Johannine Dualism and Contemporary Pluralism

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I take it that the title "Johannine Dualism and Contemporary Pluralism" implies a *problem* — or a complex of problems — in search of a solution. The problem may be put thus: given the dualism of the Gospel of John, how may this Gospel be appropriated in a theologically responsible way in the context of the cultural pluralism characteristic of (late- or post-) modernity? More generally: can we still *hear* a text whose particularities of language, form, and content — all deeply moulded by the historical circumstances in which it took shape — seem to place the text at such a distance from the ideas and values of the contemporary world? Clearly, we are in the realm of discourse and practice that has become known as theological hermeneutics.

Illustrating the Hermeneutical Problem

The problem is posed sharply by Johannine scholar R. Alan Culpepper in his 1996 essay, "The Gospel of John as a Document of Faith in a Pluralistic Culture."[1] Culpepper asks this question: "As the culture [of North America] in which we live becomes increasingly pluralistic, religious communities are beginning to confront issues posed by the beliefs, experiences, values, and religious traditions of individuals from widely different social, ethnic, racial, and

1. R. Alan Culpepper, "The Gospel of John as a Document of Faith in a Pluralistic Culture," in *What Is John? Readers and Readings of the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), pp. 107-27.

religious backgrounds. To put it in other words, *does using the Gospel of John as a document of faith lead to a faith stance that is adequate to the challenges a pluralistic culture poses for believers?*"[2]

By way of response, Culpepper begins by briefly tracing challenges to John as a document of faith in times past: first, the second-century controversy over the Gospel's theological orthodoxy, given its arguably Gnostic tendencies and its popularity among the Gnostics; and second, the nineteenth-century challenge by the likes of Karl Gottlieb Bretschneider and David Friedrich Strauss to the historical reliability of the Gospel, given the marked differences between John and the Synoptics and the characteristically Johannine idiom of the discourses.[3] Culpepper then suggests that the challenges facing John's Gospel as a document of faith today are different. No longer is the challenge that of John's theological orthodoxy, nor is it John's historical reliability. The main challenge is *ethical.* He says: "In place of the theological and historical challenges of earlier eras, a series of new concerns has arisen. These concerns are not primarily theological or historical but ethical: (1) Is the Gospel of John anti-Jewish? (2) Does the Gospel have anything to say to the marginalized and the oppressed? And (3) How should we interpret the theological exclusivism of the Gospel in a pluralistic culture?"[4]

Culpepper proceeds to consider each of these three questions in turn. On the first, he emphasizes the contribution to Christian anti-Semitism of the Gospel's hostility to "the Jews," and calls for the repudiation of John's anti-Judaism and the questioning of the Gospel's "theological exclusivism." On the second, he calls for a hermeneutic of suspicion toward standard interpretations of John by biblical scholars who are "almost exclusively white, male, Europeans and Euro-Americans," the effect of which is both to conceal the interpretative interests at work in the scholarly guild and to marginalize readings of John from other social locations. On the third question — to do with the interpretation of John's theological exclusivism in a pluralistic culture — Culpepper seeks to mitigate the force of Johannine exclusivism by empahsizing the universalistic implications of John's cosmic, Wisdom/Logos christology as exemplified in John 1:9 ("The true light which enlightens *everyone* was coming into the world."). According to Culpepper, "John's Logos Christology allows Christians to affirm that adherents of other religious traditions may come to know God through the work of the Cosmic Christ."[5] In his conclusion, Culpepper reiter-

2. Culpepper, "The Gospel of John," p. 108; italics in the original.
3. Culpepper, "The Gospel of John," pp. 108-12.
4. Culpepper, "The Gospel of John," p. 112.
5. Culpepper, "The Gospel of John," p. 124.

ates his main contention: the challenge to John as a document of faith today is the ethical one — and what is needed in a context of cultural and religious pluralism is *"a hermeneutics of ethical accountability."*[6]

I have drawn attention to Culpepper's recent essay, partly because it shows with passion and lucidity that our concern is a current one, but mainly because its argument is unconvincing or seriously undeveloped at critical points. Identifying some of these points will prepare the way for the main substance of the essay to follow.

