



THINKING  
THROUGH  
CREATION

Genesis 1 and 2 as Tools of Cultural Critique

**Christopher Watkin**

Foreword by John M. Frame

“This is one of the most refreshing books I have read in a long time. With deceptive simplicity, Watkin defends exegetical, theological, and philosophical verities that are much needed in today’s discussions. Rather than being embarrassed by Christian doctrines such as creation *ex nihilo*, the Trinity, and the Sabbath, he sees them as unique strengths in the quest for truth. Among his most helpful strategies is *diagonalizing*, which we used to call *the third way*: a corrective to scores of false dichotomies, such as functionality vs. beauty, corrected by the meaning of God’s creation; fact as objective vs. value as subjective, corrected by the ‘and there was . . . and God saw that it was good’ of Genesis 1; and nature vs. culture, corrected by the cultural mandate. For those who thought that all had been said about Genesis, philosophy, and culture, this marvelous book will convince them otherwise, and it will inspire them to explore further.”

—**William Edgar**, Professor of Apologetics, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia

“For years, as an academic sociologist and a volunteer leader in the Engaging the University initiative of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES), I have been urging faculty and students worldwide to bring their disciplines, their scholarly debates and research agendas, and their teaching and writing into close creative encounters with powerful biblical motifs and theologies. Too often they reply, “Where is the theology, what are the motifs, that apply to the big issues in my field, to my research agendas?” In *Thinking through Creation*, Chris Watkin, a leading scholar of French social thought, presents a paradigmatic response. This learned, beautifully written, theologically infused, and highly evocative work provides all of us in the academy—students and senior faculty alike—with a creative theological armory that reflects the glory of our Creator God and can transform our scholarship. The book is readily accessible to any thoughtful student or professor, complete with aids to understanding difficult issues, study questions, and a rich bibliography. Watkin’s deep insights carry rich value far beyond the social

sciences and humanities to every corner of the twenty-first-century university.”

—**Terence Halliday**, Co-Director and Research Professor,  
American Bar Foundation; Honorary Professor, Australian  
National University; Adjunct Professor of Sociology,  
Northwestern University

“Christopher Watkin’s *Thinking through Creation* could not be more aptly named. Here is another excellent tool for contemporary Christians as they confront the challenges of postmodern culture. Watkin bores in on one of the nonnegotiable elements of the biblical narrative—the idea of creation. Of course Christians want to use the Bible and its teaching in the first two chapters of Genesis—but how? Especially when secularists have co-opted the term with their focus on the three *Ds*—dinosaurs, Darwin, and the days of creation? Watkin answers by insisting that we develop a clear understanding of the doctrines of the Trinity, human nature, and culture. The Trinity and creation are not irrational ideas to be rejected as embarrassing and outmoded. Just as Charles Cochrane in his enduring work *Christianity and Classical Culture* demonstrated how Augustine’s Trinitarianism replaced the classical Greek worldview, Watkin deftly unpacks how a fresh understanding of the Trinity enables Christians in the twenty-first century to avoid the trap of debating the three *Ds* and instead to discover the riches of biblical teaching. But Watkin goes further than simply developing these ideas; he insists that we *think with them*. His creative use of diagonalization offers a fresh way of resolving apparent dichotomies that has captured contemporary thinking. Watkin’s work deserves to be in the hands of pastors as well as all students—from college freshmen to seminarians.”

—**Andrew Hofferker**, Professor of Church History Emeritus,  
Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson

“On a dramatic and unprecedented scale, historic Protestantism is today a global phenomenon, and its maturing presence in countries and cultures far and vastly different from its native contexts is an urgent call to pursue biblical wisdom on what it means to be

God created good, is ‘enchanted’ in the best sense: run through with Word, song, and meaning. Take up and take heed.”

—**Kevin J. Vanhoozer**, Research Professor of Systematic Theology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“Chris Watkin explores two controversial and often overlooked doctrines (the Trinity and Creation) in order to tear down false dichotomies in philosophy and lift up treasures of truth just below the surface of our creedal affirmations. This book helps us to inhabit biblical worlds of thought so that we can see, interpret, and reach our world with the gospel.”

