Praise for *The Way of Heaven and Earth*

"This book is like a many-jeweled crown. It is a rich treasury of thousands of pieces of wonderfully unoriginal Catholic wisdom arranged in an original and unforgettable 'big picture' that reveals the Catholic (universal) 'both/and' mind in contrast to all its 'either/or' alternatives. It shows how Christ is a matchmaker who marries (not compromises) all the spiritual couples that the world divorces."

—**Peter Kreeft**, Professor of Philosophy, Boston College, and author of *Socrates' Children*

"Pursuing holiness requires a type of suffering that many are not able to bear. It includes a radical transformation in the way we see God, ourselves, and the world. In *The Way of Heaven and Earth*, Becklo masterfully leads us down the road that Scripture calls 'narrow' and 'constricted' by breaking through the false dichotomies that distract many today and teaching us how to be holy, how to see, how to understand, and simply how to be human. If you're tired of wrestling with the either/or scenarios that plague the human heart or tired of sitting in the tension of polarization and extremes, this book is an invitation to be free of the paradoxes by diving deeper into them through the lens of the Incarnation. Everyone should read it."

—**Rachel Bulman**, author, speaker, and editor of *With All Her Mind: A Call to the Intellectual Life*

"I am so happy that Matthew Becklo has written *The Way of Heaven and Earth*. Why? Because when people discover that I teach philosophy at a seminary, they often share with me their deep desire to study philosophy in the light of the Catholic faith to better understand God, themselves, the Church, the world, and their participation in it. Whether he intended it or not, in *The Way of Heaven and Earth*, Becklo covers all the major philosophical themes required by the *Program for Priestly Formation* in a well-written, thoroughly researched, and challenging yet accessible book. As our world, our country, and even at times our Church become more polarized, Becklo reminds us that the fullness of truth is usually found in the Catholic both/and, and that heaven and earth ought not be opposed."

—**Fr. Damian Ference**, Vicar for Evangelization and Secretary for Parish Life in the Diocese of Cleveland, Professor of Philosophy at Borromeo Seminary, and author of *Understanding the Hillbilly Thomist: The Philosophical Foundations of Flannery O'Connor's Narrative Art*

THE WAY OF HEAVEN AND EARTH

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From
EITHER/OR
to the Catholic
BOTH/AND

MATTHEW BECKLO

WORD on FIRE

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For Elizabeth

How can we know the way? . . .

I Am the Way.

—John 14:5–6

Contents

Acknowledgments

In February 2015, several years after my reversion to the Catholic faith, I began to think about a book on the "Catholic both/and." For the next six years, I continued to think about it, occasionally scribbling down paragraphs, notes, and quotations. Word on Fire has given me the great gift of finally turning this dream into a reality, and in February 2025—a decade later—it arrives in print.

The cultivation of these ideas over this decade has been the graced work of my life up to this point, and it wouldn't have been possible without the help and encouragement of so many along the way.

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INTRODUCTION

The Great Both/And

Man is a divided animal. Division, of course, has always been with us. But the speed, frequency, and intensity with which we can now share ideas has brought us to a crisis of polarization—one that more and more threatens the future of civilization. Whether it's religion, philosophy, culture, politics, or art, we find ourselves in a fiercely divided world: divided countries, divided states, divided communities, divided families, divided minds. The variety of ideas on a given subject always seems to boil down to some overarching dichotomy, some inevitable showdown. "The world is broken, sundered, busted down the middle, self ripped from self."[1]

Polarization requires the choice between two poles, and behind all of our divisions, we find dilemmas. Do we believe in the conservative or the liberal cause? Tradition or progress? High culture or pop culture? Religion or science? Is man a soul or a body? Is the good life in discipline or passion? Should we be religious or spiritual? Is reality spiritual or material? Should we follow the light of faith or reason? Are we saved by faith or works? Everywhere we turn, we're tempted into an either/or, our vision split in two like

1. Walker Percy, *Love in the Ruins* (New York: Picador, 1971), 382–383.

the double-faced Roman god Janus. We can't bear the tension, and inevitably we choose one way at the expense of the other, narrowing our eyes at those who chose the opposite way.

How we make the choice, of course, varies: sometimes we go to war with the opposing element, and sometimes we deny that it exists at all; sometimes we keep a respectful distance from it, and sometimes we absorb it; sometimes we push it down, and sometimes we rise up to take its place. But we choose—and the stakes are high. Seizing one element at the expense of the other tends toward extremes, and these extremes—whether by common cause or opposite charge—tend to attract one another. In fact, in the ultimate punishment, one extreme often leads right into the clutches of its direct opposite. This is what Carl Jung, borrowing from Heraclitus, called "enantiodromia" (in the Greek, an "opposite-running"). When one side of a dilemma dominates our thinking, the other side will eventually build up, explode through our conscious control, and wreak new havoc.

Social media—so carefully engineered to affirm what we choose, and to addict us to that affirmation—has clearly contributed to this crisis of division and extremism. But the dilemmas behind it have always been with us, and the digital revolution has at least forced us to face them all at once. Can we overcome them before they overcome us? Can we even understand them at all?

This book finds new hope in a forgotten Way. It hinges on three closely related ideas. The first is this: *Our greatest dilemmas are heaven-earth dilemmas.* But what does "heaven and earth" mean? There are layers of meaning to these terms, which come down to the West through the Bible. The surface layer is the *things* of heaven and earth: the guiding metaphor of the sky above and the ground below.

But these surface meanings orient us to four deeper meanings of the terms. The first two look at the big picture: the *people* of heaven and earth (God and man) and the *places* of heaven and earth (God's place and man's place). The second two zoom in on the earth side, where the heavenly and earthly intersect: *man's place* (the spiritual and the physical) and *man himself* (the spirit and the flesh).