Take, first, that final invitation, the call to "a hermeneutics of ethical accountability." The obvious question is: accountability *to whom?* In a pluralistic society, who is to arbitrate? Is a genuine plurality best served by Kantian universal moral absolutes established according to the lights of human reason unfettered by Scripture and tradition? What is at stake, furthermore, in prescinding on questions of theology and history (as questions of "yesterday") in favor of questions of *ethics?* This privileging of ethics in a way that separates the moral questions from the theological and historical is an increasingly common strategy in interpretation. But its pitfall is what we have come to recognize to be characteristic of theological modernism. However unintended, its ultimate effect is to reduce theology to anthropology, to seriously circumscribe how the text "speaks" by sanitizing the text of those parts regarded as offensive, and to cut the text off from Scripture-bearing communities for whom the Gospel of John remains revelatory of the divine. In the end, we are left with the question, why bother at all with such a problematic text if the danger is always that of being led astray from the path of moral probity, a path discerned independently of the text, in any case?

Related to the problems associated with Culpepper's uncritical "turn to the ethical" is his naïve embrace of cultural and religious pluralism as the determining context for responsible interpretation. There are several issues here. One has to do with the nature of pluralism — in particular its function as an *ideology* of the project of modernity, an ideology which operates (ironically) to suppress genuine differences between peoples and cultures. It does this in the name of *individualism,* itself a kind of cultural lowest common denominator buttressed massively by consumer capitalism. Thus, instead of a genuine *plurality* of cultures, each with its historic particularity, ethos, and worldview, we have an ideology of *pluralism.* Here, universal ethics becomes a way of managing competing truth claims and policing genuine difference — which is a natural corollary of the relativization of truth in a context of ideological pluralism. What becomes important are questions of *procedure.* Questions of truth are

6. Culpepper, "The Gospel of John," p. 127; italics in the original.

politely circumvented by being relegated to the realm of personal choice and private preference.

If universal ethics and ideological pluralism do not serve theologically responsible interpretation well, the question of a more appropriate *context* has to be considered. The irony of Culpepper's approach is that, in the "totalizing" expectation it brings to the text of John — that is, in the demand it places on the text to speak directly and comprehensively to the present in ways that are relevant to the needs and experience of the reader — it represents, at least in some ways, the flip-side of fundamentalist interpretation. What is lacking in both a modernist and fundamentalist interpretation is a richer and more complex notion of context. Each and every text in John requires for its interpretation contextualization in the Gospel as a whole (itself shaped by the Jewish scriptures). The Gospel itself requires contextualization both in its originating linguistic, socio-historical, and cultural context and in its context in canonical and subsequent Christian tradition and history. This includes, of course, how it is heard in Christian faith communities today. The manner of Culpepper's approach is to short-cut this process. In consequence, the demands and expectations of the modern (North-American) reader he represents are allowed to become too insistent, and the necessary tension and complex mediations of time and space between text and reader are seriously compromised.

Johannine Dualism

Having just spoken of the need to take theology and history seriously, and the need for a proper *contextualization* of John which includes its originating linguistic, socio-historical, and cultural context, I turn now to the question of "Johannine dualism." A cursory survey of scholarship shows that dualism is widely held to be a significant and characteristic feature of the Gospel of John. Rudolf Bultmann's classic *Theology of the New Testament* has a full chapter on Johannine dualism in his account of Johannine theology;[7] James H. Charlesworth has a widely cited study comparing the "dualisms" of John and the Qumran Scrolls;[8] C. K. Barrett's *Essays on John* has a nicely nuanced essay on "Paradox and Dualism" ranging widely over New Testament texts generally but

7. Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, vol. 2 (ET, London: SCM, 1955), pp. 15-32.

8. James H. Charlesworth, "A Critical Comparison of the Dualism in 1QS 3:13–4:26 and the 'Dualism' Contained in the Gospel of John," in *John and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Crossroad, 1972), pp. 76-106.

focusing on John in particular;[9] and, most recently, John Ashton's magisterial *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* has a major discussion of "dualism" also.[10] These studies and others raise a number of issues that are worth our attention with a view to a more adequately contextualized and theologically suggestive interpretation of John.

