

## Preface

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When a natural tragedy brings death and destruction, as with the South Asian tsunami of 2004, Hurricane Katrina, or the recent bushfires in south-eastern Australia, one of the responses is the question “Why is God doing this?” The question is asked both by churchgoers and by those who have abandoned church practice. Sometimes it appears in the secular press, along with answers from a range of religious authorities. The same question arises spontaneously in more personal situations of unbearable grief and loss, as when death takes a child or a young parent or a dear friend.

Among the answers offered to this question are these: “It’s God’s will”; “God sends these sufferings in order to try us”; “God does not send us more than we can bear”; “Suffering brings us closer to God”; “God sends sufferings as a punishment for our sins”; “This hurricane, or this death, is the result of immoral living and the rejection of God’s law”; “God sends us suffering so that we can offer up our sufferings with Jesus on the cross”; “God sends us sufferings because God loves us especially”; “Suffering is sent by God to teach us to grow to maturity in our spiritual lives.”

All of these answers seem at best inadequate, and some of them can be extremely damaging. They intensify the pain of the sufferers, either by making them feel they are responsible for the suffering or by making them feel that God is punishing them or has in some way targeted them. Such answers can distort the Christian gospel of God. There is little of the good news of the God proclaimed by Jesus. In particular, it is essential to ask

whether it is appropriate to think of God, the God of Jesus, as deliberately sending disasters to some people while saving others from them. This, of course, raises a fundamental question about how we think of God acting in our world. It also invites a critical question about the pastoral practice of the Christian community: What view of divine action, and what view of God, is encouraged by the practice of the church?

Every generation has had to struggle with the ancient problem of evil. There is a new intensity to the problem of evil in our day, however, because of our twenty-first-century scientific worldview. We now know that the evolution of life, with all its abundance and beauty, has been accompanied by terrible costs, not only to human beings, but also to many other species, most of which are now extinct. The costs are built into the system, into the physical processes at work in the geology of our planet, such as the meetings of tectonic plates that give rise not only to mountain ranges and new habitats but also to deadly earthquakes and tsunamis. The costs are built into the very biological processes, such as random mutation and natural selection, that enable life to evolve on earth. What is beautiful and good arises by way of increasing complexity through emergent processes that involve tragic loss. The costs are evident in the 3.7-billion-year history of life with its patterns of predation, death, and extinction. We know, as no generation has known before us, that these costs are intrinsic to the processes that give rise to life on earth in all its wonderful diversity.

Our awareness, not only of extreme human suffering, but also of the costs built into evolutionary emergence, presents a fundamental challenge to contemporary theology. A theological response might be attempted in at least two different ways. One is through a philosophical or theological theodicy, which attempts to defend or explain the goodness of God in relation to suffering. But theodicies need to be treated with caution, because they run the risks of seeming to know what is unknown in God, on the one hand, and of trivializing suffering by putting it in an explanatory framework, on the other. A recent example of a partial theodicy that avoids these traps is Christopher Southgate's *The Groaning of Creation*.<sup>1</sup> An alternative strategy, the one I will adopt in this book, is to contribute to a renewed theology of divine action. This strategy is based on the analysis that a particular theology of divine action in Christianity, a theology that sees God in highly interventionist ways, has contributed to the problem

we have in dealing with suffering. A renewed theology of divine action will not remove or explain the intractable theological problem of suffering, but it may remove something that exacerbates the problem.

In response to the costs built into evolution, a theology of divine action has to be able to offer a view of God working creatively and redemptively in and through the natural world to bring it to healing and wholeness. Such a theology of divine action must meet at least three requirements. First, it would need to be a noninterventionist theology that sees God as working in and through the natural world, rather than as arbitrarily intervening to send suffering to some and not to others. Second, God's action in creating an emergent universe would need to be understood in the light of the resurrection and the promise that all things will be transformed and redeemed in Christ (Rom 8:19-23; Col 1:20; Eph 1:10; Rev 21:5). Third, it would need to be a theology in which God is understood as lovingly accepting the limits of creatures and actively waiting upon finite creaturely processes, living with the constraints of these processes, accompanying each creature in love, rejoicing in every emergence, suffering with every suffering creature, and promising to bring all to healing and fullness of life.

While a Christian theological notion of divine action cannot offer a full explanation of suffering, it can remove common misunderstandings that spring from traditional Christian notions of divine action. It can offer an alternative to the popular view of an interventionist and arbitrary God, a view of God who acts in and through all the interactions of creatures, always respecting their integrity and their proper autonomy, enabling and empowering creaturely entities and processes to exist, to interact, and to evolve. It would also need to be a theology that can account for special divine acts, such as the Christ-event, and the experiences of grace and providence in everyday life. Such a theology would need to be in creative dialogue with sciences such as cosmology and biological evolution. It would need to offer an eschatological vision that sees suffering in the context of hope based on the resurrection. Such a theology would need to be eschatological from the ground up. It would need to offer hope not just for human beings but for the whole of creation.

