INTRODUCTION

"PAY THE DEBT"

Recently, I have begun work with a community of South Sudanese refugees in the city of Winnipeg. In learning about Dinka culture, I have also discovered something about my own. It is common for indigenous cultures to look to teachers of the past as guides to how we ought to comport ourselves today. The Dinka do not have the same attitude toward the past as the vast majority of contemporary North Americans: that is, they do not believe that contemporary knowledge is an achievement over what was known in the past.[1] It is generally held that the present generation forgets our ancestors' teachings to our own peril.

Upon learning this, I remembered something that I discovered some time ago about Western Medieval understandings of history. The term "Dark Ages," or *Tenebrae,* was assigned to his age by Petrarch (1304–1374), who represented a consensus belief among medieval scribes that a golden age of antiquity—with its brilliant execution of the *ars memorandi* ("the art of remembering")—was long gone, and thus he and his contemporaries, who wait in darkness, must attend to a reawakening of the mind and a restoration of the creativity and eloquence of the past.[2]

Read in relation to these other cultures, the contemporary West is strangely critical of its ancestors. It tends to see them as benighted, intolerant, and unprogressive. In spite of postmodernity's protests, the modern picture of inevitable and perpetual progress hangs ever in the air, clouding our view, and cutting us off from the past's wisdom and insight.

To argue for a hearing of the luminaries in Christianity's past is not the same as saying that Christianity's past was always especially illuminated. Contemporary critics are right to lament the colonizing history of Christendom as an utter distortion of the good news of Jesus Christ. To say that there are luminaries in the past from whom we ought to learn is also not to say that these past figures were impervious to sin, prejudice, or the many violences that characterized their times. Neither are we. My suspicion is that one of the ways that we inure ourselves to the violence of our time and our complicity within it is to look for answers outside of ourselves. Dead figures make easy scapegoats. But the violence of today cannot be easily attributable to the dubious and facile genealogies of

violence that certain critics of the Christian past are quick to make. Augustine was and is not responsible for Hiroshima or Auschwitz or Batoche:[3] specific and real actors in modern world history were, and we continue to be.[4]

One of the best remedies to the past's ills is to understand our Christian past with greater nuance. This involves seeing the teachers of the past as caught in theological and moral struggles analogous to our own; as confronted, as we are, with a dramatically compelling gospel; and as seeking, as we do—and often failing, as we do—to live that gospel faithfully in our fallen time. To see the past clearly involves separating the wheat from the chaff of history, and becoming capable of recognizing those men and women of rare intelligence and wisdom as ancestors worthy of our respect and our remembering, and therefore also of our critical engagement. In his analysis of the task of remembering the past, philosopher Paul Ricoeur speaks of our relationship to tradition as a kind of debt that is owed:

> The idea of debt is inseparable from the notion of heritage. We are indebted to those who have gone before us for part of what we are. The duty of memory is not restricted to preserving the material trace, whether scriptural or other, of past events, but maintains the feeling of being obligated with respect to these others, of whom we shall later say, not that they are no more, but that they were. Pay the debt . . . but also inventory the heritage.[5]

What kind of obligation does the past demand of us? Clearly, it involves careful attentiveness to the words and contexts of past figures for the sake of representing them accurately. The student of the past who is also the inheritor of a heritage, however, is also required to offer a measure of receptivity to past figures because it is not the case that they *are* no more but, instead, that they *were*. That they *were* demands of us a measure of restraint before judging too harshly or too finally. Because they *were,* there is always a conversation left unfinished. There can be no closure on the past because they continue to assert a silent pressure upon the present that resists our efforts at closure or forgetting. This is so because it is not the case that they *are* no more. We pay a debt to them through our willingness to receive what they might offer.

TRANSCENDING THE LIMITS OF PRIVILEGE

A difficulty undoubtedly arises by virtue of the fact that all of the primary writers I deal with in this book are male: Irenaeus, Athanasius, Basil, and Augustine. Their influence upon Christian theology no doubt has something to do with

accident of birth: for instance, Basil was an aristocrat, while Augustine was a highly educated North African. All were privy to an education that would not have been available to the vast majority of men and to virtually all women in antiquity. No doubt their writings are skewed by such privilege. The writings of all of them have been preserved, in part, because the powerful judges of history selected their writings to be preserved, while others—particularly those of heretics—were occluded.

However, their writings can, as I see it (admittedly by faith), transcend the limitations of their worldview, even of their privilege. To dismiss their writings because they were rich seems to me as irrational as dismissing the writings of those who are poor, of those who are female, of those who are non-Christian. What I have attempted to do in this book is not to follow their insights slavishly, but to allow their (in my view, remarkable) insights to engage and penetrate the questions at hand that are of contemporary concern. Seldom do I find in their writings teachings that are immediately applicable to the moral and political questions that I pose and that have inspired this book. This book is not an effort to show that Augustine was really a feminist, or Basil of Caesarea an environmentalist. Instead, I find them abidingly helpful (often in spite of their problematic teachings in specific situations) in the spirit, rather than the letter, of their writings. By spirit, I mean first principles, or the fundamental architecture of their arguments, which I believe can offer support and insights of enormous value to contemporary theologians.