The great dilemmas in the history of ideas in the West are heaven-earth dilemmas. The most prominent are these four ultimate dilemmas of life, which all extend out of "heaven or earth": God or man, God's place or man's place, the spiritual or the physical, and the spirit or the flesh. Surrounding these are the great dilemmas of philosophy and theology, which extend out of these same four pairs. And each dilemma that we encounter plays out the same dynamics: on one side, we find a *heavenward* way that chooses the heavenly element at the expense of the earthly; on the other side, we find an *earthward* way that chooses the earthly element at the expense of the heavenly. Man is a creature "pulled two ways like between two teams of horses,"[2] and these two ways are heaven and earth. We find ourselves falling into this same pattern time and time again. Heaven and earth crack the code of our deepest divisions.

This leads to a second idea: *Our heaven-earth dilemmas are only resolved in Christ, the Way of heaven and earth.* From the beginning of Genesis to the end of Revelation, "heaven and earth" is the great mantra of the Bible. And heaven and earth—in all four meanings of those terms—reach their fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth. He is the Way in person; in him, "the sky did really come down and

2. William Faulkner, "Barn Burning," in *Selected Short Stories of William Faulkner* (New York: Modern Library, 2012), 18.

join the earth,"[3] and his spired churches all over the world reach up into the heavens. He says as much, calling himself "the way" (John 14:6)—and not as a road to some other place, but as both the journey and the destination. In Christ, heaven and earth are *contrasted*; heaven is higher than the earth and has the primacy. Yet they're also *connected*; heaven has come down to the earth, drawing the two together in an intimate union. In a word, heaven and earth are in *communion* (together-as-one) in Jesus. God gathers "all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth," "to reconcile to himself all things" (Eph. 1:10; Col. 1:20). In Christ, both heaven and earth are full of God's glory (Isa. 6:3).

When we look at our great dilemmas in the light of the Way, they become false dilemmas. Christ frees us from having to choose between heaven and earth, and offers safe passage between the Scylla and Charybdis of each without the other. But this is no mere intellectual or spiritual program; the more we open ourselves to the truth of Christ, the more we're drawn into his life. We don't claim the Way; the Way claims us. And from within it, we find again and again that the heavenward and earthward each get something right, but that neither gets the whole picture; that the Wayward hold together what the wayward separate or confuse.

This leads to the third and final idea: *The fullness of the Way is in the Catholic Church, which is defined by the principle of "both/and."* Early Christians took Jesus at his word, often describing their newfound faith as "the Way" (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22)—a participation, soul and mind and body, in the life of Jesus. Most Christians walk together on the first stretch of his Way—a "mere

3. C.S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (New York: Scholastic, 1987), 214.

Christianity"—but the Catholic Church has the temerity to see it all the way through to the end. This is the "Catholic both/and."

This phrase has been popularized today through the evangelical work of Bishop Robert Barron, and in the twentieth century, was a preoccupation of various theologians of the Society of Jesus, including Hans Urs von Balthasar, Henri de Lubac, and many others. But this *et-et* (and-and) theme stretches back through the whole of Catholic literature—from Flannery O'Connor and G.K. Chesterton, back through Aquinas and Augustine, all the way to Irenaeus of Lyons and Ignatius of Antioch—and into the Sacred Scriptures. The Church's dogmas, doctrines, and condemnations, its sacraments, saints, and social teachings—all of it comes back to the both/and.

What is it? It's simply an insistence on the Way—an instinct for seeing it and choosing it, for inhabiting the creative tension of paradoxes rather than falling into simplistic solutions. Like the young girl in the Old El Paso commercial about the choice between hard or soft taco shells, now made famous by a meme, it's a knack for responding, "Por que no los dos?" *Why not both?* It seeks dualities without dualism, binaries without bifurcation, dyads without dichotomy. Like some of the saints, it bilocates. Catholics use various images for this both/and: harmony, marriage, sanity, tension, balance, fullness, wholeness ("catholic" meaning *kata holos*, according to the whole). And they frame it using various principles: analogical, sacramental, dialectical, incarnational. But ultimately, the great image and principle is Christ himself. The both/and is just *Christocentric*: it centers on the Way incarnate. Like the *mandorla*, it sees the spheres of heaven and earth intersecting and integrating. Like the Mandalorian, it declares, "This is the Way."

But isn't there a fatal flaw in this whole project? Doesn't the Bible also talk, time and time again, about the *dangers* of the earthly? Aren't the great enemies of the soul, as Christian tradition has it, "the world, the flesh, and the devil"? If so, how can we talk of a "Way of heaven and earth"?

Here, we have to make a key distinction between two very different meanings of the earthly. The first, which we might call "the true earth," is the earthly insofar as it *exists*. But the second, which we might call "the false earth," is the earthly insofar as it's *evil*. Earth in the first sense—the body, the human being, God's "very good" creation (Gen. 1:31)—is the opposite pole of heaven, and these opposites come together on the Way. But earth in the second sense—St. Paul's "works of the flesh" (Gal. 5:19–21), St. Augustine's "City of Man," St. John's "the world" (1 John 2:15–17)—isn't the opposite pole of heaven. In fact, it isn't even a pole at all: evil is an absence, a privation, a lacuna—a sinking downward into nothingness. In the topographical poetry of the Bible, it leads to Sheol, which is under the earth, and Gehenna, a cavernous valley; it's the way not to life but to everlasting death.

Thus, this false earth has no place on the Way of heaven and earth; on the contrary, it's what stirs up all our divisions between them. God is the great gatherer; the devil (*diabolos*, from *diaballein*, "to scatter") is the great divider. Where there is holiness, there is wholeness—two words that share the same etymological root; by contrast, "where there are sins, there is multiplicity, there are schisms, there are heresies, there are dissensions."[4] C.S. Lewis rightly saw a spiritual darkness behind our collapses into extremes

4. Origen, *Homilies 1–14 on Ezekiel*, trans. Thomas P. Scheck (New York: Newman, 2010), 117.

and enantiodromias: "all extremes, except extreme devotion," are playthings of the devil, who "always sends errors into the world in pairs—pairs of opposites," and "relies on your extra dislike of one error to draw you gradually into the opposite one."[5]

The Church doesn't say "both/and" to good and evil—only to good. It also doesn't say "both/and" to truth and falsehood—only to truth. It doesn't even properly say "both/and" to the countless pairs of arbitrarily or closely related things—beautiful as they might be. Instead—with eyes fixed on Christ, who is goodness, truth, and beauty itself—its "both/and" is to heaven and earth, that radiant unity-in-difference that molds and moves its people.