Defining "Dualism"

We may begin with the question of definition. Historian of religion and Gnosticism specialist, Ugo Bianchi, is helpful here: "As a category within the history and phenomenology of religion, dualism may be defined as a doctrine that posits the existence of two fundamental causal principles underlying the existence . . . of the world. In addition, dualistic doctrines, worldviews, or myths represent the basic components of the world or of man as participating in the ontological opposition and disparity of value that characterize their dual principles."[11] An important corollary is the need to distinguish *dualism* proper from simple *dualities* or pairs of opposites, such as male/female, right/left, light/darkness, life/death, good/bad, spirit/matter, sacred/profane, and so on. According to Bianchi, "Not every duality or polarity is dualistic, but only those that involve the duality or polarity of causal principles. . . . This means that a concept of mere ethical dualism, stressing the moral opposition between good and evil and their respective protagonists (as in the Christian concepts of God and the Devil), is not properly dualistic in the religio-historical and phenomenological sense unless good and evil are also connected with opposite ontological principles, as in Zoroastrianism and in Manichaeism. The simple contrasting of good and evil, life and death, light and darkness, and so on is in fact coextensive with religion itself and cannot be equated with the much more specific phenomenon of dualism."[12]

In more systematic mode, Bianchi also offers a typology of the basic forms of dualism. He distinguishes three pairs: radical versus moderate, dialectical versus eschatological, and cosmic versus anticosmic. In radical dualism, the two principles are coequal and coeternal; in moderate dualism, one principle is primordial and the other is derivative. In dialectical dualism, the two

9. C. K. Barrett, *Essays on John* (London: SPCK, 1982), pp. 98-115.

10. John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp. 205-37.

11. Ugo Bianchi, "Dualism," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), IV, pp. 506-12, at p. 506.

12. Bianchi, "Dualism," p. 506.

principles — often conceived of as good and evil — function eternally; in eschatological dualism the belief is that the evil principle will be overcome at the end of history. In cosmic dualism, creation is fundamentally good and is threatened by evil coming from outside; anticosmic dualism holds that evil is intrinsic to the world, and is present, for example, in matter, the body, or the inferior soul.[13]

The relevance of Bianchi's definition and typology for the present study needs to be considered. First, it is clear from his account that the *genealogy* of "dualism" as an analytic category is the history of religions and the phenomenology of religion, and that its "native soil" is in the study of Zoroastrianism in particular. This raises complex theological-hermeneutical questions. In particular, how appropriate *is* "dualism" — an analytic category drawn from the scientific study of Zoroastrian religion — as a tool for the interpretation of texts like the Gospel of John that stand within the fundamentally *monistic and monotheistic* framework of biblical faith and Early Judaism? Will the category "dualism" allow us to understand the text more profoundly against its originating historical context — which it may well do — or will it have the effect of "flattening out" the text as presenting just one more variation of a particular phenomenon we know of already as a feature of certain kinds of "religion"? Now that Nicholas Lash and others have made us more aware of the nature of "religion" and its scientific study as an ideological construct of modernity and the Enlightenment,[14] we need to be conscious of the load our categories carry — their potential for illumination, but also their potential for distortion.

Second, Bianchi's differentiation between dualism and duality is pertinent.[15] Arguably, there is in John no polarity of "causal principles." There *are* multiple dualities — such as those of light and dark, life and death, above and below — but the basic narrative presupposes a thoroughly biblical narrative of creation and salvation reinterpreted in the light of the revelation of the love of God for the world, a love made manifest in the incarnation of the divine Logos

13. Bianchi, "Dualism," pp. 507-9.

14. See Nicholas Lash, *The Beginning and End of "Religion"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); also his earlier work, *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God* (London: SCM, 1988).

15. Note also the reservation expressed by N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992), pp. 252-53: "The problem with this is that the word 'dualism' is used in several quite different senses, by no means always differentiated. Furthermore, the word 'dualism' itself is heavily loaded in some circles, often indicating disapproval; but several of the things which are asserted to be 'dualistic' are perfectly normal features of most if not all biblical theology, and we must make a careful distinction between that which the great majority of Jews accepted as normal and that with which some, exceptionally, flirted."

and the gift of the Spirit-Paraclete. Certainly, the monotheism at the Gospel's heart is a monotheism of a complex kind, itself with precedents already in Judaism. This complex monotheism contributed significantly to the subsequent development of the Christian doctrine of God as Trinity. But the important point to make here is that the fundamental order of reality that the Gospel of John displays is not properly called dualistic, if by "dualistic" we mean the ontological opposition of causal principles as described by Bianchi. The dualities that appear are what we would expect of a Gospel grounded so firmly in the biblical narrative of divine revelation through creation and salvation.