THE IMPORTANCE OF INCARNATION

If we think of first principles as organizing theological affirmations that shape doctrine and practice,[6] we find among the Nicene and pre-Nicene teachers guidance that enables contemporary Christians to make greater sense of the faith that we confess and its relevance to the world. The relationship of these principles to Scripture is of profound concern for contemporary Christians who are often left the equally impoverished alternatives of historicism or literalism in reading the Bible. It is part of this book's contention that the Nicene teachers surveyed here read Scripture through a specific first principle that is christological in nature. That is, we can understand something of the meaning of Scripture because of the consummate and world-shaping knowledge that we have received in God's becoming incarnate in Jesus Christ. This fundamental principle—the incarnation of the word of God—will affect how Scripture is to be read, but not in a way that is inimical to Scripture. It is Scripture, after all, that discloses the event of the incarnation and governs the incarnation's meaning.

The main question animating this book is, What difference does the word becoming flesh make to our thinking and to our acting (although I am reluctant to separate these two too strenuously)? In the early church, we might say that Christology or, better, the revelation of God in Jesus Christ signaled a veritable revolution in ordinary patterns of thinking about the world. Although much ink has been spilled in noting how the figures whom I am engaging were indebted to pagan philosophy, for me what is far more interesting is how the pagan philosophy—by which they were admittedly profoundly influenced—was transfigured by their faith in the word becoming flesh decisively and finally in Jesus Christ.

Given the revolutionary nature of Christian thought upon prevailing philosophies within antiquity, is there an analogous "reading" that can be done by the contemporary church? Christians are influenced wittingly or not by many discourses other than the gospel. This is a good thing. God does not encounter us as a blank slate, and God, I believe, acts in and through non-Christian and nonreligious knowledges to offer knowledge of God. Contemporary understanding of the gospel has been shaped profoundly by critical discourses—for example, by pluralism, secularism, feminism, postcolonialism, and environmentalism. Might it be the case that these discourses can also be revolutionized or transfigured in such a way by the word becoming flesh that they are given not only a distinctive Christian shape or form, but also a greater depth and clarity?

By bringing the Christian tradition of the early church into conversation with these contemporary critical discourses, I am also intimating that the insights of the Nicene teachers cannot be easily left behind in a renewed theology. For whatever reason, most of those who have been advancing a critical theology have abandoned Nicene orthodoxy as "Constantinian" or conservative. By and large they have tended to treat the figures of the fourth and fifth centuries as foes rather than friends. But this period of emergent Christendom is not only more complex than it has often been characterized (for instance: Was Athanasius a friend or foe of the emperor? His track record of multiple banishments by imperial decree might nuance the picture that is often painted of him.), but it is often richer both in theological depth and in sociopolitical configuration. Who cannot be compelled by both the Eastern and Western church's turn to monasticism as a way of eschewing the newfound favor they had won? Can the ascetic turn within nascent Christendom be a resource or inspiration for those who lament the incessant consumerism of Western culture or the lack of seriousness of many of the spiritual practices of our time? Might the manner in which the Nicenes read Scripture *spiritually* and *ecclesially* open it up beyond a wooden literalism on one hand and an anemic historicism on the other?

THE GIFTS OF NICENE THEOLOGY

"The Fathers" and "patristics" are terms that I avoid in this book for rather straightforward reasons: that is, they perpetuate the concept that it was only "Fathers" and their thought that contributed to the life of the early church. Nevertheless, the period that I am engaging requires some justification and clarity. I use the term *Nicene teachers* not in the narrow sense of actual participants in the Councils of Nicaea or Constantinople,[7] but as referring to those early teachers who affirmed and defended the principle of Christ's full consubstantial unity with God the Father that was won at those councils. For the Nicene teachers, this christological principle was central to their thinking about all subsequent doctrines and practices.

I speak of these authors—Basil of Caesarea, Irenaeus of Lyons, Athanasius of Alexandria, and Augustine of Hippo—as teachers, for their chief task in their sermons, commentaries, pastoral letters, and more systematic treatises was to guide the faithful and to rule out what they took to be false teaching. For the most part, the ancient writers with whom I am engaged in this book belong to the period of early Christendom that was marked by the intellectual work required to offer specification to Christian thinking about the Triune God in the midst of controversy. The majority of the controversies of the Nicene period concerned the second person of the Trinity whom they confessed to be a historical man who was born, lived, was crucified, and was raised from the dead in a particular set of historical circumstances, and who was the eternal word "eternally begotten of the Father." The "development" of doctrine during this period was the result of the reappropriation of Scriptures in light of this affirmation. The intellectual task of clarifying these teachings in midst of theological controversies that sought either to reduce or exaggerate Jesus' identification with the Father was exacting and at the service of safeguarding the soteriological logic of the good news in situations that threatened to undermine such confession. Trinitarian rules of faith were normative in the third century in ruling out false teaching in various controversies, and became the normative grammar that enabled various theologians to carry this teaching forward in the midst of alternate accounts of the nature of salvation.

In all of this, these thinkers were teachers of the apostolic faith. They sought to give an intellectual account of the Christian faith in a world in which philosophy was prized. They sought fidelity with the teachers of the past, all the way back to the apostles, and they sought to "hand down" the good news at times to the catechumenate, to the unbeliever, and to members within their community so that they might grow in wisdom and in virtue. These two were closely related. The media of their teachings were various: they were highly exegetical, often direct commentaries on Scripture; many were sermons; some were polemic writings. Always, they were aimed at building up the faith.