Of course, none of this is to say that the Way is tidy or easy. It's neither. The Way comes with principles, but not with a script; it requires careful discernment and constant prudence. Those who walk it bring a great variety of gifts—temperaments, experiences, insights—and tend to stress one element in a given dilemma, even as all those gifts are drawn together in the unity of the Church, where "iron sharpens iron" (Prov. 27:17). The Catholic both/and doesn't shut down conversation; on the contrary, it's where things really get interesting. It's a path of tension and drama, of self-assessment and self-correction, of fine-tuning and hair-splitting—one that always makes the oversimplifications of the either/or look so tempting. Indeed, while the "either/or" is often associated with Protestant thought, the debates of the Reformation are just one chapter—in this book, the last chapter—in a broader story, one that very much involves Catholic history.

You will, I hope, see your own journey and the journeys of

5. C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* and *Mere Christianity*, in the *Signature Classics* (New York: HarperOne, 2002), 204, 150.

those you know all over these case studies of heavenward and earthward ways, just as I have, even though so many of them are from long ago. "There is nothing new under the sun"—nothing but the Way "making all things new" (Eccles. 1:9; Rev. 21:5). And the methodical yet brisk approach will hopefully keep the journey from being either too cursory or too cumbersome. It will involve passing through old and difficult arguments, but not for long—because the argument of this book is the arguments themselves.

But my greatest hope is that this book will bring the reader closer to answering that greatest question: *What does it mean to be human?* All of our questions, even that of God, pivot off this question, because even our search for God is inescapably a human search. Man himself is the question. Nothing is as common, familiar, or obvious, yet as precious, distant, or mysterious. And whether we succeed or fail in our attempt at an answer, Joseph Ratzinger was right: "There is no escape from the dilemma of being a man."[6]

6. Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 2nd ed., trans. J.R. Foster (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2004), 45.

PRELUDE

The Things: The Heavens or the Earth

We've been born into a world of heaven and earth. No matter where we go, and no matter what we do, we're always oriented by the sky above and the ground below. If we go outside, we see the sun and the stars above us and the ground under and around us. If we stay inside, the roof and walls above our head shield us from the rain and snow, and the foundation beneath our feet digs into the dirt and rock. Even when we soar above the clouds in a plane, there remain the heavens above and the earth below. Modern technology has distanced us from this basic truth, but it's always there: the heavens and the earth shape all that we do and all that we are. There is nothing more basic to our experience of the world.

Science, of course, has changed how we think about these surroundings, purifying us of primitive notions. We now know that there's no real "sky," but only the scattering of blue light in earth's atmosphere, and no real "above," but only the vast space of the cosmos surrounding a spherical earth. Yet the essential thing remains: a polarity between "up there" and "down here." In fact, even if we become an interplanetary species, as bodily creatures we'll always experience a given space and the greater space beyond it.

And we'll always be faced with the choice between looking at

one or the other in any given moment. We can't so much as glance at the heavens above and the earth below at one and the same time. We can look at the horizon line connecting them, and we can look back and forth between them, but we can't fully hold them together in view. We can either gaze upward at the sky or around and down at the earth; we can either look along a vertical plane or a horizontal plane. They are divided in a zero-sum game: the more we fill our field of vision with the heavens, the less we see of the earth, and vice versa.

The Latin root of "decision," *decidere*, means to cut: and to decide to look one way is necessarily to cut off the other way. In any given moment, we're making a decision: Should we ignore the world around us for a moment and take in the power and glory of the sky? Or should we ignore the sky above us and hit the ground running? We can't do both; we're only human.

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Faced with this dilemma, we might go the *heavenward* way: we decide to look up at the sky. We keep our gaze vertical and our posture fixed, contemplating the stars above in a kind of rapture.

When we gaze at the sky like this—which ancient people so often did—we're transported, even transformed. We seem to be in orbit around our cares. Unlike life on the ground, the sky is majestic, fixed—a beautiful and orderly procession of light moving in predictable patterns. It's also distant and mysterious. What we look at isn't an everyday object within our reach. It's not like a mug of coffee that we can pick up, smell, and sip. Its objects are remote—the most remote things, in fact, that we'll ever see in this life. The

stars are even separated from us by time as well as the vastness of space. Yet this celestial realm shines down and affects our world. We can't hold the sun, lasso the moon, or reach the stars; yet the sun burns our skin, the moon moves the sea, and the stars flicker in our eyes. This heavenly show, however remote, is ours; all we need to do is look up.

But the rapture of the heavenward gaze, grand and glorious though it may be, comes at a cost. It takes us up and out of the earth around us—not only the physical earth itself, but also the particular people and concrete things we experience on it. All of it falls outside of our vision. We look at the sky, but we cease to care for the ground. The bright heavens become true reality—the earth, a shadowy distraction.

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On the other hand, we can take the *earthward* way: we can keep our eyes and hands fixed on what's in front of us, and our bodies on the move horizontally.

Here, we don't stop and gaze up to the lunar, but instead enter the rhythm and energy of the sublunary. If the first way was common in the ancient world, the second is the defining feature of postmodern life: we see, we feel, we react, we go. Life on the ground isn't majestic and fixed, but messy and ever in flux; the only thing that stays the same is change, and we change with it, coping with all of the earth's ambiguities and uncertainties. And what we experience isn't distant or mysterious, but immediate and familiar; it's a whirlpool that pulls us into itself, a parade of places and names

and things and voices that enters into us as surely as we step out and enter into it.