—**Trevin Wax**, Bible and Reference Publisher, LifeWay Christian Resources, author of *Eschatological Discipleship*, *This Is Our Time*, and *Counterfeit Gospels*

“I give a high endorsement to Christopher Watkin’s little book *Thinking through Creation*. It is a fine contemporary example of the kind of Christian thinking that connects biblical teaching and historic Christian orthodoxy with the challenges of contemporary culture, but does so in a way that does not resort to proof-texting or to the shibboleths of the contemporary culture wars. Instead, it uses Scripture to break through the many false dilemmas that bedevil much contemporary thinking, both secular and Christian. Thoroughly conversant with a broad range of contemporary and classical thinkers, Watkin offers a radical and trenchant critique of contemporary culture and a well-grounded alternative shaped by the Christian Scriptures. I regard this slim volume as a seminal work, and I predict that it will become a classic of its kind.”

—**Albert M. Wolters**, Emeritus Professor of Worldview and Biblical Studies, Redeemer University College; author, *Creation Regained*

# THINKING THROUGH CREATION

Genesis 1 and 2 as Tools of Cultural Critique

Christopher Watkin

  
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For Alison, sine qua non

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## Foreword

READERS WHO APPROACH this book with a background in Reformed and presuppositional thought will find much that is familiar here. Watkin ably argues the proposition that Scripture presents not only a way of salvation but a distinctive worldview—a philosophy in which God is Creator-Lord and the world is his creature-servant. Only this biblical worldview presents the Supreme Being as simultaneously absolute and personal. This God is transcendent, not in the sense that he is limited to a realm beyond ours and cannot be known, but in the sense that he is fully able to exert supreme power within the world he has made. And therefore he is also immanent, not as a mere spiritual haze within experience, but as a personal Being who creates relationships with human beings and directs nature and history toward his personal goals. If God were an impersonal force, then the meaning of the universe would reduce to power. But because he is personal, even tripersonal, the deepest truth of the universe is to be found in personal relationships—indeed, in love.

Watkin also expounds the implications of the doctrine of the Trinity, the original loving relationship. Like Cornelius Van Til, he finds the Trinity to be the root of all one-and-many relationships in the universe.

But Watkin carries this discussion further than have his predecessors. In chapter 3, Watkin shows the importance of God's creating by his *word*, so that formlessness and emptiness are filled by form and content, resulting in a world that is "unnecessarily diverse and abundant." That "unnecessary" abundance shows that the world is not only an object of science, wonderful as that is, but also a place of beauty and art that inspires the great aesthetic gifts of mankind. The world's diversity is a diversity of ways in which the very richness of God's own nature, his *goodness*, is displayed in the world. The materialists and rationalists of philosophy have tried to reduce the world to something much less than this, but because it is God's creation, it will not be reduced.

Chapter 4 focuses on God's creation of mankind in his image and explores that biblical concept in great depth. Watkin explores substantial, formal, and relational interpretations of the divine image and the importance of marriage. He discusses also the creation mandate and the concept of work—work limited by Sabbath rest. Along the way, he answers important questions: What does it mean to "fill" the earth and "subdue" it? To what extent can we imitate God's creative work without trying to usurp his prerogatives? To what extent should we seek to preserve the natural environment, and to what extent use it for our own purposes? What about the rights of other human beings to participate in the bounties of the creation?

I was moved and delighted at the depth of Watkin's analysis, and the richness of insight that God has taught him through the study of the Bible's creation account. He is a good writer and illustrates his points very well. You will note, for example, his diagrams illustrating *diagonalization*. Scripture, he says, rejects many common dichotomies between concepts in secular thought. For example, philosophers have placed before us the choice between morality governed by an impersonal structure and morality governed by an unstructured personal entity. But Scripture says that morality is governed by a personal Being who has his own structured morality. There is a "diagonal" relationship between personality and structure, meaning that we do not need to choose between the two of them. Watkin is a surprise: a well-trained philosopher who is also a clear and helpful writer.

I hope that through the publication of this volume, his work will become much better known in America and that he will become a major player in our discussions of Christian philosophy. *Thinking through Creation* is an edifying book. It glorifies God.

