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—Elizabeth Baxter

Priest and Executive Director of Holy Rood House,
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The Centre for the Study of Theology and Health

“So much of Christianity has been deprived of its context. Fr. Dominic White reconstructs this ‘Lost Knowledge’—the original cosmology—by leading us from lesser-known writings of the early Christians to the art, customs, and liturgy of later times. These are more familiar but now not fully understood because they too have lost their context. In this book we meet a brilliant mind, a warm heart, and a gentle humor that open up the somehow familiar world of our ancient cosmology and shed new (or old?) light on current disputes and concerns in the church.”

—Dr. Margaret Barker

Author of *Temple Themes in Christian Worship*

“This is a courageous book. The author dares to venture into forms of spirituality which may sound bizarre and are easily dismissed and there detects a hunger for aspects of our Christian tradition which have been largely forgotten. It is scholarly, daring, and beautifully written, a rare combination.”

—Timothy Radcliffe, OP

Author of *Stations of the Cross*

“In this brave and engaging book, Fr. Dominic White takes us on a voyage of exploration in search of the lost knowledge of Christ: a lost knowledge of the Cosmic Christ and a spiritual cosmology of angels and the heavens. Exploring hidden (‘apocryphal’) scriptures and the deeper meaning of the Christian liturgy, and drawing on music and the arts, Fr. Dominic helps us discern a renewed and renewing vision of Christ and the cosmos and the place of the human within it.”

—The Very Reverend Archpriest Andrew Louth, FBA

Professor Emeritus of Patristic and Byzantine Studies
Durham University, UK

The Lost Knowledge of Christ

*Contemporary Spiritualities,
Christian Cosmology, and the Arts*

Dominic White, OP



A Michael Glazier Book

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This book is dedicated to the beloved memory of
three people who cared about truth:

My father, Raymond Gerard White (1942–2013),
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Excerpt from “O Faithful Cross,” taken from *The Divine Office: The Liturgy of the Hours According to the Roman Rite*, vol. 2, 573* (no. 21). Used by permission of *Stanbrook Abbey, Wass*.

At the time of publication, permission was still in process for the excerpt from *Merry Xmas Everybody* (1973) by Slade.

Chapter 1

The Story That Wouldn't Die

For images, go to:

<http://lostknowledgeofchrist.wordpress.com/chapter-1-the-story-that-wouldnt-die>

How's this for spirituality? We're in a cathedral, and it's Easter. Everyone gathers around the labyrinth (yes, the cathedral has one as part of its floor; figure 1). The bishop follows the altar server to the center of the labyrinth. The server puts the ball in the bishop's hands. This is the signal: the organ sounds, the choir sings out, and the bishop throws the ball in the air. The dean catches it, takes a step to the rhythm of the music, then passes it on, till all the clergy are dancing around the labyrinth and passing the ball.

A "what if"? A New Agey flight of fancy? A recommendation for clergy stress relief? This is what actually happened at Easter in cathedrals up and down France until the mid-fifteenth century. The cathedral chronicles and rituals laid down how the Easter dance was to be done. Some bishops tried (unsuccessfully) to wriggle out of it. This was not just some medieval eccentricity or a hangover from paganism. It represented some very ancient Christian teachings about the cosmos. These same teachings were embedded in the architecture of the cathedrals themselves, the labyrinths on the floors, the frescoes and stained-glass windows. They structured the music, the seasons and feasts, and much else. Then the teachings got progressively forgotten and lost.

Many people would be surprised to learn that Christianity has any teachings about the cosmos. Surely God became human in Jesus Christ in

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order to save humankind? This present world is passing. But we're living in an age of environmental crisis as the world warms up and the weather becomes unstable. This is impacting on everyone, from indigenous peoples in the Amazon and farmers in sub-Saharan Africa to flood victims all over the United States and Europe. Do Christians have nothing to say to this? Increasing numbers of younger people are discovering nonreligious spiritualities that have a strong rooting in nature and the cosmos—and therefore a strong motivation and *story* for ecological living. We find many books and DVDs on such spirituality in the Mind, Body, Spirit or Self-Help section of a local bookstore.