Having made these cautionary comments, however, due weight has to be given to textual and historical studies which, working by analogy and comparison as they must, *do* find dualistic elements both in John and in the literature of the period. They are able to do so partly because they employ a considerably broader and more differentiated definition of "dualism" than that of Bianchi. Jörg Frey, for example, in his recent and detailed study of patterns of dualistic thought in the texts from Qumran,[16] distinguishes no less than ten kinds of dualism, some of which overlap and are mutually reinforcing. The ten are as follows: (1) "Metaphysical" dualism corresponds with Bianchi's primary definition and signifies the opposition of two equal causal powers, as in Zoroastrianism. (2) "Cosmic" dualism refers to the division of the world and humanity into opposing forces of good and evil, light and darkness, but, in contrast to metaphysical dualism, these forces are neither coeternal nor strictly causal. (3) "Spatial" dualism signifies the division of the world into separate parts such as heaven and earth, above and below. (4) "Eschatological" dualism is the temporal corollary of spatial dualism. It signifies the division of the world into two periods of time, the present aeon and the future aeon. (5) "Ethical" dualism denotes the division of humanity into two groups — good and evil, righteous and wicked — according to virtues and vices of the kind found in Jewish wisdom and apocalyptic. (6) "Soteriological" dualism denotes the division of humanity into two groups, the saved or lost, on the basis of their belief or unbelief in a savior or their participation or not in a certain salvific act. (7) "Theological" dualism (sometimes called prophetic dualism) signifies the contrast between God and humanity, creator and creation. (8) "Physical" dualism denotes the absolute division between spirit and matter. (9) "Anthropological" dualism denotes the opposition of body and soul as distinct principles of being.

16. Jörg Frey, "Different Patterns of Dualistic Thought in the Qumran Library: Reflections on their Background and History," in *Legal Texts and Legal Issues: Proceedings of the Second Meeting of the International Organization for Qumran Studies Cambridge 1995*, ed. Moshe Bernstein et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1997), pp. 275-335. A roughly comparable list of ten types of (what he prefers to call) "duality" is found in Wright, *People of God*, pp. 253-54.

(10) "Psychological" dualism is where the contrast between good and evil is internalized such that the opposition is not between two groups of people but between principles or impulses at war within the individual person.[17]

Casting the definitional net as widely as this not only makes it possible to find numerous elements of dualism in the Gospel of John; it also makes it possible by comparative analysis to situate the Gospel more easily in an originating literary and historical milieu. This milieu includes the wisdom and apocalyptic traditions of the Bible and Early Judaism, the texts from Qumran, and pre-Johannine Jesus tradition. One striking outcome of such comparisons — especially with Qumran — is the apparent proximity of Johannine "dualism" (if that is what we should call it) to the culture and thought-world of Palestinian Judaism.[18]

What, then, *are* the elements of dualism in John? Once we have considered one or two of these in a little detail in their originating context(s), we will be in a better position to consider the theological-hermeneutical question of Johannine dualism generally in the context of late-modern pluralism. But the point is not just to *identify* the "dualisms," as if the descriptive task is all there is. The point, rather, is to try to hear what these dualisms are *saying* and to discern the *moral-theological dynamic* that is being communicated in such a distinctive way.

The World Above and Below

The Gospel of John is well known for its distinctive understanding of "the world" (ὁ κόσμος). This is conveyed partly in terms of spatial oppositions. On the one hand, there is the *vertical* opposition between the world above and below. To "the Jews," Jesus says, "You are from below [ἐκ τῶν κάτω], I am from above [ἐκ τῶν ἄνω]; you are of this world, I am not of this world" (8:23); of his disciples, "they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world" (17:16); and to Pilate, with emphatic repetition, "My kingship is not of this world . . . my kingdom is not from here" (18:36). Furthermore, Jesus himself is the Son of man who brings salvation by descending from heaven and ascending back to heaven by way of the cross: "No one has ascended into heaven but he that came down from heaven, namely the Son of man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent

17. Frey, "Dualistic Thought," pp. 282-85. I have followed Frey's wording closely in this summary. Frey is himself indebted to two earlier essays, among others: Charlesworth, "A Critical Comparison" and John G. Gammie, "Spatial and Ethical Dualism in Jewish Wisdom and Apocalyptic Literature," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93 (1974): 356-85.

18. Cf. Charlesworth, "A Critical Comparison," pp. 104-5.

in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life" (3:13-14).