But this earthward movement also has its price. By narrowing our focus to the earth, we ignore and forget the glory of the heavens. The world up above would have lifted us up, but we remain too sunk in our own cares to really see it at all. We make progress on practical matters, but the mystery of the universe remains outside of our worried mind. The sky even becomes a kind of artificial painting—a mere backdrop to the stage of earth. The shifting ground becomes true reality—the heavens, an abstract illusion.

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All of us in the West today have been shaped, through and through, by the Christian faith; Christianity, for its part, has been shaped, through and through, by the Bible; and the Bible is shaped, through and through, by a singular image that appears throughout its pages, beginning with the very first line of the very first book: "the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1).

The familiarity of this phrase obscures its great power. What the Bible offers us here is a revolution in human perception: we're not looking at the heavens alone, or the earth alone, or the space between them, or one and then the other: we're looking at both at once. The "heavens and the earth" was for the ancient Israelites what *kosmos* was for the Greeks: the term for "the universe," for everything. The limitations of our visual gaze remain, of course—we still can't look fully at one or the other—but Scripture expands that gaze out to the whole, drawing us into the vantage point of the Creator of all things. Our world teaches us that we can't occupy two

sights in one look or trod two paths with one step. But right from the beginning, the Bible invites us into a radical new space.

The phrase itself is mysterious—a paradox of twoness and oneness, the ultimate merism uniting two poles into one whole. On the one hand, the heavens and the earth are a duality: they *contrast* with each other. The sky and the ground are clearly not the same thing; if they were, the constant repetition of that lengthy phrase—*hashamayim ve'et ha'aretz* in the Hebrew—would be a lot of unnecessary work. The heavens are above, while the earth is below; they are distinct. In fact, creation involves a whole sequence of orderly contrasts—light and darkness, day and night, dry land and the sea—but it all begins with this first contrast of the heavens and the earth. If one or the other were ignored, the great drama of the Bible would never get underway.

On the other hand, the heavens and the earth are a unity: they *connect* with each other. Despite the clear contrast, they can't be neatly divided, each in its own separate, self-contained space. The sky and the ground are ordered to each other, reach out for each other, participate in each other. This connection is established by a top-down movement, with heaven first lowering itself: the "lights in the dome of the sky" shine down as "signs" and give light to the earth (Gen. 1:14–15), and the land is "watered by rain from the sky" (Deut. 11:11). But the earth doesn't just passively receive this shower of light and water; it responds by growing upward and outward: "The land shall yield its produce, and the tress of the field shall yield their fruit" (Lev. 26:5). The prophet Isaiah captures this down-and-up dance: "The rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth,

making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater" (Isa. 55:10).

The simultaneous contrast and connection of the heavens and the earth is *communion*. And both are necessary: without contrast, there's no *com* (together), no distinction of one from the other; but without connection, there's no *union*, no oneness bridging the distance. The heavens and the earth are neither one indistinct substance nor two separate substances; they're like a lover and beloved in a dance of mutual attraction, the two becoming "one flesh" in marriage (Gen. 2:24). In the biblical vision, all of physical reality begins with this great both/and.

Then again, we now know that the cosmology of Genesis—which imagined a flat earth surrounded by a bowl-shaped dome, the "firmament," separating an ocean above the sky from the oceans around the earth—was mostly wrong. What's more, all of this sky talk was in the service of telling a story about God. Doesn't this make the God of the Bible just another mythological god, like Zeus reigning on Mount Olympus as the god of sky and thunder? Doesn't it confirm the atheist trope that the Bible is just a nice story about a bearded father figure sitting above the clouds? Why does the Bible, and Christianity to this day, put such an emphasis on the sky?

The answer lies neither in science nor in mythology but in poetry. We can't help but think and speak in the symbols of the above and the below: we approach the transcendent with the imagery of the sky, and we approach the mundane with the imagery of the ground. Even the words themselves bear witness to this: "transcendent" comes from the Latin for "climbing over" and "mundane" from the Latin for "world." One person has their head in the clouds; another is grounded. One idea dawns on us; another

gets murky. An aspiration is lofty; a resentment is buried. We sing of higher loves and of friends in low places. We gaze at Hollywood stars and praise the down-to-earth. We write of our better angels and of man underground. No one ever wrote of everlasting love using the imagery of grit and mud; it's always the moon and the stars. No one ever spoke of everyday struggle using the imagery of the moon and the stars; it's always grit and mud. The sky and ground are always orienting us, always helping us find our way.

This deeply human impulse reaches a high point in the Scriptures, where "the heavens and the earth" takes us beyond the "everything" of physical reality and into the greater everything of all reality. The sky and the ground are the master metaphor for this greater story—and the heavenward and earthward ways the master metaphors for failing to enter into it.

PART I
The Dilemmas of Life

CHAPTER 1

Life: Heaven or Earth

The history of man is haunted by the religious sense: the search for the ultimate meaning of life.

And just as sight throws us into a dilemma of the sky and the ground, life throws us, time and again, into four great dilemmas of heaven and earth: God or man, God's place or man's place, the spiritual or the physical, and the spirit or the flesh. The same zero-sum game between the local vertical and horizontal is in play, but now, we're pulled between an absolute vertical and horizontal: the vertical axis of all things heavenly, and the horizontal axis of all things earthly.

Is the meaning of life in heaven or on earth?

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The heavenward way is heaven at the expense of earth.

Between the eighth and third centuries BC, something strange happened to humanity, and it was the emergence of this heavenward way. The philosopher Karl Jaspers called it "the Axial Age." It

was a time of religious and philosophical awakening in both East and West. From Zarathustra to Plato, the Axial Age produced mystical sages, wild prophets, and lovers of wisdom. All of this spiritual combustion collectively set humanity in a new direction—and that direction was *upward*. Man was becoming aware of "being as a whole," setting for himself "the highest aims" and experiencing his own depths "in the clarity of transcendence."[1]

This heavenward zeitgeist came to fruition with Gnosticism, a strange but captivating constellation of religious sects combining Greek thought and Eastern religion. Gnostic teachings appeared on the earth like the monolith of *2001: A Space Odyssey*—ominous, alien, and utterly vertical. A line from Robert Frost captures the Gnostic view of life: after seeing a spider with a dead moth on a flower, the poet asks, "What but design of darkness to appall? / If design govern in a thing so small."[2] For the Gnostics, this earth is an appalling design of darkness and death, right down to its smallest details. God, on the other hand, is spiritual light and life, completely transcendent and unknowable. He dwells eternally in the highest heights, surrounded by various divine beings. Sparks of divinity are trapped here below, including deep within us: this is the *pneuma* (spirit)—the true self. But God didn't create this world and wants nothing to do with it; rather, it's the work of a lesser god who rules over man with an iron fist. We're caught in this world like a moth in a spider web. What binds us here isn't sin, but ignorance, and the way out isn't salvation, but *gnosis* (knowledge).