The Nicene period was particularly rich in formulating such arguments, in part because the church moved from being a marginal sect to one that came to be at the center of political favor. Although that move was not a salutary one in many respects for the church, it did compel its theologians to give a rational account for the life that they lived in a manner that was accessible and intelligible within the intellectual world in which they inhabited and within a context in which large councils of bishops were convened at the emperor's behest. Although early Christendom (after the conversion of Constantine in 312 CE) does not represent the beginning of this apologetic work—certainly the pre-Nicenes were engaged in defending the gospel in light of the teachings of the philosophers—this period, with the advent of catholic conciliar processes for the debating and adjudication of doctrine, proved immensely fertile as this context provided the occasion for the teachers of the church to pay particularly close attention to doctrine. The Nicene period was by no means uniform and there are key differences in the theological emphases among those who supported what would become a Nicene consensus, which was worked out in Nicaea in 325 and later ratified and expanded in 381 in the Council of Constantinople. Nevertheless, Nicaea and Constantinople articulated a catholic creed that was trinitarian in scope, that signaled the importance not only of the unity of the Godhead, but also of the status of each of its "persons" as having salvific power that is effective and not merely derivative.

This book is primarily concerned with the christological confessions of faith of the Nicene period and their appropriation by several key theologians. While the creeds and creed-like sayings—the rules of faith or *regulae fidei*—articulated a common conviction in the saving capacity of the Son that can be traced to biblical witness,[8] what emerges in the fourth century is greater clarity given to christological confession fueled by various controversies that emerged in this period. Chief among the controversies was Arianism,[9] admittedly itself a problematic appellation that came to be used polemically against a wide range of opponents to orthodoxy who subordinated the Son to the Father. According to "Arians," the Son was a mediator or an auxiliary to the Father because of his derivative status as Son, a status that the so-called Arians determined to be ontologically inferior. In spite of their being branded teachers of anathema, those who were identified as Arians would not strike us today as particularly heterodox. They, too, worshiped Jesus Christ as God, as had been the virtually universal practice since apostolic times.[10] What the Nicene defenders had to articulate against those opponents whom they identified as "Arian" is the manner in which the Father can be at once said to be the origin of the Godhead, while the Son is also his ontological equivalent—neither ontologically subordinate nor merely auxiliary. This confession, too, had to conform to the grammar of divine simplicity—a fundamental affirmation of the unity and aseity of the

Godhead, thus displaying how the Triune God can have distinct "persons" and also be united in activity and intention in the world.

This has enormous consequences how we may speak coherently about Christ. Christ is not a partial revelation of God. He is, rather, the "fullness of God" in whom God "was pleased to dwell" (Col. 1:19). Thus Christ is irreducibly God. He is not an instance or occasion of divine revelation, but is in himself unequivocally God dwelling "in bodily form." This central affirmation, of Jesus as the fullness of God revealed, is one that admittedly chafes against much of contemporary critical theology. To regard Jesus Christ as a partial revelation would appear at first glance to offer a more hospitable theology for those concerned to "make room" for other revelations of God within other religions and within the natural world. Seeing Christ as partial revelation also would seem to be more credible in a scientific, modern age, and therefore more hospitable to human knowledges outside of theology. Moreover, according to certain lines of feminist theological reasoning, the adoration of a male savior would appear to reinforce patriarchy.

I have attempted to avoid drawing terse parallels between the contemporary theologies that tend to diminish Christ's stature with ancient "Arianism." The historical gulf is just too wide to make such a comparison useful, and the legacy of Christian theology marginalizing heterodox thought too problematic. I have no special desire to impose a unity upon modern Christology or to invalidate alternate construals of Christ for their own sake. Rather, my reappropriation of Nicene Christology has as its aim chiefly the upholding of the saving efficacy of Christ for the sake of communicating Christ's salvific power over the fallen "powers and principalities" of this world, including, and perhaps especially, those political structures that hem us in. My argument is not that this realistic Christology is more "useful" or "expedient" than others in inaugurating a better political order. Rather, I would argue that a better political order has already been inaugurated in Christ, albeit only partially at this time. Yet an awareness of this emergent new order can inform a robustly political theology. Nicene orthodoxy does not make it so, or enable us to inaugurate such transformation in a more expeditious fashion; rather, it gives us the lenses to "see" such transfiguration as has already taken place, to see the riches that have already been given.

Nicene theology also articulates an account of the world in which the salvation that is won in Christ does not magically interfere with the activities of creation and God's creatures, but neither does it remain distant and distinct from these. Rather, the Triune God, as articulated and defended by the Nicene teachers, works through and within the world, while also transcending it, thus bringing *this world* to *its own* proper completion. Such action is delivered through God's renewing and regenerating power, which makes use of our

action toward the God-given ends for which we were created and toward which the whole creation groans.

