

Introduction

EXPLORATIONS OF DIVINE AGENCY AND DIVINE MYSTERY

One of the most problematic dimensions of religious belief is the conviction that God is so utterly mysterious that God cannot be comprehended by the human mind and, at the same time, is so utterly personal that our lives are incomplete without the deepest kind of relationship with God. Religious belief is often caught between the allure of the mystery of God and our desire for a personal relationship with God. And yet, there is no more serious disconnect at the heart of monotheistic theologies than the deeply personal religious practice of praying to God as *Someone* who has, can, and will *do* things or *act* in some way in response to prayer, and a theological conviction that the divine mystery is so deep and so beyond our ability to comprehend that God cannot be the kind of reality who can *literally do* anything at all because “doing” (acting) is not possible for the kind of reality that God, in God’s deepest and most cognitively inaccessible being, essentially *is*. The fundamental mystery of God toward which most religious people are drawn, as a moth to a flame cannot, it is believed, be resolved by reducing God to the status of an agent who acts in the world. Without being quintessentially mysterious, God would become simply one item in our world subject to our conceptual and practical manipulation. In some very profound way God, many insist, *must* be beyond our conceptual reach while remaining religiously connected to us in some way. The fullness of God cannot be caught by our conceptual webs, but God must remain in some deep relationship with us if God is to have any relevance to our deepest religious aspirations and desires. How to articulate these twin commitments has been the problematic heart of the western monotheistic theological tradition.

Religious practitioners seem to want two things simultaneously that are extremely difficult to hold together conceptually: they want a God to whom they can relate and they want a God who utterly transcends the limitations of the ontological conditions in which they as human beings exist, including the limitations of their language, conceptions, and knowledge. I want to acknowledge both of these yearnings by showing how they are reflected in three apparently disparate views of God (though two of these views, I shall argue, constantly intertwine, play off against each other, and eventually collapse into one, even though both have been treated historically as superior to the third view [of God as “literally” a personal agent] which is usually dismissed

as far too unsophisticated to be taken seriously). I will not argue that only one of the three (or two) is the right one, but I do want to show that the stepsister view of God as personal agent has a previously underappreciated metaphysical power that, when appropriately exploited and deployed, makes it a strong contender for philosophical/metaphysical appeal. At the same time I believe it more successfully captures the practice within monotheistic traditions of praying and relating to God as a Someone whose literal acts make a decisive difference to them and to the world. The challenge to this third view is how it can retain the necessary aura of mystery and incomprehension that seem to the adherents of the first two views of God to be absolutely essential if their views of God are to be taken seriously.

My argument, in a nutshell, will be that by drawing on the ontological or metaphysical¹ *primordality* (the basicity) of *personal agency*, one can derive a concept of God that does justice both to God's relationality through action and to God's profoundest mystery. I will also argue that a persistent misunderstanding of agency has hamstrung attempts to "fit" God's action into the causal nexus of worldly events, to find what some scholars have called the "causal joint" between divine action and the cause-and-effect matrix within which natural events are located and understood. I will show that there is a different, and heretofore, radically underappreciated understanding of action that does away with the problems that attempting to fit divine action to a causal joint have caused.

I have used the word "metaphysical" to refer to the notion of personal agency here, simply to denote a view of the structure and nature of reality as a whole. It will be crucial to this exploration of God's nature as agent to remember that there is more than one respectable metaphysical view. Everyone operates, whether at the virtually unconscious level or at the level of the highest philosophical speculation, with some kind of metaphysical view.² For example, one metaphysical view is that reality is nothing but bits of matter and all explanation of reality is materialistic. Another is a more dualistic view that reality consists of matter plus conscious beings whose consciousness is not

1. I use the words "ontological" and "metaphysical" because they connote the fundamental "stuff" of reality: what is really real and how it is conceived by the human mind. They are used by philosophers and rather than invent a new set of terms, I intend to stick with these though I will try to make sense of them in a way that sometimes eludes the best efforts of philosophers to make their terminology "user friendly." Whatever reality turns out to be, God must be implicated in, under, through, or with it (though exactly how is the heart of the debate).

2. In a later chapter, I will discuss how some contemporary theologians, such as Wolfhart Pannenberg, deal with the issue of metaphysics and theological claims.

reducible to matter. Metaphysical views disagree about whether freedom to act is real or an illusion. Each of these views entails a whole host of metaphysical assumptions and principles. If a religious person expects her relation to God, to other persons, to the world, and to her religious tradition or community to have something to do with what is true and real, she will have (or hope to have) a metaphysical view, even if it remains implicit and not yet fully developed. I will assume that the metaphysical view of reality that is most congenial to the monotheistic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is one that entails or depends upon a notion of God *as* a personal agent, and not just in a metaphorical but in a literal, direct, and primordial sense.