As the last quotation makes explicit, the dualism here is predicated on the traditional scriptural polarity of heaven and earth. Occasionally, "the world" has a cosmological connotation, but more often — as in the designation "*this* world" — it refers to the realm of humankind, especially to fallen humankind as the object of God's love. The significance of Jesus' claims to be "from above" and "not of [or from] this world" is christological and soteriological. It is precisely because Jesus as the Son of God and heavenly Son of man is from heaven — that is, *from God* — that he is able to bring the saving revelation of the truth, the saving revelation of God's love and judgment. Furthermore, whatever dualism might be implicit in the opposition of "the above" and "the below" it is certainly not an absolute, metaphysical dualism. Barrett's way of expressing this point is to observe that the Son of man is "a figure in motion" whose descending and ascending brings heaven and earth into contact for the salvation and judgment of the world.[19] Ashton fundamentally agrees: "We must conclude that without further specification the contrast between heaven and earth or above and below is not, properly speaking, dualistic at all. The gap between heaven and earth is constantly being bridged, sometimes by theophanies, sometimes by angelic or human messengers, prophets, conceived as sent directly from the heavenly court. Jesus himself was the last of these divine emissaries, entering the world with the God-given task of bringing life (3:16; 10:10), light (8:12; 12:46) and salvation (3:17; 4:42; 12:47)."[20]

But as well as the vertical opposition of heaven and earth, "the world" has the connotation of a *horizontal* opposition as well, a polarity of believers and unbelievers. "He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not [αὐτὸν οὐκ ἔγνω]. He came to his own and his own did not receive him [αὐτὸν οὐ παρέλαβον]. But to all who received [ἔλαβον] him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God" (1:10-12). This statement in the Prologue is echoed subsequently in the Farewell Discourse, where Jesus speaks of the coming of the Spirit of truth "whom the world cannot receive [οὐ δύναται λαβεῖν], because it neither sees him nor knows [οὐδὲ γινώσκει] him" (14:17). We have here what Bultmann called a "dualism of decision" *(Entscheidungsdualismus)*,[21] or what, in terms of our ten types listed earlier, we might call a soteriological dualism — the division of hu-

19. Barrett, "Paradox and Dualism," pp. 108-9.

20. Ashton, *Understanding*, p. 207.

21. Bultmann, *New Testament Theology*, vol. 2, p. 21, cited in Ashton, *Understanding*, p. 207.

manity into two groups on the basis of their belief or unbelief. Be that as it may, the Gospel as a whole displays a world (humankind) in darkness among whom the coming of the light, Jesus, brings division and separation.

In sum, "the world" as narrated by the Evangelist is profoundly significant from a moral-theological viewpoint. First, it locates the divine Logos in relation to creation — "the world was made through him" (1:10; cf. 1:3). Second, it is the object of God's universal love — "God so loved the world" (3:16). Third, in the incarnation, it is the locus in history of saving revelation — "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth" (1:14). Fourth, as the sphere of human darkness, it is witness to the coming of the light as both salvation and judgment — "This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil" (3:19).

Light and Darkness

The polarity of light and darkness is pervasive in John and fundamental to Johannine dualism. The following examples are representative. Evoking the separation of light and darkness in the account of creation in Genesis 1, the Johannine Prologue depicts the Logos as the light shining in the darkness and not being overcome by it (1:5; cf. 1:9). In chapter 3, in a profound comment on the depravity of the human condition and the division caused by the eschatological breaking in of the light of revelation, the Johannine Jesus says: "And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil" (3:19). In a narrative context of growing estrangement and controversy between Jesus and the Pharisees, Jesus challenges them to discipleship — to "follow" him, to "walk" in the light — on the authority of his great revelatory utterance, "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (8:12). And, in a final challenge to the people at the Gospel's narrative turning-point in chapter 12, "the hour" of his death having arrived with the coming of the Greeks to see him, Jesus says: "The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light" (12:35-36).

What is impressive in these deployments of the symbolism of light and darkness is their predominantly soteriological and christological thrust. "Light" speaks of creation and therefore of life. It also speaks of revelation and therefore of truth, an aspect made more significant by the implicit transfer of the meta-

phor of light from torah as the way, truth, and life (e.g., Ps. 119:105), to Jesus (cf. John 14:6). There is no static opposition of a metaphysical kind between light and darkness. The dualism, rather, is one of soteriological and christological *movement:* the penetration of a world in darkness — ignorant of God, blind to the truth, disobedient to God's law — by the life-giving light of the divine Logos now incarnate in Jesus.