Christ's role within this divine drama is perfectly identified with that of the Father. We know and we experience God's liberating and creative love *through* Christ. But that experience of love is not merely a private intuition; it is instead an objective affirmation of this world, given at its very foundations, in the love that is poured out to the Son, who is sent to be the pioneer of true humanity and thus to be our redeemer. In becoming flesh, the Son unites what is divine to what is all too frail—our humanity—but in so doing, restores our humanity to its proper standing. Thus Christ takes up, or receives, our humanity, and indeed, as I argue in chapter 2, all mortal flesh into God's own unending and abundant life. In God's coming in Christ, God pronounces and confers the most profound blessing upon this life. There is nothing that needs to be done to add to this blessing: it merely requires our reception and our thanksgiving for it. In the gift of creation and the gift of Christ its perfection and perfecter, the order of the universe is revealed to be love, not violence; abundance, not sacrifice. Our role in response is simply to conform our peace making and our justice seeking to a prior peace, to a prior justice or order. While this peace and this order are not immediately apprehensible within this fallen world, the Nicene teachers are instructive in articulating the types of intellectual and spiritual disciplines that make wisdom possible. In each case, this vision is not understood as contingent simply upon human positing but, rather, upon a certain receptivity, a preparation of hearts and minds for God's adding to and infusing human wisdom.

CHRIST AS *EXEMPLUM* AND *SACRAMENTUM*

I have settled on three figures from the Nicene period (Augustine of Hippo, Basil of Caesarea, and Athanasius of Alexandria) and one pre-Nicene teacher (Irenaeus of Lyons) because I believe each of these can help us to overcome deficits in contemporary Christology for particularly urgent moral and political questions of our time. This book brings together *the* great figure of Western Christendom—Augustine of Hippo—with Eastern teachers of the church, Basil of Caesarea (one of the so-called Cappadocian Fathers) and Athanasius of Alexandria. It does so because I am convinced that the differences between East and West have been overdrawn by scholars of that period, and because recent readings of the Fathers have been extremely helpful in leaving old polemics between East and West behind. Most of the writers I engage are from the fourth and fifth centuries, with the exception of my brief treatment of Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 115–c. 202) in chapter 4. My treatment of his insights give way to a

more in-depth engagement with Athanasius of Alexandria as a fourth-century figure who appropriates and develops them.

Each of the christological malaises with which this book wrestles has to do with a kind of immanentism, a tacit assumption within much of contemporary "critical" theology that human striving and knowledge are the chief sources of liberation, and that Christ serves primarily as an exemplar to guide our practices. What the doctrine of the incarnation in the Nicene period presses us to consider is how, in the union of humanity and God in Christ, every aspect of the *humanum* is already taken up and therefore is on its way to transformation. Thus there is no caducity in human affairs, no abject domain of human life or human affairs that cannot *de facto* be incorporated into God's redemptive purposes. Whereas critical theologies often begin in negation, a political theology that takes its cues from Nicene Christology must begin instead with an affirmation of this world. Thus there can be no primary motion of critical separation, even if it appears politically expedient to do so. This does not mean that there can be no judgment; there has to be judgment or justice in any theology that is concerned with political life. However, a theology guided by the incarnation of the word cannot be one that stops short of commending reconciliation as the theological end to which all parties must strive.

Put differently, the freedom that is won in Christ is not merely a negative liberty. By negative liberty, I mean merely that the type of freedom that much of contemporary political discourse envisions is primarily one of removing the constraining bonds of one's opponents or oppressors. Philosopher Charles Taylor defines negative liberty this way: "The basic intuition [of proponents of negative freedom] is that freedom is a matter of being able to do something or other, of not having obstacles in one's way, rather than being a capacity we have to realise."[11] In this passage, Taylor tellingly links a fuller notion of freedom with capacity, thus pointing to a notion of freedom that is very congenial to the one shared by the ancient teachers of the church.

Freedom, in this view, is the capacity to realize the self to be what it was created to be. Thus human freedom has as its background picture an ideal or prototype. We cannot answer the question of freedom without having a set of prior answers to questions such as, What is the goal of human life? or Toward what end does human life strive? The answers that are given in the Nicene period are ones that are entirely christological in shape. If Christ is the picture of perfect freedom, how does our knowing and our acting conform to him? This is clearly an exemplarist model of determining questions of freedom, based upon Christ as perfect human example. But Christ, according to the Nicene teachers, is not merely an *exemplum*; he is also *sacramentum*. That is, he imparts and endows our human quest for freedom with a desire that transcends its own fulfillment, because the home of human fulfillment is rest in God. Such desire

is an awakening of our capacities not simply for self-realization but for a self-realization bound to the self-realization of the entire world. Christ gives us the pattern of human freedom which is service for others, but gives it not merely as a pattern to be followed, but as a gift in which we participate, and to which he, God incarnate, opens our hearts, minds, and embodied actions.

THE VIRTUE OF HUMILITY

A retrieval of these various insights from the past is predicated upon a destabilization of the kind of identity that modern criticism upholds: that is, viewing the self as a singular agent who determines for itself the course of action and the aims of political struggles. Nicene theology has the effect of problematizing the notion of autonomous agency, displaying how our knowledge of ourselves—like our knowledge of God—is partial and can be distorted and riddled with illusions. As moderns, the primary illusion we hold (at least in the North Atlantic) is one of mastery and control—of our world, of our language, of our encounter with God. Nicene theology is a surprising corrective to this, for it maintains that God is at work even when we are unaware, and that God continues to work in us and beyond us even when our confessions and praise of God have ceased.