I will argue that metaphysical dualism, and its principle of ontological transcendence, ultimately misrepresents and distorts the implicit metaphysical view (it is rarely brought to the level of explicit awareness and articulation) in the liturgical and scriptural texts that God is one agent among other agents and is appropriately understood by a literal application to God of the concepts of agency and agent. (The term *literal* will need some unpacking, but the thrust of my argument is that the differences between the divine agent and human agents are real and religiously significant but are not so categorical as to undercut the common application of the concept of “agent” to both God and human beings.)

But this argument goes very much against the grain of western theology and will be very difficult to establish because it seems at best counterintuitive and, at worst, a falling back into primitive superstition (especially an anthropomorphism dreaded by nearly all serious theologians and philosophers), which not only fails the test of metaphysical sophistication, but can't even take the test in the first place because it isn't adequately equipped with the right concepts. In addition, it will be taken as denying or avoiding a recognition of the mystery of God, a mystery without which, it is claimed, God would not be worthy of worship and not worth the trouble of thinking about. The argument for the primordially of personal agency applicable to both human agents and the Divine Agent is, nonetheless, essential if we are to bring credibility and religious utility to our understanding of the divine with whom we want to enter into the closest possible relationship without losing any of the mystery that has attracted religious believers to the concept of God from the beginning, although the nature of that mystery will necessarily have to be redefined and relocated. God must satisfy our craving for contact with the most basic reality and our conviction that God lies, in some crucial ways, outside our cognitive grasp and manipulation. How to satisfy both inclinations is the task of philosophical theology. If we cared nothing about a relationship with God, the problem would be solved simply by finding ways of articulating the divine

mystery (despite the internal contradiction in trying to do so), but the essence of relationality is the co-presence of at least two beings, neither one annulling nor being reduced to the other. But how can God be God, in the traditional view, if God is in a relationship with (without being limited by) that which is ontologically and totally other than Godself?

For those who want to stress the mystery of God, it is not helpful to say that God is the kind of “being” who does not act because even to think of God as “a” being (or entity) is, for some philosophers of religion, a profound mistake. God, for them, is not “a” being but instead is the ground of being, or act-of-being, Being-Itself, or even “that” which is beyond being, other-than-being. God is the Wholly Other and so other that God cannot even be compared with that which God is other than. Therefore, many would argue that to even to think of God as one who does things—as an agent—is a fundamental confusion of conceptual categories. It confuses God with all that constitutes the “reality” that God transcends. It makes God an entity, a subject/object³ *within* the ontological conditions that apply only to non-divine subjects/objects, thus reducing God to their ontological level and trapping God within the metaphysical conceptual categories appropriate to them but not to God.

This approach to the mystery of God seems to have everything going for it. It appeals to a deep intuition in all serious religious thinkers that God can at best be “glimpsed” or “intuited” but never comprehended through our metaphysical lenses. There is something about a mystery that always remains just outside the reach of concepts and explicit consciousness. There is something about quotidian thinking that suggests (even demands) a reality beyond conceptual reach, a limit to thinking, a horizon of thinking or being, a depth, transcendence, and otherness that cannot be grasped *within* the limits of human thought. Any metaphysical view that brings God within the reach of human thought and direct experience (as one being in relation to another) is degrading, unsophisticated, simplistic, naïve, and primitive, unworthy of serious metaphysical consideration. I want to recognize the strength of this approach to the mystery of God but ultimately to question whether it is adequate to our experience of God as one standing in relation to us and whether it is metaphysically coherent.

The disconnect or tension between trying to relate to God as a personal agent and thinking of God as beyond personal agency has long been part of

3. I say subject/object because in one sense all personal entities are subjects to themselves and yet objects to others. As a personal self I am a subject with subjective qualities – emotions, thoughts, intentions, etc. that are uniquely mine and at the same time I am an object for other subjects who may or may not discern these subjective qualities correctly or ‘objectively’.

my own personal religious life and theological convictions. But I have grown increasingly dissatisfied with this disconnect at both personal and conceptual levels. I have come to suspect that the disconnect is based on a fundamentally flawed concept of what God “must be” to be God, a flaw that I believe can be remedied by utilizing a different basic or primordial conceptual category, that of personal agent, for understanding God.

I want to explore the reasons for this disconnect with an eye toward resolving it by invoking what I will call the *primordially* of personal agency, both as fact and as concept. By primordially I mean simply that personal agents⁴ are a non-reducible, basic, ontologically fundamental, elemental fact of life and that the concept that reflects that fact is itself non-reducible, incapable of either being broken down into more basic “parts” or gone beyond by a more transcendent concept intended to represent that fundamental fact. A primordial category is one that doesn’t need to be explained from beyond itself by something more basic or elemental or more transcendent and exalted.