1. Karl Jaspers, *Way to Wisdom: An Introduction to Philosophy*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), 100.

2. Robert Frost, "Design," in *Anthology of Modern American Poetry*, ed. Cary Nelson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 96.

Gnosticism has been called the first great Christian heresy, but the father of all Gnostics, Simon Magus, was already busy proclaiming his own gospel in Samaria when St. Philip arrived there to proclaim Jesus. The Acts of the Apostles tells us that he was dazzling people with magic, and that they called him "the power of God that is called Great" (Acts 8:9–10). The Church Father Irenaeus gives us more detail: Simon presented himself as "the Being who is the Father over all," and his companion, a prostitute called Helena, as the latest physical dwelling of his own divine mind, which had fallen from the spiritual realm above down into this deteriorated world below, "passing from body to body."[3]

Gnostic movements, fresh from the Axial Age, eventually latched onto the story of Jesus and assimilated it. Many taught that Jesus was a divine messenger from above, not God himself, and that his humanity was really just an illusion; therefore, he didn't really suffer and die as a human being at all, but only *seemed* to. St. John warns the early Christians about these "Docetists" (from the Greek *dokeo*, "to seem"): "Many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh; any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist!" (2 John 7).

The Gnostics capture something vital, something that speaks to us in the deepest recesses of our being—namely, the fascination with and longing for heaven above. They affirm, with great religious zeal, the reality and superiority of the vertical. That the Apostles and the Fathers had to protest so frequently and so firmly against these movements is telling: Gnosticism was the ultimate heavenward challenger to Christianity for the heart of the world.

3. Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.23.1–2. Unless otherwise indicated, Church Fathers quotations are from the Ante-Nicene or Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers series, available at newadvent.org.

But this heavenward way leaves us in a high-strung dualism of heaven and earth. We learn the knowledge of God, but a rejection of man; the longing for a pure place above, but a rejection of this place below; the pursuit of the spiritual, but a rejection of the physical; and the release of the spirit in death, but a rejection of the flesh in life. But there's no escape; all these earthly things surround and assault us on the way up—and disgust and dread deaden the very spirit we long to liberate.

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The earthward way is earth at the expense of heaven.

Something just as gradual, universal, and transformative as the Axial Age has been happening to humanity in our time, and it's a reorientation toward this earthward way. We're too immersed in it to really see it, but we can confidently call it something like a New Axial Age. It's an age not of transcendental vision, but of practical revolution—of rapid technological, cultural, and political change. The themes of the New Axial Age are the polar opposite of the Axial: man lays aside being as a whole for being in its parts, the highest aims for the most practical, and the clarity of transcendence for "the iron grip of immanence."[4] An instinct for the vertical no longer comes naturally to us, and even if we strive for it, it often remains an affectation, a live action role-play. All of us—religious and nonreligious alike—are children of this horizontal worldview.

Is there a counterpoint to Gnosticism in the New Axial Age? It's tempting to say agnosticism (a-gnostic). But the agnostic

4. Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book* (New York: Picador, 1983), 124.

only refrains from making any knowledge claims about God and heaven; he doesn't close himself off to them, and certainly not to the spiritual. Instead, the ultimate counterpoint to Gnosticism is secularism—from the Latin *saeculum* meaning "world" or "age." The secularist doesn't believe in God, but turns his attention instead to exalting man; he doesn't believe in a world beyond this one, but turns his attention instead to social progress; he doesn't believe in the spiritual, but defaults to science in explaining everything; and he doesn't believe in the spirit, but finds happiness in life's little pleasures and victories. Secularists, like the Gnostics, claim Jesus as their own, but in their hands, he isn't a divine messenger from above, but a purely human teacher from below. His life is about his message, and his message is earthly: feeding the poor, unsettling the establishment, not judging others, being kind to one another.

Secularism is the new ultimate challenger to Christianity—and it's not without its merits. Its great virtue is affirming what so many heavenward souls have denied: the inherent goodness of man, the world, and the body. Where the heavenward spurn the earthly with pessimistic disgust, the earthward embrace it with optimistic hope.

But that optimism leaves us dissatisfied and restless. We look for happiness all around us—in people and places, in pleasures and passions—but we never quite find it. The earth, beautiful as it can be, only disappoints in the end: the delight we take in things fades away, and if it doesn't, they do. And over time, the weight of the world—man's cruelty, society's injustice, the fragility of the physical, the frailty of the flesh—is too much to bear. Without a light from heaven, we can only plod deeper into the mud—a darkening path of confusion and sorrow that leads to a dead end.

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The Way is both heaven and earth.

The Bible opens with the heavens and earth we see, but only to open us to the heaven and earth we live: God and man, God's place and ours, the spiritual and the physical, the spirit and the flesh. Yet rather than leave the associations of sky and ground behind, it leans into them. Like a wise teacher, God's Word meets us where we are—in a world of the vertical and horizontal—to take us both higher and deeper.

This happens first through language itself, which connects the sky to God and his "place." "Heaven," "the heavens," and "sky" are all translations of the exact same Hebrew word: the plural *shamayim* (the root of which means "lofty"). God's "place" is the heaven beyond all heavens, "the heaven of heavens" (Deut. 10:14). "Heaven," in line with rabbinic tradition, is also sometimes used as a metonymy for God to show respect to his name, as when Matthew speaks of "the kingdom of heaven" in place of "the kingdom of God." The terms "God" and "heaven" are so closely related that we can even speak of God himself as heaven, and heaven itself as God.