I will begin this work with two chapters that attempt to set the scene, the first addressing some characteristics of the universe revealed by the

natural sciences, and the second exploring what can be discovered about divine action from the Christ-event. What I see as two central chapters follow: the first on creation as the self-bestowal of God, and the second on special divine acts in the history of the universe, the life of grace, and the history of salvation. Then, in the fifth chapter, I take up the question of miracles in relation to the laws of nature and follow this with a chapter on the resurrection of Jesus. This leads to two chapters on the divine act of redemption in Christ, which I explore in terms of deifying transformation. The penultimate chapter is on eschatology, the final deification of the whole of creation. Discussions of divine action seem to lead to important questions about the meaning of prayer, so the book concludes with a chapter on prayers of intercession.

The title of this book could be a little misleading. It will become evident to readers that there is a sense in which I believe we *cannot* say how God acts. We cannot describe the inner nature of divine action any more than we can know or describe the divine nature. In this sense, the title promises more than can be delivered. But we can seek to articulate some characteristics of divine action that we perceive from the way God is revealed to us in the Christ-event, from creation itself, and from our own experience of the grace of the Spirit at work in our lives. This book is an attempt to describe these characteristics. In this sense, it is possible and proper to explore how God acts in our world.

The first and most important acknowledgment I need to make is to William R. Stoeger, S.J., who has collaborated with me on this whole project. Bill is an astrophysicist who works for the Vatican Observatory Research Group in the Steward Observatory of the University of Arizona. Before beginning this work, I enjoyed the hospitality of the Jesuit community of Tucson and spent many hours talking over the project with Bill. At several points in this book, I incorporate and build on his published works in the field of science and theology. He has read and offered critical comments on each chapter. I have learned a great deal from him over many years, and this book owes much to him. I was able to travel to Tucson to meet with him because of the generous bursary provided by the Manly Union's Ongoing Formation Fund. My sincere thanks to the president, Fr. Peter Christie, and the executive of this fund.

In September 2005, the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences in Berkeley, California, and the Vatican Observatory cosponsored a conference on the problem of evil, held at Castel Gandolfo, Italy. The focus was on the suffering built into the natural world, in the light of recent developments in physics and cosmology. My work benefited greatly from this conference; from the original impetus to write a paper on this fundamental issue; from the stimulating engagement with scientists, philosophers, and theologians gathered from around the world; from their critical comments on my own work; and from their various contributions to the conference and to the book published as a result.<sup>2</sup>

I was able to do a substantial amount of work on this book in the second half of 2007, when I was made welcome at Durham University as the St. Cuthbert's Senior Visiting Research Fellow in Catholic Theology. I am very grateful to the faculty of the Department of Theology and Religion at Durham University. I owe particular thanks to the Durham University Catholic Chaplaincy and St. Cuthbert's Catholic Church, and to the community that made me feel so much at home. I owe a great deal to Dr. Paul D. Murray and Fr. Anthony Currer, above all for their friendship, but also for their generous interest in this research, their critical questions, and their constant encouragement.

As I was beginning this work, Bob Russell and Ted Peters of the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences at Berkeley graciously took time to discuss the issues of this book with me. I have learned much from both of them in many such discussions. Alastair Blake, Visiting Research Fellow in Physics at the University of Adelaide, and my colleagues James McEvoy, Patricia Fox, R.S.M., and Rosemary Hocking, have read the manuscript carefully and generously offered very helpful comments. I have benefited greatly from their suggestions and encouragement along the way.

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edited by Celia Deane-Drummond and David Clough (London: SCM, 2009), 81–99. A version of chapter 5 appeared as “Miracles and the Laws of Nature,” in *Compass* 41, no. 2 (2007): 8–16. The basis for chapter 6 appeared as “Resurrection and the Costs of Evolution: A Dialogue with Rahner on the Costs of Evolution,” in *Theological Studies* 67 (December 2006): 816–33. Part of chapter 9 appeared as “Every Sparrow That Falls to the Ground: The Cost of Evolution and the Christ-Event,” in *Ecotheology* 11, no. 1 (March 2006): 103–23. A later development will appear as “Hope for Creation after Darwin: The Redemption of ‘All Things,’” in *Theology after Darwin*, edited by Michael Northcott (London: Paternoster, 2009). I am grateful to the College Theology Society for inviting me to offer a plenary lecture at the society’s annual convention in May 2009 at Notre Dame University, where I was able to test material found in chapters 3 and 4. This lecture is due for publication in *Horizons*. Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.