My argument will be that the concept of God as personal agent is primordial and sufficient for representing God. It is not derived from or constructed out of more basic elements. It is a basic and fundamental concept that represents a basic and fundamental fact about God that cannot be supplemented or completed by categories drawn from elsewhere. Personal agency is the “north pole of human thought”: you can’t go beyond it to a more essential or inclusive category for thinking about reality. And, as I will argue, the very fact that thinking about these matters must itself begin in and presuppose the personal agency of the thinker is a clue to the basicity of agency in structuring our reflection about ourselves, other agents, and the world in which we exist. Doing, it turns out, must be more basic than thinking since thinking is itself an act or a doing, while doing is not always an act of thinking (though it is usually preceded or guided by thinking). Acting is therefore inclusive of thinking while thinking is exclusive of doing (except in the sense that it is itself a doing). If we follow through on the full implications of this fact, we will eventually arrive, I will argue, at the notion that God’s fullness and mystery is best reflected in the notion of God as primordially a personal agent. It will follow that the mystery of God is essentially the mystery of any

4. I will use the terms “agent” and “personal agent” interchangeably except where some distinctions will need to be drawn for clarity in particular contexts. To be an agent, I will argue, an entity must have consciousness and intentionality (i.e., purposiveness). Only persons have both. Many beings, of course, bring about effects by their movements in relation to other beings. A molecule affects and effects changes in the organic world in which it moves. But we should not call a molecule an agent since presumably it does not bring about these effects consciously and purposively.

personal agent whose freedom to intend new courses of action always keeps God one step ahead of scientific predictions and reductions. And the mystery of God as agent is deepened precisely by the universal scope of God's power and knowledge. Whether it is as robust a mystery as some theologians would like is another question.

APPROPRIATE ANTHROPOMORPHISM

However, there is another equally significant and powerful inclination in religious life. It is a strongly felt, almost irresistible inclination not to settle for a notion of God that seems, on the surface, so superficial, simple, limited, particular, and finite as the notion of God as a personal agent. It seems too confined by the structures of the finite, spatio-temporal material world (what I will refer to from here on out as the STMW) in which we exist and have our being. It is, frankly, too *anthropomorphic* to serve the deepest inclinations of religious feeling: too laden by the application to God of attributes that derive from limited, finite, contingent *human* personal agents. As human persons, we are enmeshed in and limited by the finite world of spatial-temporal-material conditions. We are also, in the theologies of the monotheistic religions, too sinful to be the basis for concepts about a God who transcends all human limitations and failings.

According to most philosophers of religion, anthropomorphism is probably the single most significant failing in any argument for God as a personal agent. It fails the test of theological/metaphysical sophistication precisely because it derives a concept of God from our experiences of ourselves as personal agents "trapped" in the STMW. And yet thinking anthropomorphically is virtually inescapable if we find in the world beings that share with us basic personal characteristics. Let's assume for the sake of argument that the basic attributes of human personal agents are consciousness, will, and purposiveness or intentionality (i.e. the ability to intend courses of action and to carry them out). If we assume that anthropomorphism is the application to some being(s) other than ourselves of characteristics that fundamentally define us as human beings (personal agents), then clearly anthropomorphic qualities are inappropriate when applied to rocks or trees. (I exclude for the sake of argument the claim by some Buddhists that trees and plants are sentient beings.) Virtually everyone agrees on that point. These objects *lack* something that human personal agents have. So then the question becomes, what is it about consciousness, will, and the ability to intend (and effect) courses of action that is inappropriately applied to God? Does God *lack*

these attributes? Most theists would deny that God lacks them. But they are uncomfortable saying that God *has* them in the same way we have them. Now, as we shall see, there are two views of God (the dualist and the monist, which eventually collapse into each other) that ultimately do conclude that God lacks these attributes because, they will argue, God is not the *kind* of reality who has attributes appropriate in the STMW since having these kind of attributes is itself a limitation and a deficiency. Lacking a limitation is no slur on God. But to hold to the monist or dualist view is to deny to God any attributes that constitute the personal agent in communion with other personal agents. This, I would suggest, is far too high a price to pay to maintain the mystery of and difference between God and what is other-than-God.

But if we do not go all the way toward extreme dualism or monism, we are left with a view of God as a being who has attributes and then the question becomes *which attributes* are appropriate for a divine being. And at this point, anthropomorphism becomes inescapable. Either God has consciousness, intentionality, love, and so on, or God does not. Either God is compassionate or God is not. Now the *degree* or *extent* of God's consciousness or compassion may be radically (though not ontologically) different from that of human consciousness and compassion. God's love may so far exceed our ability to love that it is metaphorically appropriate to say that God's love should not be compared to human love. But there must be some commonality between God's love and ours if our understanding of divine love is to have any meaning at all, and this commonality is the basis of an *appropriate anthropomorphism*. After all, what positive meaning does "greater than personal" have? What is *greater* than the personal (intentionality, consciousness, will, love, etc.)? Unless one can specify the content of something "greater" than these things, one is committed, whether one likes it or not, to some kind of anthropomorphism. The question will not be *whether* anthropomorphism is appropriate, but what kind of anthropomorphism is.