Fully expressive of this soteriological movement is the story of the healing of the man born blind in John 9, itself a kind of enacted parable of Jesus' revelatory claim in 8:12, "I am the light of the world." This claim is repeated explicitly at the story's outset (9:5), and reinforced with the associated symbolism of doing God's work "while it is day" (9:4). Significantly, and ironically, as the blind man gains his sight and makes the movement to full *insight,* there is a reverse movement on the part of the Pharisees and more generally "the Jews," those who "see" but show, by their refusal to accept the man's witness to Jesus, that, in fact, they are blind and stand condemned. It is as if the coming of the light shows up the darkness for what it is.

Comparing "Dualisms" in John and Qumran

Does this kind of dualism have any close analogies? Specifically, does the impressive deployment of the light/darkness dualism by the sectarian community at Qumran allow us to posit a similar milieu for the Gospel of John? As Charlesworth showed in his study of 1QS 3.13-4.26, there are strong points of analogy between the *Community Rule* and John, so much so that Charlesworth suggested Essene influence on John and his world of thought: "John probably borrowed some of his dualistic terminology and mythology from 1QS 3:13-4:26."[22] Ashton, indeed, goes further, advancing the hypothesis that the closeness of fit between Qumran dualism and that of the Gospel of John is best explained by positing that the Evangelist was a convert from Essenism: "[T]he evangelist had dualism in his bones. . . . [He] may well have started life as one of those Essenes who were to be found, according to Josephus, 'in large numbers in every town.'"[23]

Typical of the dualism of the *Rule,* including its sophisticated deployment of light/dark symbolism, is the following: "He [the God of Knowledge] has created man to govern the world, and has appointed for him two spirits in which to walk until the time of His visitation: the spirits of truth and falsehood. Those

22. Charlesworth, "A Critical Comparison," p. 104.

23. Ashton, *Understanding,* p. 237.

born of truth spring from a fountain of light, but those born of falsehood spring from a source of darkness. All the children of righteousness are ruled by the Prince of Light and walk in the ways of light; but all the children of falsehood are ruled by the Angel of Darkness and walk in the ways of darkness" (1QS 3.17-21).[24] This text and its larger context betray a number of dualistic features: first, a modified cosmic dualism — "modified" because the two spirits are subordinated to one God; second, an appeal to the light/darkness opposition as an explanatory paradigm; third, a strong ethical dualism, in that humanity is divided into two mutually exclusive groups according to whether they do "righteousness" or "falsehood"; fourth, a deterministic understanding of history and human existence as a corollary of the ethical dualism; fifth, a pervasive eschatological dualism as the key of the entire text, one expression of which is a doctrine of reward and punishment.[25]

How does Johannine dualism appear by comparison? Certainly, as is recognized widely, the Gospel evinces the same kind of thought-world as that of the Qumran texts, and both share themselves the broader thought-world of the Scriptures and their intensive exposition and interpretation in the literature of Early Judaism. But Johannine dualism is obviously distinctive. This distinctiveness lies in the reinterpretation of life and thought in the light of belief in the coming-already of the Messiah, Son of God, Word Incarnate in the person of Jesus.

Thus, the cosmic opposition of heaven and earth is bridged decisively by the descent of the Son of man who serves as the ladder upon which the angels of God ascend and descend (cf. 1:51) and who ascends back to the Father by way of the cross thereby uniting all people to himself (12:32). The anthropological pessimism of a humankind in the thrall of darkness and subject to the determining power of opposing spirits is challenged dramatically by a Gospel narrative in which a particular human being, Jesus of Nazareth, bears in his person the glory (δόξα) of God (cf. 1:14; 2:11) and whose coming is the very light of creation shining in the world and bringing life. The ethical dualism which divides humankind into two camps — the "sons of light" and "sons of darkness" — whose existence and fate are predetermined is modified radically by the revelation of the love of God for "the world" and the offer of "eternal life" to all who believe (3:16). Related to this is the way the devil is portrayed.[26] As an opposing

24. Geza Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 2nd ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), pp. 75-76, cited in Ashton, *Understanding*, p. 213.