John M. Frame  
Professor of Systematic Theology and Philosophy Emeritus  
Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando, Florida

## Preface

THIS BOOK, and the larger project from which it is drawn, represents the work of over two decades. Although I have been thinking and reading about the relation between the Bible's story line and Western culture for twenty-two years now, it was only in 2015 that the idea began to take shape in my mind for a book that would survey the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, stopping along the way to consider some of the main patterns and assumptions of Western thought. As 2015 drew to an end, this idea swelled to a rather unwieldy 160,000-word document on my laptop, with the working title *Thinking through the Bible*. Needless to say, publishers were reluctant to embrace a volume of such girth by a relatively unknown author. The present book is a reworked and augmented version of the first three chapters of *Thinking through the Bible*. Only time and sales will tell whether the subsequent material on the Old and New Testaments will see the light of day.

The project grew from the realization that a full-orbed contemporary articulation of Christianity must not only explain the Bible to our culture, but also explain our culture through the Bible. It must seek to discern what our culture looks like when viewed through the story, categories, assumptions, and ways of thinking that we encounter

from Genesis to Revelation. When we think culture through the Bible in this way, not only do we come to understand them both in deeper ways, but we also discover some surprising commonalities, along with equally unexpected and illuminating differences.

In these pages I invite you to join with me in thinking our culture through the Trinity (chapter 2), the account of the creation of the world in Genesis 1 (chapter 3), and the creation of human beings in Genesis 2 (chapter 4). The second chapter argues that the Trinity provides Christians with a way of understanding and living in the world that is both more sophisticated and more beautiful than extrabiblical alternatives. It presents to the reader the distinctive and foundational biblical truth of *absolute-personality theism* and shows how a biblical understanding of *transcendence* and *immanence* differs from the philosophical concepts that bear those same names. The reader is introduced to the tool of cultural analysis called *diagonalization*, a way of navigating the false dichotomies that litter contemporary culture and thought that neither straightforwardly refuses nor simply embraces them. We consider the relation between the Christian Trinity and the perennial philosophical problem of the one and the many, and contrast the irreducibly loving nature of Trinitarian relationships with a society whose most fundamental dynamic is power.

Chapter 3 seeks to tease out the intellectual and social implications of the biblical account of the creation of the universe in Genesis 1 and 2. It introduces the important biblical idea of the *Creator-creature distinction* and shows how it revolutionizes human relations by turning a *u-shaped dynamic* of reciprocal favor into an *n-shaped dynamic* of divine initiative. The Bible is shown to diagonalize both the fact-value dichotomy that underpins much contemporary thinking about ethics and also current debates about the relation between language and reality. Finally, the chapter elaborates a distinctively Christian understanding of beauty in the context of a created superabundance that challenges prevailing cultural values of efficiency and productivity.

In chapter 4, we turn our attention to the biblical story of the creation of humanity. The Genesis 2 account of humanity created in the image of God is set alongside contemporary cultural alternatives to show that the Bible furnishes us with a picture of humanity liable to

resonate more deeply with our values and intuitions than do competing accounts, with particular emphasis on its crucial importance for the question of equality. The creation mandate, so often dismissed today as a charter of exploitation, is revealed to be a foundation and catalyst for incisive and sophisticated interventions into the areas of ecology and environmentalism and also an imperative for Christians to be involved in cultural production in all spheres of society. Finally, the chapter draws out the cultural significance of Sabbath as a subversive and life-affirming act of resistance to prevailing cultural hegemonies.

In addition to the main discussions of the Trinity and creation, the reader will find three types of reflection scattered throughout this book. These sections deal with particular issues that arise from the major doctrines and passages discussed. Sections entitled “Think It Through” deal at greater length with themes and issues raised by the biblical passages studied in the main flow of the book. A “Reading Note” discusses how the Bible shapes reading practices both of itself and of other texts. “Compare and Contrast” sections trace the similarities of and differences between the Bible’s treatment of a particular issue and that of a non-Christian philosopher or school of thought, showing more clearly some of the important alternatives to the biblical position. Finally, chapters 2 through 4 each end with a list of the key cultural and biblical patterns discussed in the chapter, a list of key terms and names from the chapter that are defined in the glossary, issues for further study, and a list of further reading.

The purpose of this book is to reclaim the Trinity and creation from their cultural despisers and to show how these foundational doctrines speak into, question, and shed fresh light on some of the most important debates in contemporary society and thought. If it succeeds in its aim, then it will plead guilty to the charge of “incitement to biblical thinking,” for it will have provided a springboard for Christians and others engaged in all areas of thought and culture to use the biblical patterns and concepts explained in its pages to develop fresh and distinctive interventions in many new contexts, challenges, and debates.