It is significant, I think, that even those scientific reductionist attempts to explain human behavior as mechanistically or biologically determined use anthropomorphic language (perhaps inadvertently) even while denying the reality of essential personal attributes to human persons. Genes, for example, are said to "intend" their own survival and reproduction. The only way to avoid anthropomorphic language is to think of something other than ourselves as having no personal agent attributes at all. And in many instances this denial of personal characteristics is absolutely appropriate. Rocks, for instance, cannot be said to intend, plan, think, reflect, desire, regret, or hope, and thus anthropomorphic terms do not apply to them. Conversely, the only way to

avoid anthropomorphic language for God is to assume that God has no personal characteristics at all: God does not intend, plan, think, reflect, care, or love, and so on. But no theistic view of God has denied *all* of these characteristics to God, though they often have to be stretched beyond their “normal” usage. The question is whether this “stretch” carries them so far beyond their fundamental meaning as to render them literally meaningless.

So the issue is not anthropomorphism as such but the degree and kind of anthropomorphism that is appropriate to subject/object to which it is applied. When is it metaphysically appropriate to characterize God as personal, conscious, loving, intending, acting? A lazy or simplistic anthropomorphism is to be avoided but the attempt to transcend anthropomorphism entirely is impossible and misguided. A sophisticated and carefully worked out anthropomorphism will, I believe, yield a view of God that is both metaphysically and religiously satisfying. But the proof is in the pudding as they say.

There is a drive in all religious people to reach beyond this finite world of enmeshment and entanglement toward a reality that utterly transcends it, striving toward a horizon, an absolute otherness from us, that in some sense stands above, beyond, or under all that constitutes the finite world, and which is itself not *part of* that world as one entity alongside other entities, and therefore not reflected adequately in any conceptual categories originating in and conditioned by that world. Some part of my spiritual being wants a union with God that is *more than* a relationship *between* God and me (since a relation of betweenness presupposes God as an “other” [i.e., as not-me] yet existing within the same general ontological space as me, even though radically different from me in certain basic ways). Relationality always necessarily limits the beings that are in relation since, to be in relation, each must have some degree of ontological independence (or, as we say colloquially, having one’s own “space”) in relation to the others. Instead, what some religious people reach for is a union with that initially appears as “other” but in which I may eventually become fully absorbed *into* God, a union in which the distinction between myself and God is overcome and I become one, literally, *with* God in whom my being participates in a undifferentiated way. I, in effect, lose my ontological independence as an independent, individualized self and am absorbed into God without remainder. I want to acknowledge God’s initial and apparent otherness and then cross the gap that divides us by becoming one with God, not a being *in* relationship to God. This is where, I will argue, *ontological dualism* (the radical otherness of God to the world) eventually collapses into *ontological monism* (the undifferentiated

oneness of God, which includes and even extinguishes the otherness of what initially seemed to be separate from God).

While ontological dualism seems initially the polar opposite of ontological monism, they are, I will argue, fraternal twins, crossing and recrossing each other, fusing and separating, merging and distinguishing one from the other as each tries to do justice to the absolute otherness of God (as seen from the human point of view) and the oneness of God (as seen from the divine point of view). It will be virtually impossible to treat one without implicitly also treating the other since they are so metaphysically close despite their initial appearance of difference.

If, as I will argue, the notion of agency is a primordial or basic notion, then to achieve *immersion in God* (not a relationship “with” God that continues to presuppose a distinction *between* me and God), then we have to push beyond agency to get to the core of what it means to be God. But the more we move outside or beyond the category of agency, the more we replace the primordality of that concept with something else. And that something else is articulated best by the mystics and some philosophers who want to take thought to its very roots in a reality that encompasses it, saturates it, or is presupposed as the unarticulatable horizon or ground for it. And that reality is a single undifferentiated oneness in which even the initial divine otherness is ultimately swallowed up.

I want to draw out, in effect, an important claim regarding the difference between monism and dualism made by Mark C. Taylor who said,

The foundational principle of immanence entails a monistic schema in which God, self, and world are different manifestations or expressions of the same underlying reality. Transcendence [what I’ve called radical Otherness] shatters monism by introducing a radical Other, which forms the foundation of the principle of oppositional difference constitutive of every dualism. The monistic and dualistic schemata illuminate . . . the contrasting ways in which God or the divine seems to disappear. In monism, God and the gods disappear by becoming indistinguishable from the world—when everything is sacred nothing is sacred. In dualism, God and the gods vanish by becoming so distant that they are inconsequential and thus disposable—when the divine is totally absent, nothing is sacred.⁵

5. Mark C. Taylor, *After God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 133.

While apparently quite different on the surface, the assertion of God's radical otherness will, I argue, collapse into an undifferentiated oneness that is both God and everything that appears (initially but misleadingly) as other than God. Otherness and identity are fraternal twins whose existence is mutually implicated even though on the surface they seem to be bitter rivals.

It is when the undifferentiated oneness that many mystics extol becomes *identified* with God that we run into difficulty in preserving the notion of God as agent. An agent God cannot *be* being-itself, but we'll see many reasons why many people have thought this to be the case. In order to preserve God's radical otherness, they opt for discarding the notion of divine agency or retaining it only as a metaphor whereas I will opt for treating the notion of God as absolutely other or, in its collapse into being-itself, as a derivative metaphor, not a primordial concept. I am willing to refer to God, who is non-metaphorically a personal agent, for heuristic and meditational reasons, by the symbol of God as being-itself.