25. Charlesworth, "A Critical Comparison," pp. 77-89.

26. Cf. R. A. Piper, "The Absence of Exorcisms in the Fourth Gospel," in *Christology, Controversy, and Community: New Testament Essays in Honour of David R. Catchpole*, ed. D. G. Horrell and C. M. Tuckett (Leiden: Brill, 2000), pp. 253-78.

power, the devil is by no means an equal force: rather, he is subordinated overwhelmingly to the power of God at work in Jesus (cf.14:30) and, in line with the soteriology and "realized" eschatology of John, the devil's effective authority is both restricted and foreshortened: "Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out" (12:31; cf. 16:11). Finally, the dualistic, future-oriented eschatology of Qumran and apocalyptic generally is largely — although by no means completely (cf. 5:28-29; 6:39, 40, 44, 53-58; 12:48) — "demythologized" in the direction of the present. The preaching of "the kingdom of God" is transposed into a new key, the offer of "eternal life."[27] Of this, the story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead is a profound exploration, the focus of which is the revelation imparted to Martha: "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die" (11:25-26).

Johannine Dualism and Contemporary Pluralism

Having developed an account of Johannine dualism in its originating context, seeking in the process to understand (what I call) the "moral-theological dynamic" which such language and thought-forms display, I return to the problem articulated at the outset, and ask again: given the dualism of the Gospel of John, how may this Gospel be appropriated in a theologically responsible way in the context of the cultural pluralism characteristic of (late- or post-) modernity? Here I can offer only a series of observations which I hope will foster further discussion.

John's "Deconstruction" of Dualism

My first observation arises out of the preceding analysis of Johannine dualism itself. On the assumption that dualism is a problem for contemporary pluralism because it is seen as particularist and exclusivist, there are several findings which may help to draw the sting from these anxieties, to some extent at least. First, it is clear that "dualism" is a slippery word that requires a highly differentiated kind of definition to be at all helpful analytically. This kind of differentiation may not

27. Cf. Ashton, *Understanding*, p. 217: "The new life enjoyed by the faithful is more than ordinary physical existence: it is the life of faith. Christians are no more immune from physical death than other folk. But the benefits that accrue to them from their acceptance of the message of Jesus are, for this evangelist, best symbolized by *life* and all that is associated with it; the term . . . [*aionios*] indicates its radical difference from natural life."

have been taken sufficiently into account by those who find "dualism" problematic. Second, in many cases the opposites or polarities under examination are more appropriately seen as "dualities" common to a wide range of human social and religious experience and expression; in which case, the problem may be an artificial one. Third, the comparison between John and Qumran leads some commentators to describe Johannine dualism favorably as "modified" in one way or another (so, Ashton), or as primarily "soteriological" rather than "metaphysical" or "cosmological" (so, Charlesworth), or as a dualism "in motion" rather than one which is "static" (so, Barrett). This is a way of saying, "If 'dualism' is bad, then at least Johannine dualism is not as bad as other brands!" And that may be a helpful kind of qualification. Fourth, and more profoundly, it is arguable that the Evangelist may be interpreted as offering a "deconstruction" (or "demythologization," as some would say) of dualism of certain kinds — in other words, that he is engaged in his own "program" of theological hermeneutics, taking the common linguistic and conceptual coinage of his day and reminting it in the light of Christ. In which case, the Evangelist can be seen as offering his own (christological and soteriological) solution to the problem.

Reading Diachronically

Second, and to reiterate the general point made in relation to the essay by Culpepper, I do not think that the way forward is to slacken the theological-hermeneutical tension — the interpretative dialectic — between the Gospel text in all its historical particularity and the values of the modern world in all their historical particularity. This is a question, in part, of a readerly competence that recognizes the importance of reading diachronically, not just synchronically — of taking with utmost seriousness that the Gospel of John took shape in time and over time.[28] This will help us avoid anachronism in interpretation and temper our sometimes too-insistent demands for the sacred text to speak directly to us today. It may encourage us also to work more by *analogy* — to ask: if "dualism" of various kinds is the form that Christian witness to the truth took then, how might that dualism be "performed" in ways that are faithful and appropriate now? To put it in terms that resonate with the interpretative practices of the church Fathers and the reformers, what is the spirit behind the letter? And how, if at all, does Johannine dualism point us to what is of ultimate importance: the truth about Christ and the life of faith?

28. On the importance of the diachronic, see Rowan Williams's essay, "The Discipline of Scripture" in his *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 44-59.