Likewise, the Scriptures connect the ground to man and his world. The word for "ground" (*erets*) is also translated as "earth," "world," or "territory." *Erets* isn't just the clumps of dirt under our feet; it's our *place*, the place into which we're all born: "The heavens [*shamayim*] are the LORD's heavens, but the earth [*erets*] he has given to human beings" (Ps. 115:16). The Hebrew *adam* (human being) is also a play on words with *adamah* (meaning "red soil" or "ground"): "The LORD God formed man [*adam*] from the dust of the ground [*adamah*]" (Gen. 2:7). *Adamah* can also be translated as

"earth" and even "land." Genesis later equates man with *apar* (dust): "You are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Gen. 3:19). Even our word "human" comes from the Latin *humus* (earth).

But this is just the beginning: the connections are not only linguistic but also symbolic. God and heaven are constantly associated with sky images in the Old Testament, most especially light. But we also hear of what appears in the sky (the stars, the moon, and especially the sun), what emerges from the sky (clouds and rain, lightning and thunder, storms and whirlwinds, falling fire and soaring rainbows), and of what rises to the sky (eagles and their wings, the cedars of Lebanon, and the many biblical mountains). The vision of heaven in the book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible, is a sort of climactic finale in which all of these sky images reappear.

The ground images the Bible uses to describe man and the world are no less varied and constant. We hear of what makes up the earth (clay and soil, dust and ashes), of what rises from and sinks back to the earth (grass and flowers, worms and beasts), and of what runs along the earth (fading shadows and fleeting winds). All three categories of earth appear in Psalm 103, which also contrasts them with the height of heaven:

> For as the heavens are high above the earth,
> so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him. . . .
> For he knows how we were made;
> he remembers that we are dust.
> As for mortals, their days are like grass;
> they flourish like a flower of the field;

for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
and its place knows it no more. (Ps. 103:11, 14–16)

The same associations link the spiritual to heaven and the physical to earth. God and his place are pure spirit; thus, spirits, blessings, and all kinds of invisible realities—especially angels, those spiritual creatures so often associated with the sky—have a close kinship with heaven. By contrast, waters, fields, plants, flowers, and especially animals are closely associated with earth.

Thus, in the Bible, the sky and the ground are the great images for heaven and earth, in all their meanings. And the point of all this—the upshot of this great pattern—is that the communion we observe in the first pair is an image of what God intends for all the others. Heavenly things keep their primacy, but earthly things are being drawn into union with them. Communion, with the same tension of contrast and connection, is the heart of biblical religion.

We see all of this come together in the twenty-eighth chapter of Genesis. Jacob stops in the middle of a journey to lay down on the ground for the night, resting his head on a stone. In his horizontal posture on the earth, he has a vertical vision of heaven: "He dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it." God speaks to him, promising him that "the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring." Jacob arises in the morning, declaring, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

This is the famous "Jacob's ladder." The word behind "ladder," *sullam*, really means more of a stairway or a stepped ramp, but the idea is the same: a path, a connection, a way. And it's a way

connecting heaven and earth. Jacob, a visionary on the move, sees heaven and earth commune: God and man, paradise and the world, angels and rocks, spirit and flesh—all through the lens of the sky above and the ground below. This is the biblical dream: that heaven and earth would become one.

And in first-century Palestine, an itinerant rabbi declared this dream fulfilled in himself: "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man" (John 1:51).

CHAPTER 2

The People: God or Man

The heart of man is a search for God. This experience is written into our history, both personal and collective. But from it comes a fatal distortion: God and man appear divided, rivals in a zero-sum game. We're thus thrown into the primary dilemma between heaven and earth. It seems like we have to embrace either the way of divinity or the way of humanity; there's no other way.

Is ultimate reality in God or man?

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The heavenward way is God at the expense of man.

We see this impulse in the Gnostic sect of Manichaeism. Mani, under the influence of Zoroastrian dualism, taught that behind reality there stand two opposite forces, the "Father of Greatness" and the "King of Darkness," which dwell in eternally separated realms of good and evil, light and darkness. The first is associated with *pneuma* (spirit) and the second with *hyle* (matter), though spirit and matter are ultimately composed of the same "stuff." The world,

Mani taught, began with a clash between these two realms: the darkness rushed up to the light and launched an attack against it. Eventually, some of the powers of darkness devoured some of the light, mingling the two substances together. The powers of light then struck back and conquered them, forming the world from their mixed corpses. The world is thus a vast chamber of death confining the swallowed light. This cosmic prison is ruled by the "archons," evil powers of that same dark kingdom.

But what is man? In Manichaean teaching, he is, quite literally, the spawn of Satan. In a devious plan to hold on to as much of the light as possible, the King of Darkness had two of his demons devour other light-infused demons and then mate with each other, and their offspring became the first human beings: Adam and Eve. But the *pneuma*, the light of spirit, remains buried within this creature of darkness, and it needs to be liberated—making humanity a key battleground in the cosmic war.

This is where Jesus, on the Manichaean reading, enters the picture: not as a savior, but as a messenger of light from above. Jesus is sent to liberate the sparks of divinity—fragments of his own light substance—which are being endlessly devoured and trampled in the darkness here below. Through spiritual acts of self-denial and ritual purity—and also through the rays of the sun—the light is released and lifted up and out of the world. The moon, for the Manichaeans, is a celestial ferryboat: when it waxes, it's filling up with spiritual light from below, and when it wanes, it's delivering that light to the sun, and from the sun, to its home above with the Father of Greatness. Once all the spiritual light is freed, this world will burn up and disappear.