An important clarification will need to be made between thinking God as supernatural, outside, above, or beyond the world and thinking God as the ground of being in whom all beings participate or subsist. In the first option, God is, in some sense, still "a" being since God is not identical with any or all of the finite beings who are limited in a vast number of ways (e.g., with respect to duration, power, knowledge, etc.). As long as those finite beings have a real existence, God must be differentiated from them. In the second option, God is not "a" being at all but is postulated as the ground or horizon of being who, without existing as "a" being, makes possible the existence of individual beings and the "world" in which existing beings "are." (This making possible is not necessarily "causing" other beings to exist because the notion of being a "cause" is conceptually problematic for God if God is conceived as beyond the distinction of cause and effect or beyond the distinction between transcendence and the other, which God transcends.) The difference between the God who is different by virtue of being a transcendent being and the God who is different by virtue of being the ground of being from whom other beings are not distinguished by differences of natural versus supernatural is at the heart of much of the difficulty in formulating a notion of God that is other than that of God as personal agent.

THE EXPERIENCE AND CONCEPT OF GOD

I believe both the inclination to think of God as a personal agent and one to think that God must surely be more than that exists in many religious

believers, myself among them. And so I write in the first person about all this, drawing both upon my religious experience and my forty years as a philosophical theologian who has wrestled intellectually with these issues. I am writing this book because of the seriousness with which I have taken the *concept* of God (and I believe also the *experience* of God) in my own life and thinking. I have struggled at both a personal and a theological level about how to reconcile the disconnect between the common assumption that God cannot act in the world as we normally understand action, and the religious practice of assuming that God has acted (and continues to do so) in the lives of religious people and their communities. I want to share my own struggle with this disconnect and the theological/philosophical resources that have helped me in that struggle. And in the process I want to point to some ways in which I think the worst effects of the disconnect might be mitigated, if not dissipated. I will press especially strongly on a different way of conceiving action that does not produce the traditional misunderstandings about “fitting” action (divine or human) into a closed causal structure. That different way, outlined in its basic form by the late philosopher Edward Pols, sees action as the utilization of (not a subordinate element in) the causal infrastructure. As such, action is not fit *into* causality, but causality is fit into the overarching intentionality of the agent whose acts exploit, utilize, and deploy causality. A complementary, but not identical, understanding is developed by a panentheist approach advocated by Arthur Peacocke and Philip Clayton and will be given some attention later on.

I want to think simultaneously of God as a personal being with whom I can have a deep, transformative, and fulfilling relationship and as having or being “more” than anything I can possibly conceive “within” the world I inhabit because I know the limitations of the human mind and of the other finite objects with which I have daily interactions. I don’t want to encapsulate God in humanly derived concepts of thought because I want to do justice to the mystery of God, but I also don’t want God to become so remote or “other” by means of a conceptual virtuosity that both affirms and annuls the power of thought to think of God that I can no longer have a personal relationship with God. Similarly, I don’t want to encapsulate any personal agents in forms of thought that deny them the freedom and power to escape from restricted understandings that have derived from reductionist categories of thought that have no place for personal mystery or freedom of action.

Religiously, I listen to and recite the words of the creed and believe them when they affirm God as the one who created the world, not as an extension of Godself but as a reality over against God (i.e., ontologically other than

or distinct from God) though radically dependent upon God's willingness to sustain its existence from moment to moment.

I have found after forty years of teaching and research that most academic writing strives to attain an objectivity in thought at the expense (or at least a hiding) of the fact that any reflection on God is self-involving and thus that the experience of the self (myself in this case) cannot be set aside. This does not mean that one reflects on the experiences one has without the aid of highly polished intellectual skills, methods, and concepts. They are essential to one's very being as a philosopher or theologian. But writing drily and abstractly about one's engagement with God (or at least with the concept of God; the distinction is one that will need much greater elaboration) has become, for me, a dead end and no longer worth the effort if done in isolation from the *practice* of religious living. At the heart of the religious life (at least in the theistic religions) is prayer to God and a sense that one is responding to the actions of God as revealed in the self-involving recital of God's actions in the past, as these are represented in a written text taken by the religious community to be some kind of holy scripture (such as Tanakh, the New Testament, the Koran, and other monotheistic religions such as Zoroastrianism, Sikhism, and even some forms of Hinduism, to name a few).

Prayer and thanksgiving (as distinct from meditation) presume that there is Someone there to whom the prayer or thanksgiving is addressed and that the addressee will (or at least has the capacity to) respond to the prayer by *doing something*. (What is done may not, of course, be exactly what the petitioner has asked for.) Creedal affirmations are presumed to be "about" Someone whose actions (e.g., creation, liberation, covenant, reconciliation, healing, comfort, salvation) are affirmed as being of ultimate significance to the believer and the world as a whole. Many forms of meditation, on the other hand, do not presuppose the existence of some *other being* with whom the meditator is in relation or about whom the meditator is thinking.