Thus the chief theological virtue that is upheld among all the Nicene teachers that I engage is the virtue of humility. By this I do not mean a wallowing in guilt or self-contempt but, rather, the capacity to imagine a world in which activity abounds outside of the immanent and closed circle of human cause and effect. Instead, the world, the cosmos, and human selves within it are participants within a greater drama that has an intelligence and a purposefulness that transcends our own. To say that there is a transcendent intelligence and will is not to say that we are somehow mere puppets in a cosmic drama. It is not to say that such intelligence and will are arbitrarily imposed against us. Rather, they work with human intelligence and will, as well as those of other creatures, even when we rebel against them. They do so in bringing things to their proper completion, in ordering the universe toward ends that are pacific: in bringing light out of darkness, order out of chaos, life out of death. Such word or such wisdom is the animating energy of the world, that creates and sustains it. This word or wisdom is not only given at creation, it is spoken again in clarity and fullness in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Or, as the writer of Hebrews puts it, "in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds" (Heb. 1:2). In him the proper destination of all things is made known, because he is their beginning and end. Christ, as the Nicene teachers have argued, is not

derivative, but is the creative, generative word that is fully one with God the Father in intention and will. To posit such power in the incarnate God may lead to the confusion that Christ stands above us and over us in depriving us of a fully human nature—depriving us of our wills, demanding our obedience, and punishing our transgressions. Yet, this Christ does not stand against us as alien or antagonistic; he is "nearer to us than we are to ourselves," as Augustine put it. For Christ is also the internal word, the one in whom our own broken intelligences and wills receive their healing. In becoming human, Christ assumes for us all the messy stuff of our human nature and unites it with God, thus restoring in us our proper heritage as sons and daughters of the living God (2 Cor. 6:18).

The affirmation of God's immediacy within created life and its strivings is not to say that it is identical with it. Creation is still waiting with "eager longing for the revealing of the children of God" (Rom. 8:19). It remains captive to an alien rule, one that is contrary to us and to God, and one that is now in "bondage to decay" (Rom. 8:21). Yet life that has been created and affirmed by God admits no decay or violence. The life of God and the life that we were created for in God is a life of lasting peace. This affirmation will test other theologies which would argue that God is the author of violence or that the heavenly city is attained by calculated sacrifice. Therefore, although in relation to human life God may *make use* of the conditions of fallen time and of fallen nature—including its violences—toward God's peaceful and loving ends, God is not the author of these because God cannot act contrary to God's nature. Therefore, violence and sacrifice have no intrinsic place in the divine life or the economy of salvation. Violence is never an ingredient within divine salvation; it is always denied, always overcome in the infinite and abundant motion of love that God pours out into the world. Thus the divine economy is to be contrasted quite sharply with the economy within fallen creation that maintains peace through sacrifice and loss.

READING THE TEXT OF SCRIPTURE AND THE TEXT OF THE WORLD

One of the difficulties of being a Christian in modernity is that we have inherited a way of reading texts that tends to, on the one hand, seek to get at the "real meaning of the text," or, on the other, concede to multiple textual "performances" and thereby abandon any quest for more fitting or plausible performances. This leveling of scriptural meaning leaves the modern reader without much of a road map for interpretation. Of course, one could write volumes about patristic hermeneutics, and it would be foolhardy even to attempt to characterize such diverse practices by way of summary. Yet, one can establish within the Nicene period several common characteristics that serve to challenge critical hermeneutics.

The first distinction that one might assert between critical and Nicene hermeneutics is a distinction in the interpretative agent(s). Whereas both historical-critical and reader-response theories would focus upon the individual reader's interpretative processes in discovering the text's meaning, for the Nicene teachers the community—that is, the church—took precedent in textual deliberation. This community was demarcated by its practices, particularly its sacramental practices and its confessional *sensus fidelium*—the sense of the faithful that together formed the tradition "handed down from the apostles." The *regulae fidei* or the rules of faith were the creeds and creed-like confessions of faith that guided scriptural interpretation and liturgical practice. These rules were trinitarian in character in the Nicene period and were also centered upon upholding the identity of Jesus Christ as not derivative or subordinate, but as consubstantial with the Father. Thus the Nicene teachers read Scripture as a diversely interglossing canon that was centered on the saving kerygma of Jesus Christ. They therefore found within the Old Testament hidden signs of Christ's salvific work foreshadowed in its figures. Such a *figural* reading does not necessarily diminish the primary sense of the text, for the figures retain the solidity of identity and purpose, but it nevertheless allows the text to point proleptically to a revelation not yet fully known. Thus the text cannot be closed to the future, not because the reader might ascribe to it a variety of meanings, but because it can be used by God to become a "sign" that resists easy identification with this world alone. In other words, God speaks God's word through Scripture in a manner that is not historically closed, but open to a future unfolding of the revelation that it speaks. John David Dawson puts it well:

> Although one may refer to a figure "announcing" its fulfillment, it is ultimately God who does the announcing, for a person or an event is a *figura* precisely because it begins an extended divine utterance that embraces subsequent persons and events. "Figuralness" denotes the status of things as significant—not in themselves and not in their meanings—but insofar as they are, in all their concrete reality, the enacted intention of God to signify. If Jesus is the fulfillment of Joshua, it is because both Joshua and Jesus are moments within a single divine intention to signify. Discerning the intention as a literary congruence, the figural reader makes explicit the similarities by which otherwise separate events are related to one another as moments in a single, divine utterance.[12]

The Nicene teachers were exceptionally adept not only at reading Scripture as a living sign of God's self-disclosure, but guided by Scripture they learned to "read" the "text" of the world thus as well. In reading the world, as in reading Scripture, the Nicene teachers were able to discern traces also of God's

beneficent will toward creation. However, they learned to *see* these traces, again through the pattern of the world that was revealed in Christ. If shadows of Christ stretched back into history, as they read the Hebrew Scriptures, they also leaned forward, disclosing the proper identity of the world that was redeemed in him. Thus the community of the faithful—the body of Christ—and its sacramental practices had a special role in revealing the ongoing divine intention in the world for it was here, particularly within Baptism and Eucharist, that it was foretasted. For each of these writers, the eucharistic sharing in Christ connotes a realistic participation in divine life that becomes, in a way, the measure of authentic living and the pattern of knowing God's presence. The doctrine of participation—a term that is far more prominent in the Eastern writers that I explore than in Augustine—connotes precisely this ontological sharing in God's eternity through the condescension of Christ and his ascension with us to eternal "knowledge."

This is not to say that participation is limited to the sacraments and those who receive them. Because God in Christ has blessed this world in his assumption of flesh, all flesh has the capacity to communicate his truth. The Eucharist is a particularly evocative sign of this redemption, because in it we see how the grape and the fields, the waters, sky, and the earth conspire to reveal to us Christ as the hidden center of all life. Like the lovely line from George Herbert's poem "Easter," "The cross taught all wood to resound his name," all creation is charged with immeasurable significance according to the Nicene teachers because Christ has come among us. The world is a sign because it derives from God. Because it is the work of God's creation, it utters the Creator in the very structure of its being. Thus correspondence to God is not contingent upon creation fitting a predetermined pattern or ideal, but is a revelation given gratuitously and surprisingly, and in a manner always exceeding our grasp. The beautiful (or the good or the true) is so because it cannot be exhausted, because it participates in an economy that springs from a ceaseless source. Thus the very particularity that is proper to the creature is not to be overcome in the contemplation of divine beauty, truth, and goodness, but is to be dwelled in, to be contemplated in its very material identity. David Bentley Hart puts it well: "Christian thought—whose infinite is triune, whose God becomes incarnate, and whose account of salvation promises not liberation from but glorification of, material creation—can never separate the formal particularity of beauty from the splendor it announces. . . ."[13] Thus the world's creatures can be seen as heralds to God, but their function as heralds pointing to something else should not obscure the fact that it is they who do the pointing and none other. They are not to be overcome or overlooked in order to reach splendor: these are the splendor themselves on their way to becoming.

Thus Christian representation can never overlook the sign or text as being merely auxiliary to its "true" or "deeper" meaning. The surface meaning is intrinsic to the story in Christian representation, because God has communicated through it. Thus God's revelation never supersedes the sign or herald, but completes them. This pattern of understanding participation as an essential affirmation of materiality is crucial to the interpretation of Scripture. This understanding of God's participation within the very *concretessima* of human life endows human life in its particularly with a profound significance. Because all people are potentially a "sign" opening toward God's glory there is no one who can be left behind for the sake of a common good.

WHAT IS THEOLOGICAL CRITIQUE?

What, then, is critique? What, in particular, is theological critique? Critical theory is not a term that is used with the regularity that it once was. Earlier forms of social criticism within theology acknowledged the critics' indebtedness to a tradition of inquiry that was intent upon challenging the assumptions of privilege in representing reality. Going back to the Frankfurt School of the 1920s, such critique signaled a veritable revolution in thought insofar as it understood that tools of the social sciences could be purposefully used to bring about emancipation from sinful orders. This work gave rise to a questioning of culture insofar as culture—and religion within it—often supported the oppression or the alienation of a vast majority of people. It did so by positing as normative the kinds of assumptions and values of the culture that only empowered a select few. In response to these critical insights, theologians began to question the church's own complicity with sinful power and sought to break the ideological hold of the church over our freedom. Thus, as Canadian theologian Gregory Baum likes to put it, "Thinking begins with negation":

> Knowledge begins with the critique of society and its ideologies. This is in keeping with the biblical perspective where God's Word is judgment before it is new life: God reveals the hidden human sins before forgiving them and renewing the human spirit. Critical theology subjects to an ideology critique not only society and its secular culture, but also and especially the Christian tradition, the source of its inspirition [*sic*].[14]

While I will leave to the side for a moment Baum's tantalizing conviction that God reveals Godself first in judgment (which, even more suggestively, he identifies with negation!), I will nevertheless aver that, in spite of the datedness of this perspective on theology, it remains the operative modality for a wide variety of

theologies that seek social justice and environmental activism. There are three interwoven themes that Baum lifts up that, in spite of the lack of self-professed identification with "critical theology" of the writers I am engaging, remain common among them.