# Acknowledgments

IN WRITING THIS BOOK, I have rested heavily on the teaching and example of the many thinkers and lovers of biblical truth whom it has been my privilege to know over the past two decades. Some I have known personally, while I am acquainted with others only through their writing. In particular I am grateful to God for Richard Coekin, Steve Midgley, Mark Ashton, Simon Scott, and many others who taught and showed me how to be in the world as a Christian and how, as Mark Ashton frequently put it, to “believe my beliefs.”

Sincere thanks is due to all who read all or part of the typescript and offered advice and encouragement for the project, in particular David Parry, Denis Alexander, David McIlroy, and John Coffey. Al Wolters provided a shot of encouragement for the project at a key moment, and John Hughes at P&R Publishing patiently worked with me to hone and develop my original idea; I know no one faster on the draw than John when it comes to answering e-mail. I am grateful for the encouragement of Murray Campbell, Simon Angus, Graeme Chiswell, and Stuart White in Melbourne.

My wife, Alison, has accompanied me through this project with a keen and critical eye, hearty encouragement, and lavish patience, especially in the frantic days of final drafting. She was, I think, the



only person to read and offer comments on every word of a much larger early draft of the project at a busy time, a testimony to both her selflessness and her critical skill.

While I cannot know, let alone adequately acknowledge, the myriad influences, conversations, and books that have helped me to write the present volume, what I do know is that God was very gracious to me in granting the disposition, energy, and motivation to bring together ideas that I had encountered from many sources and over many years, shaping them into this book. By his grace, I have already benefited immeasurably from the process in the form of a deepening understanding of the conversation to be had between Bible and culture. What a joy to live knowing the absolute, personal, Trinitarian, loving Creator!

# 1

## Introduction

And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.” (Acts 17:19–20)

Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But as these are connected together by many ties, it is not easy to determine which of the two precedes and gives birth to the other.<sup>1</sup>

All modern and contemporary thought is . . . positively and negatively determined by the relation with Christianity.<sup>2</sup>

THIS BOOK IS written for thinking Christians who want to see biblical truth shape all areas of their thought and life, and who want

1. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Hendrickson, 2007), 1.1.1.

2. Roberto Esposito, “Flesh and Body in the Deconstruction of Christianity,” *Minnesota Review* 75 (2010): 95.

to understand, serve, and change our culture. It shows how deep biblical truths shape a distinctive way of thinking and living in the world, and it provides patterns and examples of how to bring the Bible to bear on some of the key assumptions, debates, and issues of our age, equipping the reader to apply these patterns to new questions and in new contexts. At its heart lies a central conviction: to explain the Bible to the culture in which we live is not enough; we must also explain the culture in which we live in terms of the Bible. With this aim, *Thinking through Creation* explores how to view our culture through the lens of the biblical account of the Trinitarian God and his creative act as recounted in Genesis chapters 1 and 2, using biblical ways of thinking to meet the challenge of engaging in authentic, positive, and constructive dialogue with the great ideas and values of our time.

In order to meet this challenge of bringing Genesis and contemporary culture into productive dialogue, two things are necessary: we must develop a nuanced grasp of the patterns of thought that emerge from the biblical account of the Trinity and of creation, and we must develop a penetrating appreciation of the concepts and stories that shape our contemporary culture. In other words, we must develop a capacity for what John Stott in *The Contemporary Christian* calls “double listening”:

We are called to double listening, listening to both the Word and the world. . . . We listen to the Word with humble reverence anxious to understand it, and resolved to believe and obey what we have come to understand. We listen to the world with critical alertness, anxious to understand it too, and resolved not necessarily to believe and obey it, but to sympathize with it and to seek grace to discover how the gospel relates to it.<sup>3</sup>

Both modes of listening are indispensable for Christians who want to understand and help shape our culture. Neither mode of listening is straightforward, however, and both can be misunderstood, so a

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

word of explanation on each is in order as we begin our journey of double listening.