And yet, most theological reflections on God have assumed that to *be* God in the first place, the Someone who is God cannot "do" things, cannot act in the world, in anything like the way human agents do things and act in that same world. The world that is supposedly open to human action is closed to divine action because it is presumed to violate the natural laws of cause and effect. Divine action is seen as an "intervention" into an otherwise closed world of finite causality. Doing or acting is something that is for human beings alone (although some might include animals) because it is what finite, not infinite, realities do. Doing is structured, conditioned, or restricted by the conditions of the STMW. (Though, as we shall see, the strictures of scientific causality

are such that in many scientific views even human action is impossible if it presupposes freedom of choice, a freedom which strict mechanistic determinism rules out.) God, it is assumed, must have a nature that is so radically different, or what philosophers call “ontologically other” (that is, God’s very being—God’s “ontos”—is so absolutely transcendent of the STMW that constitutes our finite human “ontos,” our essential being that “he” cannot act in the world as we act in it). At the very least we have no conceptual categories or language to reflect what it is *that* God “does,” let alone *how* God acts. At its very best the concept of “doing” or acting can only be attributed to God non-literally and non-directly, that is, in a way that is radically different from the way in which we attribute it to ourselves as personal agents.

Given the paucity of human language and the need of the religious practitioner to believe that she is in touch with a Someone not absolutely and completely different from herself, this Someone is usually described in personal terms. That is why the pronoun “someone” is religiously more resonant than the word “something.” Even those philosophers of religion who assiduously insist that God is not, in God’s own self, a personal agent, still tend to use personal language when referring to God. Partly this is a consequence of language itself, which has either personal or impersonal pronouns. It also presupposes subject-object distinctions. But it has seemed the better part of discretion, or sensitivity to religious inclinations, even while denying the literal use of personal agent-language for God, to refer to God using a personal pronoun without actually assuming that God is, in Godself, a personal agent.

The word “God” is widely used and invoked in the major monotheistic traditions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. There is probably no word in the religious vocabulary of these traditions that evokes more contention, confusion, and concern in the areas of philosophy and theology than the one that refers to what is variously called God, Yahweh, Adonai, Elohim, Allah, Jehovah, Lord of Hosts, Creator, the Holy One, One without a second, Supreme Being, Being-Itself, Ground of Being, Act of Being, or Wholly Other. Even when not being used in philosophical and theological debates, “God” is a word often used as a placeholder for an often inchoate, even inexplicable sense of a reality that is intrinsically mysterious because it is other and greater than human beings and the material, spatial, and temporal world they occupy.

But so what? Why do people care about the meaning reflected in or pointed to by the word “God” and its various synonyms? The fact is that many religious practitioners do care and care passionately. This passion is found equally among those viscerally hostile to religious belief as well as those deeply invested in such belief. And the reason is that “God” in and of Godself is either

a reality who makes a decisive difference in the living of meaningful lives, or God is a non-reality, and belief in whom has been pernicious, baleful, and the cause of immense human suffering as well as being a crippling and destructive delusion. Either way, both believers and detractors view God or the concept of God with deadly seriousness. Passionate atheists are often closer to the heart of religious sensibility than are people who don't think about God at all.

So getting clear about the concept of God will be central to a healthy debate between religious and non-religious believers. If there is to be a genuine debate, as opposed to ill-informed mudslinging on both sides of the God-belief controversy, the object of that debate needs to be clearly identified. Too often, attacks on God-belief assume one notion of God while defenders of a God-belief assume a very different notion. This often means that the opponents are simply talking past one another. One needs only to look at the intelligent design versus evolution controversy to see a contemporary example.

From the side of religious believers in the theistic tradition, there are a variety of religious practices in which reference to God is far less contentious and theologically problematic than it is in the world of philosophical and theological reflection on the utilization of God-language. In the prayers and liturgies of these traditions, God is not the subject of theological debate but is assumed to be not the abstract product of metaphysical thought, but instead a palpable, living, and personal reality to whom people offer prayers, intercessions, thanksgivings, and praise, and from whom they expect a variety of responses, from answering prayers to physical and psychological healing. And those engaging in these religious activities are not at all troubled by the implicit (and sometimes quite explicit) reference to a particular kind of God, namely God as a personal agent whose actions have made and continue to make a decisive difference in the lives and histories of human beings and the world. Only a God who can *make a difference* in the world in the lives of persons is worthy of worship.

A God who is *only* a completely transcendent reality beyond the conceptual reach of human beings is not relevant to religious life even though such a God may satisfy certain speculative or conceptual urges among the super-philosophical. But if God is to make a *practical* difference in the lives of persons, God must somehow act in, respond to, or otherwise make a difference for them. If God is to make a difference, religious practitioners need a coherent concept of God to make sense of their liturgical and scriptural references to God. In liturgy, prayer and scripture, God is depicted as making a decisive historical difference in the lives of God's people, both collectively and individually. God calls, sends, rebukes, covenants, inspires, leads, speaks, rescues,

demands, transforms, and so on. In short, God “delivers”; God is the active deliverer (from sin, injustice, oppression, meaninglessness, disease, etc.). But all forms of deliverance require divine acts, which are, as such, historically and personally decisive. Only if we establish the primordially of God as an agent can we intelligibly discuss *the modes of divine action* or *how* God acts. There is an enormous amount of literature that has been developed by scholars trying to explain the modes of God’s action in a way that does not conflict with a scientific understanding of the doings and behaviors that constitute the STMW. We will examine them only after we have established the ground for first thinking of God as a primordially personal agent.