Manichaeism speaks not only to our longing to find divine

perfection but also to our longing to escape a raging sea of wickedness and ignorance. However bizarre its teachings may sound today, it was one of the most popular religions of the first millennium, cropping up again and again in new forms well into the medieval era: the Bogomils of Bulgaria, the Cathars or "pure ones," and, most notoriously, the Albigensian branch of the Cathars. The world can be a very dark, foreboding, and unforgiving place, and human history—so glutted on greed, lust, cruelty, and pride—at times appears a macabre parade that we're forced to march in yet helpless to change. Manichaeism gives voice to this great anguish at ourselves.

But can we escape our own humanity so easily? For the heavenward, the true man of God is a man beyond men, deeply suspicious of all things human. But this heavenward narrative puts us in a strange bind: its very refusal of man is itself a deeply human act, midwifed by the mind and heart. Even as we resist humanity, our own humanity does the resisting. We can utterly separate the *pneuma* from our own lives—our thoughts, our desires, our choices—but in that case, "we" seem to disappear altogether. We're not so much elevated as extinguished.

Even setting aside this theoretical problem, the heavenward campaign against man delivers us, on a practical level, into inhuman heights. It offers us a sense of direction, but at the cost of a profound alienation. We're stripped of our innate goodness, becoming so much devilish rubbish; a mood of terror and paranoia engulfs the human experience here below; and the spiritual journey becomes brutal and colorless. We have to escape ourselves, but until we die, we can't; we can't embrace what's human, but if we're really to live at all, we have to.

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The earthward way is man at the expense of God.

There are many trails on this earthward side, but we find the polar opposite of Manichaeism in modern atheistic humanism. For the atheistic humanist, all talk of divinity has to be left behind as an illusion, and the true humanist has to be a man beyond God.

This earthward path was forged by the titans of modern atheism: Friedrich Nietzsche in philosophy, Sigmund Freud in psychology, Karl Marx in politics. But all of these titans were shaped by the same German thinker before them: Ludwig Feuerbach. "God," for Feuerbach, is simply man's outward and upward projection of his own greatness: "The more empty life is, the fuller, the more concrete is God. The impoverishing of the real world and the enriching of God is one act. Only the poor man has a rich God."[1] To arrive at intellectual maturity, we have to reclaim everything we gave to God for ourselves.

Like Manichaeism, atheistic humanism has gone from an arcane doctrine to a popular phenomenon. A growing number of Western denizens identify as atheists and regard God as an illusion. Even where religious identity prevails, a de facto atheism often operates under the surface: when push comes to shove, man edges out God.

And like its ancient heavenward counterpoint, the way of man has its attractions and even its merits. It digs beneath the reality of man's wickedness to find his inherent goodness, exalting as noble everything that the Gnostic rejects as hopelessly corrupted: the human body with its desires and passions, human experience with

1. Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. Marian Evans (London: Trübner, 1881), 73.

its ambiguities and complexities, human creativity with its questions and advances. Where Gnosticism says no to man, atheistic humanism says yes.

But can man live without worshiping? David Foster Wallace answered no: "In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshiping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is *what* to worship."[2] In the absence of God, every man still treats something as his sky. Worship is our spiritual energy: it's neither created nor destroyed—only converted. And its most alluring form in the New Axial Age—and the height of human folly—is self-worship. This is often more covert than overt, but for Feuerbach, "Man is the true God and Savior of man";[3] through religion, we were really adoring ourselves all along, and to truly go beyond God, we have to embrace it.

The earthward depths also risk becoming every bit as inhuman as the heavenward heights. We tunnel through the caverns of our own minds, but with no ultimate sense of direction or purpose. Nietzsche powerfully captured this heavenless vertigo with his parable of the madman, who proclaims the death of God not as a triumphant victory but as a disorienting plummet: "What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Where is it moving to now? Where are we moving to? Away from all suns? Are we not continually falling? And backwards, sidewards, forwards, in all

2. David Foster Wallace, *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life* (New York: Little, Brown, 2009), 98–101.

3. Feuerbach, *Essence of Christianity*, 277.

directions? Is there still an up and a down?"[4] Any turn is now possible, even justifiable: without God, "everything is permitted."[5] The atheist can still do good and know truth, but only from within a freefall beyond both. On the way of man, man loses his way.

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The Way is both God and man.

"He came down from heaven." This line of the ancient Nicene Creed holds a unique importance in the liturgy of the Catholic Church. After the word "heaven" and through the following line ("And by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man"), the faithful are instructed to bow—and then, only after "heaven" has reached "man," do they again raise their eyes. It's the only formal gesture called for during the entire recitation of the Creed.

This profound bow is meant to signal humility and awe before the "distinctive sign" of Christianity: the Incarnation.[6] "For us men and for our salvation"—finite and fallen though we are—God *became* man in Jesus of Nazareth: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . And the Word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:1, 14). More stunning still, he became a helpless baby: "God's infinity / Dwindled to infancy / Welcome in womb and breast / Birth, milk,

4. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 120.

5. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 589.

6. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 463.

and all the rest."[7] This is the "fullness of time" (Gal. 4:4), the final revelation of the God of Israel, whose exalted titles—the Lord of heaven and earth, who is "God in heaven above and on the earth beneath" (Deut. 4:39)—burst open into a resplendent and shocking new meaning. The heart of God, it turns out, is a search for man: we couldn't work our way up to God, so God climbed down to us. This is how the Good News begins: "The kingdom of God has come near" (Mark 1:15). Christ is "'Emmanuel,' which means, 'God is with us'" (Matt. 1:23).

We see the full power of the Incarnation by turning back to the first three chapters of Genesis, where we find five key "originals." First, there is an original blessing: creation is "good," and with the creation of man, "very good" (Gen. 1:28–31). Adam and Eve are commissioned to populate the earth and invited to eat freely of all the garden's trees except one—a tree that, by refusing the contrast between God and man, would destroy man. Everything that God has is theirs. In Eden, heaven and earth, in all their meanings, are in communion.

