds of Gnosticism.²⁷ The opening scenes of heavenly worship in chapters 4 and 5 reinforce the widespread early Christian reaffirmation of the Jewish doctrine of God as creator of all things, and insist that the radical infection of evil within creation does not mean that creation

itself is bad, but rather that evil is an intruder whose power is broken by the victory of the lion who is also the lamb. 'Apocalyptic', here and elsewhere in the New Testament, is not a sign of cosmic dualism, but rather a mode of declaring the creator's victory over evil, resulting in new heavens and new earth.

This points us back finally to Paul, and to one of the great climaxes in his greatest letter. Romans 8.18–27 grows directly out of Paul's entire argument about God's faithfulness to his creation and to the covenant, and forms a majestic statement of the way in which God will redeem not only human beings but also the entire created order. 'The whole creation is to be set free from its bondage to decay and to share the liberty of the glory of the children of God.' No gnostic could even contemplate such a statement, which is presumably why those who have tried to understand Paul within some kind of gnostic framework (that is, at least, much Lutheran and evangelical exegesis) have ignored this passage or marginalized it. But you cannot make sense of Romans without it. This is a key moment in the biblical narrative of judgment, which, to repeat, is not about the demolition or abolition of the created order, but the *putting to rights* of the creator's good world.²⁸ Creation, resurrection and judgment are the triple biblical witnesses against Gnosticisms of all sorts: creation, because the gnostic insists that the god who made the world is a bad god; resurrection, because the gnostic insists that the body is bad and is to be shuffled off if true, spiritual life is to be attained; judgment, because the gnostic is not interested in sorting out the present world, but only in escaping it.

This brief survey of key moments in the New Testament shows powerfully that the early Christians were eager to affirm the goodness of creation, and to see the role of Jesus Christ in creation as a vital interpretative key to what 'creation' itself meant. Jesus, in other words, is never seen as the one who rescues *from* creation, despite the regular assumptions both of

much fundamentalism on the one hand and of the newer enthusiasm for Gnosticism on the other. He is, rather, the one who rescues creation itself, and us with it.

This propels us into the third and final section of this chapter. What might happen if we took this retold biblical narrative and applied it to the issues of our day?

Against contemporary Gnosticism

The themes of the three chapters in this book interlock and interact. We shall only see the full picture when the other elements are before us. But let me begin my plea about the gospel and our culture by saying that it's time we had the courage to speak about, and live on the basis of, creation and new creation. Neither in the first century nor in the twenty-first should Christianity be thought of in terms of a private spirituality which escapes the constraints of the created order, including one's own given humanness, in the present or the future. Christianity was and is about new creation – a new creation which began when Jesus rose from the dead, which will be completed in God's new heavens and new earth, and which is glimpsed and grasped partially, but still truly, through the Spirit in the present.

What does this say about Western culture over the last two hundred years? It is routinely assumed that with the Enlightenment the world entered a new age, so that from now on everything is different, giving Western humankind a mandate to think and act differently, to set new goals and targets and use any necessary means to attain them. Part of the rhetoric of the Enlightenment has been that ordinary Christianity is based on a mistake: it is historically discredited, morally obnoxious, personally damaging, and generally not the sort of thing that sensible people would want to be associated with. And in the middle of all this we find the rejection of resurrection: not because of newly discovered historical data, or better grasp

on scientific method, but because Easter offers an alternative eschatology to that of the Enlightenment. World history cannot have two decisive turning-points; the rhetoric of the Enlightenment must therefore be shored up by denying the claim of the early Christians. There are then two options: either reject the resurrection, as liberal Enlightenment thought has done, or domesticate it, as conservative Enlightenment thought has done, turning it simply into the great miracle which shows how powerful God is, or into the sign that we shall after all go to heaven when we die, or, as the last resort, into a child's happy ending to a nasty story, with eggs and bunnies to make us feel better. In both the liberal and conservative modernist readings, Gnosticism triumphs: the liberal is free to reinvent Christianity as a movement of personal self-discovery, the conservative to say 'this world is not my home; I'm just a-passing through.'

Thus Gnosticism, rejecting resurrection either wholesale or in its true meaning, cuts the nerve of the biblical themes of creation and judgment. As I said, the right-wing version emphasizes creation – but in a mechanistic, non-Christological way; and it stresses judgment – but in a destructive and punitive, not restorative, way. The left-wing version, often in reaction, follows its ancient forebears in rejecting creation and judgment altogether, only to find that there is no moral ground left to advocate justice and ecology within God's world. This leaves a moral vacuum, which is then filled with new rules, all shiny and shrill, a parody of a genuine Christian ethic.

These two types of contemporary Gnosticism generate different, and equally inadequate, readings of the gospels. In right-wing gnostic readings, found characteristically within fundamentalism and some types of evangelicalism, Jesus' announcement of God's kingdom is simply about 'going to heaven when you die,' not about God's kingdom breaking in on earth as in heaven. In left-wing gnostic readings, which have elevated conspiracy theories to an art form, the canonical

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gospels are bravely declared to be a priori unhistorical, and in need of replacement by the gnostic gospels, whose 'Jesus' encourages his hearers to explore their own inner depths, to follow their own star, and to develop a transcendent spirituality which leaves behind the mess and muddle of the present world. I can understand why that should be popular within post-Enlightenment, and now within postmodern, culture, as it was in the confused world of the second and third centuries. But I find it hard to understand why anyone should take it seriously as a historical proposal about Jesus, or should suppose that Christianity began as a kind of gnostic spirituality and then developed into the Jewish kingdom-of-God movement we find in the synoptic traditions.