In the scriptures or holy writings of the three monotheistic traditions, God is consistently spoken of as or presumed to be an agent in the same basic sense that human beings are agents: God performs actions and responds to the actions of the human persons as one agent among others in a common field of action. God creates, sustains, commands, affirms, punishes, empowers, sends, inspires, reveals, and even speaks, as only agents can do (as opposed to things that are nothing more than biological organisms and material objects). Only agents can perform acts⁶ and the Bible is sometimes referred to as the Book of the Acts of God. Verbs, not nouns, are the primary, basic, and appropriate way by which God is described because they articulate *what God does*. *Who God is* is revealed only through divine actions.

If one remained at the level of liturgical language, these references to God acting would be relatively unproblematic. Religious believers in the monotheistic religions gather to remember the acts of God: the creation of the world; the calling of Abraham; the rescue of the Israelites in Egypt; the giving of a covenant to them at Mt. Sinai; the miraculous interventions in their occupation of the land of Palestine, such as the parting of the waters of the Red Sea; the sending of the prophets; the calling and commissioning of Mohammed; and, for Christians, the incarnation of Jesus, his resurrection from the dead, and the sending of the Holy Spirit.

But when one moves from liturgical to theological/philosophical language about God, one enters much more troubled and contentious waters regarding the meaning of the term “God” and especially the concept of God as an agent. The concepts of agency and the agents who act clearly apply to human beings. We know ourselves primarily as agents who act. In fact, knowing is itself an act that we perform in order to get a better handle on the world in which we are agent-participants. We cannot escape being agents or knowing ourselves

6. This is why the concepts of agency, act, action, and agent are all interrelated and why each entails the others, though personal agency is the basis for thinking about all the others.

primordially as agents because agency is presupposed in every conscious thought we have and every action we perform. Even the moments of mental withdrawal from the busyness of our everyday lives are the result of an intentional act performed so as to attain a state of contemplation. We withdraw from one kind of action by another act (of thinking) in order to reflect on our previous actions. (We also know that there are many things in which, through our bodies, we are intimately implicated that are not acts: the beating of my heart is not an act of mine, nor is my being swept away by a wave, but I am deeply implicated, or at least my body is, in both of these events.) But when I deliberately run fast in order to get my heart to beat faster, that is an act since I am doing something intentionally to bring about a particular material result. In short, I am an agent but not everything that occurs in and through me is an act of mine. But without the capacity to act (i.e., without intentionality and the ability to form conscious purposes, such as when I fall into a coma), I am less than the full person I can be.

Many philosophers and theologians consider action performed by human beings, and the consequent understanding of action as that which human agents do, inappropriate for describing the kind of action God performs. The assumption underlying this inappropriateness is that God is radically unlike human beings. There is, it is assumed, a complete and absolute difference (sometimes called an ontological difference to highlight its utter difference from everything else) between whatever is human, and therefore finite and limited, and whatever God is and does. And since agency is clearly the right concept for understanding what we ourselves are and do as agents, it cannot be applied to God in any literal, direct, or unqualified way—or so the argument goes.

According to the view that God cannot literally be an agent, there are multiple limitations on the direct, literal, or unqualified use of the concept of agent when applied by philosophers and theologians to God. Agents exist within a common field of others that also includes non-agents: agents have objects external to themselves upon which they act and are, technically speaking, limited and conditioned by those other realities. The dualist theological tradition assumes that God is beyond or transcendent of any limitations or conditions imposed by anything outside Godself. This dualist tradition is based on the metaphysical principle of the utter ontological otherness or transcendence of God.

I want to argue that, contrary to dualism, it will be impossible to make sense of the liturgical language of the worshipping communities of the monotheistic religions without conceiving of God as a personal agent. Without this conception, it will also be impossible to make sense of their scriptural

references to God's role in history and nature. The liturgical practices of faithful Jews, Christians, Muslims, and other theists are grounded (whether their practitioners are aware of this or not) in a philosophically defensible metaphysical view of reality in which God is, in fact, a personal agent. The language of these liturgical practices as well as the language of their scriptures or holy writings also presupposes this metaphysical view and concept of God. I want to show how the notion of God as agent can be given coherent and persuasive support by mining the full implications of notions of agency, act, and agent.

GOD AS A PERSONAL AGENT: DISPUTED POINTS

Adopting a view of God as personal agent brings both virtues and vices in its wake. In addition to the "vice" of anthropomorphism, there is the problem that if God is an agent, God becomes inextricably implicated in evil since God has the capacity to act in the world so as to eradicate or at least mitigate it. Non-agent divine beings that cannot act (because their transcendent nature makes such action inconceivable or because they are "beyond" action) cannot be held accountable for not abolishing evil, but an agent God presumably can be.