In attempting to answer these questions, we do not start from nowhere, with reason and ethics as our only guides — however much modernity might tempt us to think that we do! On the contrary, given that the Gospel of John is part of the fourfold gospel of the Christian canon, a canon that has shaped and been shaped by the church down the centuries, then it would be folly not to seek insight from the interpretative traditions of the church as embodied in its worship, prayer, and teaching. This is another way of drawing attention to the point I made earlier about taking the text in context. The problem with modernist readings — whether liberal historical-critical or conservative fundamentalist — is that they are *not contextual enough.* As a result, the full range of possible meanings and levels of significance of the text are overlooked or bracketed out.

Understanding "Contemporary Pluralism"

A third broad consideration of relevance has to do with what we are calling "contemporary pluralism."[29] Given our cultural inheritance from the French Enlightenment and English liberalism, it is natural for us to valorize pluralism as positive, and dualism — understood as a form of particularism and exclusivism — as negative. This is because, in the historical wake of the Wars of Religion and its conclusion in the Treaty of Westphalia (1848), we in the West put an enormous premium on *toleration.* An ethic of toleration is the way we try to stop people who disagree from killing each other — and pluralism is an ideological strategy for maintaining unity in a situation of cultural and religious diversity.

What needs to be pointed out, however, is that, precisely as an ideology, pluralism involves *an exercise of power and a drawing of boundaries.* Pluralism is itself a strategy for saying who's in and who's out, for determining what is acceptable and what is unacceptable, for identifying what we can and cannot tolerate. Pluralism, in other words, is a way of defining who "we" are over against those "others" who refuse to accept tolerance and liberty as we have come to understand them. In short, we are confronted with the profound irony that pluralism produces "dualisms" of its own!

The effects of this are often baleful. At the national and international levels, the defense of pluralism, toleration, and freedom finds expression in militarism and cultural and political imperialism. Pluralism, in other words, becomes

29. See further, Kieran Flanagan, "Theological Pluralism: A Sociological Critique," in *Religious Pluralism and Unbelief: Studies Critical and Comparative,* ed. Ian Hammett (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 81-113.

a strategy for policing and defending the nation-state.[30] It even produces its own — sometimes quite "dualistic" — rhetoric. The labeling by U.S. President George W. Bush of a number of nation-states as belonging to an "axis of evil" is a recent case in point. The rhetoric has gone hand in hand with Western military intervention (pre-emptive "wars of liberation") in Afghanistan and Iraq.

At the level of society and politics, contemporary pluralism becomes a code for the practice of conformity in public and eccentricity in private. In place of *genuine plurality* and real engagement in *the politics of difference,* the focus in the "naked public square" is on processes for the management (for which read "control") of difference. Matters of belief and morality are confined, wherever possible, to the private domain. Here, under the pervasive influence of consumer capitalism, they become just another exercise of personal choice, just another matter of individual preference. Questions of truth become matters of what is true for me.

Indeed, I am made to wonder if "pluralism" as an ideology is, in fact, a mark of the decline of a genuine plurality. This would correlate well with the view of some notable commentators that "religion" as now conceived is a mark of the decline of faith communities, and that "ethics" as an enterprise of disembodied reason is a mark of the decline of the moral community.[31]

"Let John Be John!"[32]

If my account of contemporary pluralism carries any weight, then we should be wary of embracing pluralism at the expense of particularity. In the realm of theological hermeneutics, we should be suspicious of strategies of interpretation which attempt to police "problem texts," either by excising them (as is done frequently in modern church lectionaries!) or by sanitizing them by means of a kind of "ethical cleansing."

In relation to Johannine dualism, what is required is patient attention to what the very particular dualistic language and thought-forms — set as they are in the context of a narrative of the life of Jesus — are trying to display concerning the identity of Jesus Christ and the meaning of "eternal life."

30. See on this William T. Cavanaugh, "'A Fire Strong Enough to Consume the House': The Wars of Religion and the Rise of the State," *Modern Theology* 11, no. 4 (1995): 397-420.

31. I have particularly in mind here Alasdair MacIntyre, Stanley Hauerwas, and Nicholas Lash.

32. I am borrowing from the title of an essay on John by my Durham colleague, James D. G. Dunn, *Das Evangelium und Die Evangelien,* ed. P. Stuhlmacher (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1983), pp. 309-39.