They also perhaps uncover something missing in our own spirituality. Many Christians instinctively call experiences like contemplating nature, being in the countryside or by the sea, or just looking at a tree in the street “spiritual moments.” Many Christians have some sense of a “connectedness” with nature. Taking this recognition of connectedness a bit further, however, some followers of nonreligious spiritualities dance outdoors and speak of “dancing with the cosmos.” How does this express itself in Christian faith? Isn't it all a bit pagan? Can we connect our experiences of nature with Christianity?

A particular feature of nonreligious spiritualities is that they don't exclude Jesus Christ. Some even speak of the “Cosmic Christ,” although closer inspection reveals a Christ very different from the one Christians believe in. He is either a shadowy spiritual figure, not really human, an ascended master like the Buddha, or even that which we can become with the appropriate knowledge of self and cosmos—this might include some rituals and practices. Magic? Paganism? Quite possibly. Also, nonreligious spiritualities often draw on legends that grew up around the Gnostic heretics, such as that Jesus married Mary Magdalene and they had children. This story was one of the main inspirations for Dan Brown's blockbuster *The Da Vinci Code*. Even though Brown himself protested that he was only writing fiction, the novel seemed to strike a massive chord with people. They're still making pilgrimages to the obelisk in the Church of St. Sulpice, Paris (figure 2), and walking the “Rose Line” on the church floor, both part of a “gnomon” or astronomical device. The fact that—as it says on a notice in St. Sulpice—the obelisk is actually eighteenth century, not Egyptian as in Dan Brown's novel, doesn't seem to put people off.

The cynical might say that when people cease to believe in Jesus Christ, they'll believe in anything. But what is it that makes what we might call “lost knowledge” stories so successful? *The Da Vinci Code* is only one of many thrillers that usually have a plot something like this: a crime takes place in connection with a newly discovered ancient document or artifact associ-

ated with Jesus Christ. A hard-bitten, maverick FBI/CIA agent teams up with an attractive young female academic in hot pursuit of said document or artifact (stereotypes may be broken by rearranging the gender distribution). In a plot usually involving governments, terrorists, car and helicopter chases, shoot-outs in exotic places, speculative science, and a hardline and thoroughly unscrupulous Vatican official determined to suppress the truth at all costs, the document/artifact is finally rescued by our hero and heroine, who by now are a couple. They discover that the document came from/was preserved by an early Christian group (or the medieval Knights Templar) who were suppressed as “heretics” by the Church. (The Church apparently got its firepower by ganging up with the civil government and establishing itself as the smug and powerful state religion.) The document/artifact reveals Christ to be very different from what the nasty, patriarchal Church made him out to be: instead, he’s gentle, inclusive, preaches a strongly natural and cosmic spirituality; he affirms the feminine and sexuality and sets everyone free from guilt, sin, and rules.

These stories are not invented out of nothing. The “lost document” theme is inspired by real discoveries. One such example is the Dead Sea Scrolls. They were found in 1946 by a Bedouin shepherd at the site of a Jewish community contemporary with Jesus at Qumran in the West Bank. The scrolls took decades to fully publish and were surrounded by scholarly rivalry, with many scholars not even having access to photographs of them. The scrolls are very important, not least because they give pre-Christian origins to what were thought to be changes to the Old Testament made by Christian scribes.

Another example is the Nag Hammadi Gnostic library—its discovery was worthy of an Indiana Jones movie. Just a year before the Qumran find, a farmer involved in a blood feud discovered a library of ancient books in a desert cave in Nag Hammadi, Upper Egypt. A one-eyed outlaw acquired and sold some of the codices, though others had already been burnt for fear of their possible “effects.” Quarrels up to government levels about who actually owned the books led to gentlemen scholars turning into international smugglers. (And of course there was scholarly rivalry!) Full publication of the texts in translation didn’t happen till the late 1960s¹ and continued until the 1990s. At last, the writings of the Gnostics were revealed in their own words. These groups, most of them split from the mainstream Christian church in the second century, had gospels, epistles, and other texts in a scriptural style, such as the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Epistle of Peter to Philip*, and the *Apocalypse of Peter* (figure 3). What was written by the Gnostics themselves and what was taken from the early Church continues to be debated by scholars. What is clear, though, is that the Nag Hammadi texts

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stressed *knowledge* (*gnosis* in Greek, hence “Gnostic”) rather than faith and authority; a rich and complex cosmology of multiple heavens; rituals for ascending the heavens; a belief that human souls are angels fallen into matter; and a strong emphasis on the feminine divine, along with the suggestion in the *Gospel of Philip* that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were lovers. Sound familiar?