Then comes the original lie, spewed by "the father of lies" (John 8:44): that Creator and creature are in competition with each other. "God knows that when you eat of it," the serpent says of the tree, "your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God" (Gen. 3:5). We hear in this lie a heavenward whisper: a rejection of our status as creatures. In fact, the Gnostic Ophites even taught that the serpent (*ophis*) wasn't a tempter at all, but rather a heavenly messenger from above trying to free Adam and Eve through *gnosis*. But we also feel

7. Gerard Manley Hopkins, "The Blessed Virgin compared to the Air we Breathe," in *As Kingfishers Catch Fire*, ed. Holly Ordway (Elk Grove Village, IL: Word on Fire Institute, 2023), 67.

here an earthward nudge: a rejection of the authority of the Creator. The serpent challenges man to reject both his own humanity and God's divinity. Thus, in the serpent's lie, man is drawn—simultaneously—into the errors of both sides.

Adam and Eve accept the lie as the truth, and fall into it—and original sin enters the world. This is the "false earth"—a corruption of God's good creation and the loss of holiness and harmony—and it's passed on to all their descendants, not as a personal act but as a general state, a wretchedness contracted just by virtue of being human.

Out of this original sin also comes an original division: the division between God and man. And out of this division comes *all* division. It's not only that Adam and Eve have divided themselves from God; they've also divided God's place from man's place, themselves from the world, and each from the other. They've even divided their spirits from their bodies—a division that ends in death, which is "the wages of sin" (Rom. 6:23). After the fall, man looks out at a world torn asunder.

But division isn't where the story ends; this is the message of the "protoevangelium"—the original Gospel, proclaimed by God himself: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel" (Gen. 3:15). A mysterious descendent of the woman will conquer both Satan and sin by suffering their torments, and reunify God and man. This is God's promise, even as he casts man outside the garden and places a cherubim with flaming sword to guard "the way to the tree of life" (Gen. 3:24).

The whole Old Testament is filled with rumblings of this reunion: God's covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David; his

formation of the people Israel through the Law and the prophets; the tabernacle and the temple in Jerusalem, where God made his dwelling among the Israelites (Exod. 25:8; 1 Kings 6:13). But it's in the small village of Nazareth that God and man finally become one again. The angel Gabriel visits the Virgin Mary, inviting her to become the mother of Jesus, "Son of the Most High" (Luke 1:32). Through her *fiat*, her "let it be" (Luke 1:38), the Way bursts forth into the world, beginning in a humble family.

Jesus wasn't (as the Gnostics held) God *seeming* like a man, nor (as the atheistic humanists hold) a man *seeming* like God. He was true God: "You are from below," he says, "I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world" (John 8:23). But he was also true man: "Jesus Christ has come in the flesh" (1 John 4:2). Christ was the Son of God, and whoever saw him saw the heavenly Father (John 14:9). But he was also the Son of Man, and whoever saw him saw his earthly mother (Mark 6:3). Jesus is neither God alone nor man alone, nor is he half man and half God; he's fully God and fully man. He's the communion of the heavenly God and earthly man without any competition between them—a scandal to both the Axial and New Axial Ages.

Why the Incarnation? St. Athanasius beautifully articulated the Christian answer: *theosis*, or divinization. "The Son of God became man so that we might become God."[8] Out of sheer love, God wants humanity to become one with him—to become, by faith and participation in his divine life, "gods" (John 10:34). Christ is both God's descent to man and man's ascent to God; he became a participant of our human nature that we might become "participants of the divine nature" (2 Pet. 1:4).

8. *Catechism* 460; Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 54.3.

But Jesus is not only the Way, the *hodos*, to divine life, but also the Way out, the *Ex-hodos*, from sin and death. Thus, the Incarnation culminates in the Crucifixion. In the Nicene Creed, the bow of the Incarnation is immediately followed by this stunning blow, the sore wounding of this sacred head: "For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate." God sends his Son all the way into godforsakenness, allowing him who knew no sin or death to become sin and die—and "by his wounds you have been healed" (1 Pet. 2:24). The cross is the tree of life that wrought our salvation.

This is the trajectory of divine love, two movements that can't be separated: "Love by its very nature tends to an incarnation, and an incarnation by its very nature tends to a crucifixion."[9] The wood of the crib leads to the wood of the cross, and the vertical and the horizontal that meet in Bethlehem lead to the two beams on Calvary:

> Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
> who, though he was in the form of God,
> did not regard equality with God
> as something to be exploited,
> but emptied himself,
> taking the form of a slave,
> being born in human likeness.
> And being found in human form,
> he humbled himself
> and became obedient to the point of death—
> even death on a cross. (Phil. 2:5–8)

9. Fulton J. Sheen, *The Mystical Body of Christ* (Elk Grove Village, IL: Word on Fire, 2023), 174.

This is the Christian vision of ultimate reality. And it has devastating consequences for both sides of the God-man dilemma. Christianity resists a heavenward anti-humanism because God has brought the divine down to the human. The Psalmist asked, "What are human beings that you are mindful of them?" (Ps. 8:4). But the Christian poses a far more radical question: What are human beings that you have *become* one of them? Christ was without sin, but otherwise, nothing human was alien to him; he can "sympathize with our weaknesses" and was in every respect "tested as we are" (Heb. 4:15). The heavenward man who denies man on behalf of God is reduced to silence before the God who became man on behalf of men.

But just as we can choose God without dispensing with man (since Christ is fully human), we can also choose man without dispensing with God (since Christ is fully divine). Thus, Christianity also resists an earthward humanism, because in Christ, man has been "invaded" by God; there's no longer a purely human sphere—again, aside from sin—where God can't be found. God still has an absolute primacy over man—and indeed "first place in everything" (Col. 1:18)—but the whole great drama of human existence is now one with him. Man is now a child of God and sibling of his Son, grafted onto his Body and brought into relationship with him forever. And when we receive Christ, we're transformed and elevated, but not destroyed: "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20). Waving the banner of "humanity" is of no avail; God is the ultimate humanist.

The heavenward and the earthward both try to kick away this Jacob's ladder connecting heaven and earth—one from above, the other from below. But the world has been forever changed; it lives in the strange gaze of the God-man.