## **Listening to the Word**

Many people today think that when Christians speak of bringing the Bible to bear on public debate and intellectual endeavor, they are arguing for a podium-thumping, verse-toting, finger-wagging, nay-saying attitude that puts a reactionary hand brake on innovation and progress. But such pick-a-verse politics is a caricature of a full-orbed Christian intervention into the intellectual and social issues of our day. One thing that it fails to understand is that the Bible contains not only a set of truths, stories, and doctrines, but also what we might call recurring *structures, patterns, or shapes of thought*. These can include patterns of God's behavior repeated in different contexts (for example: he recurrently mixes justice with mercy in a way that does not compromise either principle), recurring ways of thinking about the relation between God and the world (God is frequently described as being both high above his people and yet also near to them and with them), or repeated ways in which God's plans surprise his people (messianic figures are consistently not the firstborn or strongest, and not those whom we would expect to deliver God's people).

### **Thinking about the Bible; Thinking through the Bible**

When we distill repeated patterns from the Bible, we are seeking to pay attention not only to *what* the Bible says in this passage or that, but to *how* it presents every passage from Genesis to Revelation. Put another way, we read the Bible not only as a set of ideas and stories to think *about*, but also as a set of patterns and dispositions *through* which we can think about everything and *through* which we live the whole of life. To think *about* the Bible is to take its unfolding events as an object of our contemplation; to think *through* the Bible is to take up the patterns and moves of that story and use them as an interpretive grid for all our understanding and living, finding in these patterns tools for shaping debates and solving problems far

beyond their immediate concerns. When we start thinking and acting through the Bible in this way, we can provide genuinely fresh, distinctive, and constructive contributions to intellectual debate and social change.

Now, of course we cannot think through the Bible without also thinking about it. We cannot learn how to think biblically without seeking to discern the meaning of particular verses and passages, and much of this book is devoted to just that task. The choice between understanding biblical passages and thinking biblically is plainly a false dichotomy. Nevertheless, it is possible to understand many verses and many passages of the Bible without thinking biblically and without bringing biblical patterns to bear on the intellectual and social questions of our day. To do so is to jolt to a premature halt along the road of developing a Christian mind and voice, and this book has been written to provide roadside assistance to such cases of theological breakdown.

To advocate a sensitivity to biblical patterns and shapes of thought is by no means a plea for going behind the text of the Bible to find a secret or hidden code beyond its pages or written between its lines. Let us be clear: much damage has been done to the church and much dishonor brought to God by misguided claims to have found the “true” or “deep” meaning of the Scriptures beyond their manifest message. There is nothing esoteric in seeking to discern the patterns and structures of the Bible because they are not behind or above the text at all; quite to the contrary, they can be seen in chapter and verse and understood without any newfangled, extrabiblical interpretive key. Nor is there any claim in these pages to have discovered something new in the text of the Bible. In giving names to the biblical moves identified in this book (such as *diagonalizing* and *u-shaped dynamic*), I am only seeking to draw out with clarity the implications of a way of thinking that lies waiting for us in the Bible.

The kinds of full-orbed Christian interventions into intellectual and social issues outlined in these chapters follow, very imperfectly, in a long and venerable tradition of Christian thinkers and Reformers. The work and lives of Augustine and Calvin, to take but two of the best-known examples, show how an understanding of biblical moves,

patterns, and shapes of thought can generate cutting-edge, incisive interventions into intellectual, social, and political issues.

We can begin to get a handle on what such an approach looks like by considering Alvin Plantinga's four subcategories of what he calls an "Augustinian Christian philosophy":<sup>4</sup>

1. *Philosophical theology*: "a matter of thinking about the central doctrines of the Christian faith from a philosophical perspective and employing the resources of philosophy."<sup>5</sup>
2. *Apologetics*: a negative apologetics that defends Christianity from its detractors<sup>6</sup> and a positive apologetics that gives theistic proofs or arguments for the existence of God.<sup>7</sup>
3. *Christian philosophical criticism*: a critique (in the sense of a fair and balanced appraisal, pointing out good points and bad) of the cultures and thought-forms that exist in society today, "discerning the spirits" and "testing the provenance of the bewildering variety of ideas and claims with which we are confronted"<sup>8</sup> and passing this knowledge on to the rest of the Christian community.
4. *Positive Christian philosophy*: "thinking about the sorts of questions philosophers ask and answer from an explicitly Christian point of view,"<sup>9</sup> questions such as the nature of duty or human flourishing, and the pursuit of love or beauty.