More recently, in 2011, some small books made from lead and sealed with rings were found in Jordan. They were covered in what could be Jewish/early Christian imagery and a Hebrew script. Were they the “sealed book” of Revelation, chapter 5, or cheap forgeries?²² The academic disputes about them are already bitter, and I have even heard worrying reports of serious intimidation and physical attacks.

Now, of course, people have always loved mysteries, which is why even the wackiest “alternative histories” of the “aliens built the pyramids” kind will forever be popular. Indeed, St. Paul lamented how people wouldn’t accept sound doctrine but, “having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires” (2 Tim 4:3). At the same time, reading stories is one of the ways we search for *meaning*, for deeper truths to answer our great life questions concerning why we’re here, what it’s all about, and so on. In fact, all the stories of the world can probably be reduced to seven basic plots: Voyage and Return, Comedy, Tragedy, Rags to Riches, the Quest, Rebirth (= Salvation?), and Overcoming the Monster. Looking for lost knowledge fits the Quest plot.

But stories such as *The Da Vinci Code* that so grab people’s attention obviously touch them very deeply. They seem to speak of something, perhaps something so deep down that we’re not even aware of it, that we seek but can’t find. Or perhaps a memory, or the memory of a memory, that we’ve somehow inherited. Some of the great epics are like this: the stories of the British King Arthur may well be based on a real Romano-British king who resisted Saxon invaders in the fifth and sixth centuries. We do know that the “British” (mixed Celtic and Roman) peoples were pushed by the Saxons to the west of Britain and are the ancestors of many of the modern inhabitants of Wales and Cornwall. The legend of King Arthur therefore became an identity myth for a subject people (as well as being taken up and Christianized as part of the Holy Grail story, another Quest).

So stories can fill gaps for things we’ve lost or lack (such as independence and sovereignty for the British Celts). The thrillers that are inspired in part by Gnostic texts speak of a cosmological spirituality, the inclusion of the feminine, and freedom from organized religion—especially the sin, guilt, and rules that come with it. As I said earlier, many Christians find spirituality in nature but struggle to connect this with their Christian faith. Unlike the

“spiritual but not religious” people, we may also struggle to find a Christian spirituality for the environment. Christians who have explored this have often been suspected by their churches—rightly or wrongly—of heresy.

Our churches are, in fact, places of division: everyone will be familiar with the “liberal” and “conservative” labels that cut right across denominations, themselves the inheritors of historical divisions between the Christians whom Jesus prayed would be one. Often these labels, which many of us may find both frustrating and simplistic, are applied around debates over authority, liturgy and worship, sexuality, male and female roles, the relationship of Christianity to other religions and beliefs, and even the place of the arts in church. And, of course, there have been appalling scandals too, the worst being the hidden abuse of children over decades. Pope Francis recently said:

I see the church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds.³

And none of us lives our spirituality in a bubble. We live in daily “culture wars” between “secular” and “religious” views of how society should be run. In culture—media, literature, visual arts, film, music, and dance—these questions are continually present and debated. We may often feel—and I especially think of the pain of parents who have seen their children stop going to church—that we can’t quite find the words to make the *connection* between our faith in Jesus Christ and other people’s lives. Maybe we feel there’s something that *ought* to be in our story but is missing.

I believe that the ancient Christian teachings about the cosmos I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter may provide us with resources for a new (or very old!) way of talking about Jesus Christ. I’ve also come to the conclusion that contemporary spiritualities and the “lost document” thriller, of which people never seem to tire, all contain memories of the ancient Christian cosmology. This powerful spirituality of the early Church was largely lost by the end of the Middle Ages (the Easter dance that expressed it disappeared at the same time). With the loss of Christian cosmology, we lost a connection with nature and with ourselves. The memory of this tradition, albeit distorted, is the memory of a story that wouldn’t die, because it’s a story we need.

Starting from the desire to integrate my own personal spiritual journey—one rooted in nature and the cosmos—with my Catholic Christian faith, reflecting especially on my conversations with spiritual but nonreligious people, and trying to respond to the Vatican’s call to “make the most of the riches of the Christian spiritual heritage” in response to the rise of

New Age–inspired spiritualities,⁴ I undertook two years of intensive research on Christian cosmology. The results I share with you here.