Both these options – the right and left wings of contemporary Gnosticism, if you like – leave the church in difficulties in its mission and life. If, as in Romans 8, the work of renewing creation has already begun in Jesus and is to be carried forward in the power of the Spirit, then working to protect the ecological balance in the present time is enormously and urgently important – a conclusion which is resisted tooth and nail by today's right-wing Gnostics, and which left-wing Gnostics often want to assert but without deep theological justification. Similarly, the work of restorative justice, in criminal justice systems within nations and in global issues within the worldwide community, is made far harder by the flight from creation, resurrection and judgment into various types of Gnosticism. Notoriously, right-wing Gnosticism, caring about the salvation of souls and envisaging judgment as the punishment of the unsaved along with the wicked world itself, has an easy solution to the problems of crime at the local level and problems such as terrorism at the global level: anticipate God's 'judgment' here and now, in punitive retribution. The political left has argued strongly against both, but without the theological investment that would yield a serious alternative. The theological left, embracing various kinds of neo-Gnosticism,

is regularly reduced to the impotence of postmodern sloganeering. But those who are grasped by the fresh wisdom waiting to be discovered in scripture will be able to work towards that doing of justice and mercy, and that humility in doing them, which was spoken of by the prophets and which characterizes the whole work of new creation.

One obvious, though highly contentious, area in which this applies is sex. On the right, the Gnosticism of much fundamentalism (this applies, by the way, both to Roman Catholic and to modern Protestant forms) has taught that the human body and its functions are shabby, dirty or actually evil, and this has produced a pseudo-ethic in which sexual activity, grudgingly permitted in marriage, is shunned elsewhere for all the wrong reasons. On the left, as I noted before, the implicit Gnosticism of our culture has encouraged people to look for their 'identity' deep within themselves, where they often find the spark of sexual impulse or excitement, and conclude that this 'identity' is the thing which then defines them and legitimates whatever behaviour it urges.

Over against these gnostic distortions, the story of creation, resurrection and judgment indicates well enough where the foundations for a fresh Christian sexual ethic might lie. Avoiding entirely the caricature offered by the Gnosticism of the right, it is important to reaffirm the goodness of our embodied selves, including the male-plus-female ordering of creation. The two greatest New Testament eschatological scenes employ the imagery of marriage (Revelation 21) and childbirth (Romans 8). They thus indicate at a structural level that male/female complementarity is not a mere evolutionary accident, nor something confined to the old creation, nor yet an arrangement brought about through the intrusion of evil in the world, but is woven deep into the God-given world of both creation and new creation. (To raise this question without the space to develop it in the sensitive and careful way one might wish to may be unwise, but it would be still worse to pass over in silence an area where

the map I have sketched may provide some alternative routes through difficult terrain.)

I have thus come to regard the present fashion for all things gnostic (which is to be sharply distinguished from careful historical scholarship on the subject) as a bizarre and unhelpful feature of our culture, to be addressed with the good news of the Christian gospel. Whether it's *The Da Vinci Code*, or the 'new myth of Christian origins'; whether it's the attempt to suggest that this or that gnostic gospel might be worth more, historically and theologically, than the ones in the canon; whether it's the elitism of Western culture and its casual disregard for the planet and its other occupants; whether it's the deep dualism of fundamentalism; whether it's the failure of a contemporary Christian ecology; in all these ways I believe it is time to restate, and even more importantly to relive, the ancient biblical wisdom of creation, resurrection and judgment, to worship the creator God who made a good world and who will one day remake it, and to share in that project, not of escapism but of new creation, in the present time in the power of the Spirit.

Conclusion

What, then, does the Christian gospel have to say to this important feature of our contemporary culture? Equally importantly, how can it say it? (Merely to content ourselves with getting the theory right might collude with an intellectualism which is itself part of the problem.) To announce the good news that there is one God, the creator, and that this God is made known in and through Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, and that through him new creation has begun in which the present creation will be put to rights at last – this is good news indeed for those trapped within the gnostic assumptions of post-Enlightenment modernity. But it won't be much good just saying it. This message, by its very nature, can only truly be told by a community that

God the creator in a world of neo-Gnosticism

is living by it – living, that is, in celebration of the goodness of creation without collapsing into the licentiousness which results from imagining that there is no such thing as evil within the good creation, but rather practising the self-denial which is incumbent on those who follow Jesus; living in anticipatory celebration of the new creation in which all wrongs shall be put to rights and every hurt be healed, and making that real in public, political, global and economic life as well as in personal and communal holiness. But if a community is really committed to living this way, renouncing Gnosticism and embracing creation, resurrection and judgment, it will face, as did the early Christians, the challenge of public and political life, not least the challenge of empire. And that brings us to our next chapter.