According to Plantinga, the Christian church is currently weaker in the areas of philosophical criticism and positive philosophy, and these are the areas that provide the focus of this book.

4. Alvin Plantinga, "Augustinian Christian Philosophy," *Monist* 75, 3 (1992): 291–320.

5. *Ibid.*, 291.

6. *Ibid.*, 292.

7. *Ibid.*, 293.

8. *Ibid.*, 308.

9. *Ibid.*

## Biblical Theory

The combined tasks of a Christian philosophical criticism and a positive Christian philosophy can be thought of as a biblical *theory*, in the sense in which we might talk about *feminist theory* or *eco-theory*, a term to which we will have occasion to return below. A theory, in this context, is a way of addressing all the facets of contemporary culture and society with a particular set of convictions, concerns, values, questions, and ideals. For Carl Trueman, professor of church history at Westminster Theological Seminary, if such a Christian theory is to be written today, then it must begin with Augustine's *City of God*.<sup>10</sup>

The range of [Augustine's] thought, from psychology to politics to grace, makes him a unique source for Christian thinking. A Marxist friend once commented to me that *The City of God* was the only book in Christianity that could function as *Das Kapital* does in Marxism—a touchstone tome for the development of critical thinking about the whole of life. . . . Written as Rome, the eternal city, burned at the hands of the Goths, *The City of God* is in places a superb reflection on the relationship between earthly and heavenly kingdoms . . . . If Christians really want to develop a critical theory that allows for engagement with contemporary culture, they would do better reading Augustine than Derrida.<sup>11</sup>

Trueman is correct in highlighting *The City of God* as a singular and remarkable source of Christian reflection for critical thinking about the whole of life. In this classic of Western literature (written by a man of African origin, let us not forget), Augustine brings the whole of the Bible's story line to bear on the whole of late antiquity, from its religion through its philosophy to its politics. Weaving together a deep understanding of the ideas and narratives of Roman culture with a grasp of the patterns of the Bible's story line, Augustine shows

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

11. The post appeared on the Reformation21.org website (accessed 2011) and has since been taken down. Professor Trueman has confirmed to me in private correspondence that he is happy to stand by the quotation.

how the Bible accounts for the culture of his day better than late Roman culture can account for itself. *The City of God* stands as perhaps the most impressive edifice in double listening to be produced in the two thousand years of church history. There is, however (as Trueman would heartily agree), a source deeper in richness and broader in scope than *The City of God* for shaping a Christian theory in the rapidly changing twenty-first-century Western world. We should not begin with Augustine; we should let Augustine lead us to where Augustine himself began: with one eye fixed on the Bible and the other scrutinizing our culture.

Trueman's advice is a corrective to the widespread assumption that the best way to understand and shape contemporary culture is to read only contemporary authors. In fact, reading nothing but the latest books can be the very worst way to understand contemporary culture. As C. S. Lewis pointed out in his classic essay "On the Reading of Old Books," every age has its blind spots and characteristic mistakes, and if we read only contemporary books, then "where they are true they will give us truths which we half knew already" and "where they are false they will aggravate the error with which we are already dangerously ill." The remedy, for Lewis, is "to keep the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds" by the reading of old books.<sup>12</sup> It follows that one of the great advantages for the Christian seeking to understand and shape our culture in the light of biblical patterns of thought is that the Bible was not written in the last decade, and that it therefore does not share the blind spots of our particular culture. It was, in fact, written over a period of more than a millennium to and about communities that are by turns nomadic, agrarian, monarchical, exiled, and occupied. This cultural and historical diversity means that the Bible—in contrast to almost all current theoretical approaches or "theories"—is not hidebound by any single age or any single cultural context, least of all our own.

12. C. S. Lewis, "On the Reading of Old Books," in *God in the Dock*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 202.



## Listening to the World

When it comes to the task of listening to the world, we find that the stakes are very similar to those we encounter in listening to the Word. Just as there is a danger of wielding particular biblical verses and passages in isolation from biblical ways of thinking, so also it is possible, in listening to contemporary culture, to hear only a series of isolated sound bites and ideas that strike our ears as a jarring cacophony of cultural sound without any rhythm or melody. To hear only the individual sounds, however, is to miss the bass lines and repetitions that connect all the isolated pockets of culture together and help us to understand them as a whole and in relation to each other. If we seek to understand the surface features of our culture while paying no attention to the deep assumptions, convictions, concepts, and stories out of which they arise, we will achieve only a disjointed and ultimately superficial grasp of our times, and will have little hope of influencing the culture. Such a proof-texting approach to cultural engagement can never adequately understand the ideas and values of our culture any more than a proof-texting approach to the Bible can yield a deep understanding of God's Word. Without such a joined-up cultural understanding, we will struggle to engage in cultural debate on a fundamental level.