First, *knowledge begins as a self-knowledge*. That is, the contemporary theologians with whom I am engaged take their own situatedness within a particular society as an epistemological starting point. Thus "context" becomes that which the theologian identifies as the home from which she draws theological insight. This generally is a particular place of privilege, but also often of willing solidarity with those on the underside of history. There remains a confidence among such theologians (in this book this tendency may be seen in J. Denny Weaver, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Sallie McFague, and, to a degree, Miroslav Volf) that one can name, at the very least, who I am and where I stand. The assurance of one's position is thus grounded not externally—by reference to God or a metaphysical order—but internally: in the self and its insight. This, of course, will be a mark of distinction between the contemporary and ancient writers whom I engage, but not entirely so. The self is not bereft of significance to the ancient writers, but they hold much less confidence in its "knowability" and perhaps in its goodness. We shall see this more clearly particularly as we engage Augustine, the great skeptic of self-knowledge.

The second common feature shared by the critical theologians with whom I engage is *negation as a methodological starting point*. Negation, or the a priori conviction that the received thought of the dominant culture must be in some sense undermined, flows through the writings of many of the contemporary theologians addressed in this book. Interestingly enough, it is not the dominant modality of a number of the "postcritical," non-Christian writers whom I engage, including Hélène Cixous, Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, and Saba Mahmood, for whom culture (biblical and otherwise) does not inspire an a priori negation but, rather, an engagement and a hearing. It involves receptivity prior to judgment. Judgment is still intrinsic to such postcritical writings, but it is done with an aim of preserving and upholding those features of a culture that resist the violences which the culture engenders as not incidental to the culture but ingredient within it.[15]

Third and finally, critical theologians share a common assumption that *biblical and theological writings are not immune to ideological distortion*. Indeed, because of their foundational status within Western culture, the biblical narrative and Christian theological tradition must be especially interrogated for it "generated, sustained, and communicated"[16] the values under which we are burdened and that require to be liberated from their oppressive distortions. Thus the task of the theologian is to look to the biblical and theological foundations

of social malaise and thereby seek to remedy these through critical scrutiny of and, where possible, the advancement of a "usable" meaning that may be drawn from Scripture or other texts.

The critics that I engage in this book are far more haphazardly selected than the church fathers. In some cases, they represent Christian thinkers who engage the Nicene teachers more or less head-on (as, for example, Rosemary Radford Ruether's challenge to Logos Christology). More frequently, the critics whom I engage are those who do not take specific exception to the Nicene teachers, but are instead critical of more general tendencies within orthodox Christian confession (Wilfrid Cantwell Smith, J. Denny Weaver, Sallie McFague). At still other times, I engage Christian writers whose insights would not necessarily appear critical of the Nicene tradition, but whose treatment of a subject matter demands (in my view) clarification from the Nicenes (Miroslav Volf). Finally, I engage a number of non-Christian thinkers, either because they have had a profound influence upon contemporary Christian thought of a particular kind (Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Jacques Derrida), or because—by some gratuitous circumstance—their thought corroborates the position I am advancing through the Nicene figure with whom I am engaged (Hannah Arendt, Saba Mahmood, and Hélène Cixous). As I hope will become apparent in this book, I am engaged with most of these critical voices because I am sympathetic with their political ends. It is my hope that, whatever the theological differences that are named here at times, this does not undermine my debt of gratitude for their insights and wisdom.

This book is heavily indebted to secondary sources in the field of patristic studies. I am not a patristics scholar, and so I rely heavily on the careful work done by those within the field. I am therefore grateful for the revival of interest in the Nicene era, and for the willingness of scholars to do careful exegetical work in order to assist tenuous appropriations by theologians like myself. I am also indebted in this book to conversations that are much broader within theology in which a *ressourcement* of ancient material is a lively and growing source for constructive theology. The Radical Orthodox movement is a good example of this trend. However different the political directions that I may take at times from them, I am indebted to the careful attention that have given to thinking Christ in a culture that presumes anything but peace, anything but humility, anything but charity—both in our time and in Christian antiquity. What revolutionary effects did such Christian thought have in transfiguring the commonplaces and the wisdom of the Hellenistic world? And how did "the grain of the universe," a grain that is the hidden structure of peace in the midst of the vast dark forces of violence, explode in the hearts and minds of these figures? And, of course, behind this question is a tentative analogy with our own time. What difference does Christ make in our own world given over to violence and death?

How does he explode the parameters of our best thought today? How does he heal it? How is he reconciled to it? This book is dedicated to such an end.

THE DESIGN OF THIS BOOK

In each of the chapters, we will see how the desire of humans for liberation is one that is Christ shaped and Christ infused. In chapter 1, a chapter dealing with contemporary empires, we see the conflict that emerges within competing pictures of freedom, or competing notions of the good that might be realized. Augustine's two cities are driven by a love of self on the one hand, and a love of God on the other. The city fueled by self-love is trapped in an immanent plane in which the chief good to be realized is the good of self-preservation. In a world in which such aspirations are primary, citizens soon abjure their own capacities in order to enshrine a sovereign authority who will protect the city's citizens from external obstacles or threats. Augustine's alternate city, a city founded on peace, is one in which Jesus Christ is the sovereign, and his sovereignty is not based upon the violence of exclusion, but upon humility. Augustine of Hippo enables us to see the limitations of political theologies aimed merely at the preservation of the sacrificial order, rather than toward the heavenly city to which Christ calls his citizens. In this chapter, I bring Augustine into conversation with contemporary theorists of empire Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, who share many of Augustine's misgivings about empire procuring a true and lasting peace. Unlike Augustine, however, Hardt and Negri are reticent on the nature of a good life toward which citizens might aim, and therefore their theory falls short of delivering the kinds of political goods they promise.