There are two aspects of Christian cosmology, this “lost knowledge,” that are very important. First, it does not add anything to what has been passed down in the Church in Holy Scripture and the entire teaching tradition of the Church. It is not a “secret teaching” in that sense. Rather, it sheds light on many Bible passages and traditions that can often seem strange or unimportant.

Second, I believe Christian cosmology offers resources for us to speak to many of the problems, questions, and issues we face both in the Church and in society—and indeed in ourselves, *particularly the issues that seem to put people off Christianity* and attract them to nonreligious spiritualities. Christian cosmology has remarkable insights about sin and guilt, spirituality and psychology, authority, God and the feminine, what happens after we die, liturgy, worship and art (including dance), the artistic vocation, relationships, the body, the mind-body-spirit-nature connection, suffering and evil, ecology, and economics. It also offers new resources for approaching the divisions between Christians, such as the Virgin Mary, the Catholic doctrine of purgatory, and the East/West split.

It does not provide instant answers—it is in some ways more like the parables of Jesus, stories that challenge our view of the world, narrative riddles if you like, that Jesus invites us to mull over and penetrate. They are teachings that don’t so much say, “This is how things are, take it or leave it,” but invite us to have a conversation with God. This is in fact how, in the Catholic Church, theology is meant to be done. Thomas Aquinas, the great medieval philosopher and theologian, is held up as a model for theologians today. This is not only because of his remarkable wisdom and his demonstration of the harmony of faith and reason but also because he is capable of listening to and integrating different points of view. Every question he tackles, even the question of the existence of God, begins by considering the case against. I’ve found that in trying to interpret Christian cosmology for today’s world, it has both given me great resources and obliged me to think. I’m well aware that my interpretations are not the only possible ones and are very provisional. I hope that they will open up a conversation.

How to Use This Book

The intention of this book is to make Christian cosmology accessible to the general reader and thereby offer new resources for giving an account of faith. It is not an academic book. Because, however, of the unfortunate

tendency of many popular spirituality books of the “spiritual but not religious” kind to make interesting but very controversial claims about early Christians beliefs without giving their sources, I’ve provided endnotes to each chapter where I quote my sources so that you can read them and interpret them for yourself. Sometimes, where there are a lot of sources, I refer to the academic articles I’ve published on Christian cosmology. These articles list all the sources in detail. And there is not one “lost document” among my sources, although many of them are little-known texts from the early Church and pre-Christian and Jewish sources. I hope you won’t be too disappointed that finding them didn’t involve car chases or shoot-outs in exotic places. Almost everything I quote can be found in the library of any university that has a Christian theology department. Most of my sources are available in English translation. Many can also be found online. In other words, these “lost teachings” of Christianity are actually right under our noses! We’d just forgotten about them.

For quotations from the Bible I use the New Revised Standard Version, though occasionally the insights of Christian cosmology prompted me to retranslate the original text.⁵

One thing I discovered while researching this book is that much of Christian cosmology was transmitted through the visual arts, music, architecture, and even movements and gestures in the liturgy. In an ideal world, this book would be full of glossy photos and be accompanied with a DVD. But that would make it prohibitively expensive. To be accessible to the widest possible audience, the cost needs to be kept as low as possible. I have therefore put images, music, and video for the appropriate chapters of the book up on a blog, <http://lostknowledgeofchrist.wordpress.com>. A URL will direct you to the appropriate page. The blog is also a place where you can post comments and we can deepen our understanding of Christian cosmology. For one thing, to keep the book a reasonable length I’ve only discussed the key sources here, focusing mainly on the early ones. You may find other material in spiritual writers I haven’t mentioned, in art, and in your own experience. I’m excited about where this sharing of riches might take us and how it will change my interpretations as we seek the truth together. Indeed, while the Church of Christ is continually wounded by divisions caused so often by people not listening but attacking instead, perhaps the conversation we can have on the blog will be an experiment in unity.

With that in mind, let’s begin our recovery of Christian cosmology by looking not at our own tradition but at the beliefs of the “spiritual but not religious” people out there—many of whom may be our friends or family members. What do they actually believe and practice? Where does it come from? What’s old, and what’s new?