The very idea that deep concepts and narratives structure the discourse of our society and shape its values is perhaps a little clearer today in intellectual circles than it is in society at large, where such stories and concepts often remain assumed and unspoken. Such overarching concepts and narratives can be seen roaming through the groves of academe under the name of *theory* or sometimes *social theory* or *critical theory*, and they come in varying guises: Marxist theory, feminist theory, eco-theory, queer theory, postcolonial theory, and subaltern theory, as well as deconstruction, psychoanalysis, and many others. The idea of a *theory* here is that it “takes a critical view of society and adopts an ideological focus, typically associated with an emphasis on the analytical importance of sociohistorical context, an emancipatory agenda, and reflexivity.”<sup>13</sup>

13. Daniel Chandler and Rod Munday, “Critical Theory,” in *A Dictionary of Media and*

One important aspect of such theories is that they are telling us not merely *what* to think about or act on in the world, but *how* to act and think in relation to everything. They are not merely something to think *about*, but something *through* which to think about everything, in the sense of providing us with interpretive grids to make sense of the whole of life, to know what is important and why, to know and feel what is praiseworthy and blameworthy, and what sort of action is appropriate to promote the former and resist the latter. Once such a grid is in place, any new fact or event will be interpreted in its terms, with the result that constructive and mutually respectful dialogue with other theories is difficult unless and until the assumptions of the theory itself become part of the discussion.

This book begins to sketch some contours of what we might (somewhat inelegantly) call a *biblical theory*, and to show how it can talk incisively, authentically, and productively with other theories currently prominent in our culture. This task is all the more pressing today because each of these theories seeks to explain not only the whole of life and experience, but other theories as well. In his essay “What Is an Author?,” Michel Foucault mentions a group of thinkers whom he calls “founders of discursivity” (where *discursivity* means a new language to speak about the world and the place of humans in it):

They are unique in that they are not just the authors of their own works. They have produced something else: the possibilities and the rules for the formation of other texts. In this sense they are very different, for example, from a novelist, who is, in fact, nothing more than the author of his own text. Freud is not just the author of *The Interpretation of Dreams* or *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*; Marx is not just the author of the *Communist Manifesto* or *Das Kapital*: they both have established an endless possibility of discourse.<sup>14</sup>

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*Communication* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 81.

14. Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author?,” in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. Josué V. Harari (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979), 154.

What Foucault is edging toward with his notion of “founders of discursivity” is that certain writing (he focuses on Freud and Marx because he considers them to be the most important examples) makes possible not only other similar texts but a whole way of understanding and engaging with the world that might look a lot like the founding texts or might look very different, but is either way indebted to them. Philosopher Paul Ricœur expresses a similar thought when he argues that “all great philosophies” are “*de omni re scibili*, about everything knowable.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, there is no feature of the world or of human relations that a theory cannot fit into its story: fashion, food, and family, nature, novels, and national debt can all be viewed, interpreted, and valued through the theoretical lens.

Marxism can understand everything there is to understand in terms of its own concepts and stories. As can psychoanalysis. As can the Bible. Furthermore, each of these ways of thinking offers its own understanding of other theories as well. For example, psychoanalysis might construe the whole biblical narrative as an elaborate projection of a lawgiving father figure into the heavens (see Freud’s *The Future of an Illusion*), or perhaps for the Marxist all of the Christian’s arguments are evidence of a false consciousness that merely serves the interests of the powerful. In other words, each of these theories already has an explanation for anything that the others could possibly say, and already has a place for them within its own account of reality.