Chapter 2 takes up the theme of Christ as the one in whom the entire cosmos is made and thus alerts us to its beauty and depth perceived by humans as a real indication of God's blessing and power working within and through the natural world. In engaging Basil of Caesarea on creation, we find that creation is a sign to be read, which is a heavenly affirmation of this world. Thus creation care takes on a depth and significance as we learn to read its signs, but this reading requires our entire bodily engagement, including our disciplined refusal to dominate the Earth. Thus my engagement of Basil of Caesarea on the healing of the earth involves a form of renunciation or *askesis*, which, properly understood, is the condition not for human abnegation but for its joy. Again, in this chapter, we will explore a notion of liberty that is Christ shaped and Christ infused as the ascetic finds within her renunciation not deprivation but abundance.

Chapter 3 examines the creative capacity of Christ the Word through whom the world is created. It is also an analysis of the creative capacities within

human beings themselves to represent God in language. It argues, with other feminist commentators, that the language that we have is often woefully inadequate to capture the ineffable otherness of God, who transcends all language. This chapter locates the origin of language within human desires, which are desires that are only partially articulated. Drawing on the philosophical work of Hélène Cixous, I argue in favor of an understanding of language as not neatly transparent or amenable to reconstruction, but as representative of desires not yet fully known, of gaps and lacunae that accompany its meaning and render language opaque. However, I also argue here that the caesurae in language are not destined to be language's final destiny, but, with Augustine, that language about God, like desire itself, has a "home" in which we might hope for true communication. Just so, this pledge of the redemption of our signs, which is itself implicit in the word being made flesh, is a pledge already partially enjoyed, even in the wounded words we use.

Chapter 4 turns our attention to the challenges that the existence of many religious languages present to Christian self-understanding. Particularly, what sense are we to make of the confession that Jesus is "true God from true God" in a world in which there appear to be many like claims to God's true identity? In this chapter, I examine the kinds of responses that this question has engendered in contemporary secularism, and argue that the concessions that this secularism often asks religious persons to make are too great. In this I engage Muslim scholar Saba Mahmood, whose analysis of the remaking of religious identity in the post–9/11 antireligious rhetoric of secular politics is a drive to conformity that seeks to undermine any alternate conceptions of identity. Mahmood's analysis of women in the pious Muslim revivals prods me to look to Christian sources on the nature of the self and how this picture challenges those secular accounts of what it is to be human. In this, I examine Athanasius of Alexandria on the difference that the incarnation makes to our conceptions of the self, and posit that such an account actually shows more promise than the secular accounts in allowing other religious pictures of the self to narrate their own anthropological claims. At the very least, Athanasius provides an account of the self on account of the incarnation that counters the acids of the contemporary picture of the deracinated self as an ideal.

If the picture of human flourishing that is lifted up in the incarnation is so salutary to an ethic of peace, what then are we to make of its seeming contradiction in the crucifixion? Do we, like many critics, abandon the cross as a primitive symbol of "divine child abuse"[17] or as a justification of violence and suffering more generally? In chapter 5, I engage J. Denny Weaver's now (in)famous critique of theologies of the atonement in conversation with Irenaeus of Lyons and Athanasius of Alexandria, finding much in keeping with "the nonviolent atonement." However, I also find Weaver's and others' abandonment of

the cross problematic and turn to the theme of recapitulation as an entrée for thinking about the cross in ways that both take biblical and later construals of the atonement seriously, while also denying (together with Weaver) that God can be the author of violence.

Chapter 6 is the concluding chapter of the book, and it is an exploration of memory and its redemption in Christ. It is a chapter that is future oriented, in spite of (or, better, because of) its dominant theme of memory. In this chapter I take up the work of Miroslav Volf on "remembering rightly in a violent world," and argue that Augustine's understanding of memory challenges Volf's concession that under certain circumstances the past may be more fruitfully forgotten than retained in memory. This chapter looks to the other-worldly nature of remembering as I explore the promise that our memories will be retained and transfigured in Christ, and that remembering is key to a just future.

To repeat Ricoeur's words, "The duty of memory is not restricted to preserving the material trace, whether scriptural or other of past events, but maintains the feeling of being obligated with respect to these others, of whom we shall later say, not that they are no more, but that they were. Pay the debt, . . . but also inventory the heritage."[18] In each of the chapters that follow, I attempt to pay a debt, to attend to a kind of pressure of obligation that the past exerts upon our current circumstances, precisely because the figures whom I engage in these pages *were*. There is a way of discharging the debt that is merely perfunctory, a settling of accounts. But there is another way of viewing a debt or obligation: that is, not as bound by compulsion, but by gratitude. It is a gratitude that seeks to recognize how they *were*, and how, because of them, we *are.*