Given that these theories can explain all other theories, they cannot simply argue their differences on some putative neutral common ground (the very idea that there is “neutral common ground” is a feature of some of these theories and not others). Following Alasdair MacIntyre, theologian John Milbank therefore argues that these all-encompassing theories (he calls them *stories*) cannot be argued against but must be out-narrated,<sup>16</sup> and that if the biblical story (and the theology that flows from it) is not clearly shown to explain all

15. Paul Ricœur, “Irrationality and the Plurality of Philosophical Systems,” *Dialectica* 39, 4 (1985): 309.

16. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed. (New York: Wiley, 2006), 331.

other stories in the world, then it will quickly find itself explained away in turn, with nothing to say in reply:

The pathos of modern theology is its false humility. For theology, this must be a fatal disease, because once theology surrenders its claim to be a meta-discourse, it cannot any longer articulate the word of the creator God, but is bound to turn into the oracular voice of some finite idol, such as historical scholarship, humanist psychology, or transcendental philosophy. If theology no longer seeks to position, qualify or criticize other discourses, then it is inevitable that these discourses will position theology: for the necessity of an ultimate organizing logic . . . cannot be wished away.<sup>17</sup>

If Christians do not articulate how the Bible explains all other stories in terms of its own story and how it provides a positive vision for society, then other stories will step in to explain the Bible in their own terms and provide that vision in its place.

In this spirit, *Thinking through Creation* offers a vision of biblical doctrine not as a series of facts but as a framework for understanding any facts whatsoever, approaching the Bible not as a story within reality but as the story of reality, and as the reality itself within which any other stories must necessarily exist. This fundamental and crucial claim is encapsulated by C. S. Lewis in his address to the Oxford Socratic Club on November 6, 1944: “I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.”<sup>18</sup> The whole of life and thought is shaped by the Bible, not because the Bible has something explicit to say about every facet of contemporary society (no verse explicitly addresses the merits of parliamentary representative democracy or how often to check our social media accounts), but because every facet of contemporary society fits within the story unfolded in the Bible, as Christian philosopher Cornelius Van Til explains:

17. *Ibid.*, 1.

18. C. S. Lewis, “They Asked for a Paper,” in *Is Theology Poetry?* (London: Geoffrey Bless, 1962), 165.

There is one system of reality of which all that exists forms a part. And any individual fact of this system is what it is in this system. It is therefore a contradiction in terms to speak of presenting certain facts to men unless one presents them as parts of this system. The very factness of any individual fact of history is precisely what it is because God is what he is.<sup>19</sup>

For the Christian, everything is what it is because God is who he is, and everything—including culture and intellectual life—has its place within the narrative and concepts of the Bible.

### **The Trinity and Creation: From Embarrassment to Riches**

When it comes to the vision of developing and deploying a biblical theory today, there is a sad irony in many Christian attempts to intervene constructively in intellectual and social debates. The irony is that the biblical teachings and passages that Christians most often avoid and over which they feel embarrassment are often precisely those teachings and passages that can most decisively and innovatively shape fresh thinking. Surely few doctrines today cause as much confusion and as many blushes among Christians as the Trinity, and no passage provokes more controversy and uneasiness among Christians and more anger and ridicule in the wider culture than the account of the creation of the world at the beginning of Genesis. Too often, our contemporary culture sees in Genesis 1 and 2 only problems about days, Darwin, and dinosaurs, and the Trinity is dismissed as irrational or as an alien imposition on the Bible dating from three centuries or more after the final biblical documents were written and owing more to church politics than biblical witness. Obedient to this cultural trend, many Christians seek to consign the Trinity and the opening chapters of Genesis to the “too hard” box of doctrine and to the “too contentious” box of public debate,

19. Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, ed. William Edgar, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003), 193.

and many in the contemporary church have lost confidence in these foundational truths. This is a disaster for thinking Christians because the fundamental biblical truths of the Trinity and creation provide an indispensable and powerful suite of insights and tools for engaging with and critiquing contemporary thought and culture, as well as providing a foundational context without which other biblical truths do not make sense.

The Trinity and creation are the foundation of all biblical Christian thinking. A world that exists as the creation of a sovereign God is simply not the same place as a world that happens to exist in the absence of any deity or purpose, and a world created by a Trinitarian God is not the same place as a world created by many gods or by a god who lacks Trinitarian richness. And any attempt to reckon with the world from a biblical point of view must grapple with these two fundamental doctrines. Far from being an embarrassment to sophisticated debate and fresh thinking, the Trinity and creation provide thinking Christians with a springboard to engage constructively in some of the most important philosophical, political, and social questions of our time.