A third downside to the concept of God as agent is the difficulty of determining, with a reasonable degree of certainty, exactly what God *has in fact done*. If God can be shown to be metaphysically *able* to act in the world, then what actions turn out to be uniquely God's and which are not? And how do we tell the difference?

A fourth problem is that this view runs smack into the claims of contemporary scientific explanation. If the scientific worldview presumes that all occurrences in the world, including those we have traditionally thought of as belonging to free personal agents, can be subsumed under a causally reductive and exhaustive explanatory scheme that has no room for free agency of any kind, then it will conflict with a view of God as an agent. This conflict is presently being exemplified in the intelligent design versus evolution debate. One defense some religious believers have made to what they consider excessive claims of intelligent design is to deny that God intervenes or interferes in any way at all with the natural, causal processes of the world. This is, I will argue, too high a price to pay for a rapprochement between science and religion. However, adopting a view of God as a personal agent does not necessarily entail a direct confrontation with scientific understanding, especially if the latter does not claim to be reductionistically *exhaustive* in its explanation of everything that happens in the world. Its explanatory scheme might well apply to all non-intentional, non-personal occurrences without being able to cover those things

that are genuinely free acts by intentional personal agents. The world that science explores is the infrastructure that agents utilize in carrying out their intentions and, as infrastructure, does not threaten the primordially of the agent who utilizes it.

A fifth area of concern regarding the concept of God as agent is its apparent inability to satisfy the human craving for ultimate mystery. A God who is too easily known or whose nature and revelatory acts are too accessible to the human mind through its normal cognitive powers, threatens some of the mysterious, supersensible dimensions of God that many people seem to believe must be present in any acceptable theism. I will want to argue that a view of God as personal agent actually restores an *appropriate* sense of mystery to God: not one that is intrinsically supernatural or supersensible, but one that belongs to agents as such: the mystery of freedom; the mystery of personality; the mystery that inheres in any free personal being capable of outdistancing our scientific predictions or causal explanations of them. It is more appropriate, I will argue, to locate mystery in personality rather than in abstract philosophical concepts derived from the belief that the only genuine mystery lies entirely outside or “under” the universe.

The virtue of the view of God as personal agent is that it makes sense of the scriptural, liturgical, personal-prayer, and personal-experience language about God. Persons in the theistic traditions encounter God in a variety of ways, including the rehearsal of God’s acts in history and the personal experience of the presence of God in moments of inspiration, healing, comfort, and reassurance. Only language of God as agent can make sense of these encounters and experiences. The concept also coheres well with a specific metaphysical view. It brings God within the range of human conceptuality and undergirds an understanding of how and why God can make a difference in the world and in the lives of its inhabitants. And if there are freely intended and performed actions by personal agents in the world, God will be one of those agents (though suitably and appropriately differentiated from them because of the reach of God’s power, steadfastness of purpose, captiousness, and grace-filled love) whose acts make all the difference to the lives of persons with whom God interacts. Another virtue is the obverse of the implication of God in the problem of evil: precisely because God *can* act to deal with evil, God’s actions become essential to its overcoming. God can deliver on the divine promise to bring all persons to fulfillment by interfering in the world to combat evil. If God’s intention is to overcome evil and restore a broken creation, then prayers for such deliverance begin to make sense. So does the imperative to align oneself with those divine actions that intend to overcome oppression and injustice

because one will be placing oneself in the continuity of divine and human action tending toward the completion of God's intentions for the world.

Even if one does adopt a notion of divine agency, however, there are numerous and often quite different theological understandings of *how* God acts in the world. I want to examine these in order to place my view that God not only acts generally and universally to create and sustain the whole STMW but also acts discretely and particularly *within* the STMW; in other words, God performs some acts that are uniquely God's own, alongside the acts of other agents and non-agent causality. These alternative views of the "how" of God's action in the world range from the deistic (God creates the universe and lets it run itself without further interference) to the most fundamentalist (God is the agent who directly causes *every* occurrence as recorded in Scripture, including the creation of the world 6,000 years ago.) Some of the different understandings of divine action are compatible with each other under the concept of divine agency that I will adopt and some are not. I will explore in some detail these areas of compatibility and incompatibility.

The most problematic aspect of most accounts of divine action revolves around the concept of divine "intervention" or "interference" in the structures of the world. It is assumed that such interference or intervention will violate the scientific causal understanding of how the events of the world are to be construed. Most attempts to explain divine action are developed subsequently so as to avoid any reference to divine interference. My argument will be that in some sense *all* agents *necessarily* interfere with or intervene in what would be, without their presence, an *otherwise* closed causal web of events (closed, that is to free action by agents). But I will also argue that "interference," while metaphysically acceptable in some basic sense, is not as good as the notion of "utilization" or deployment, which turns the notion of the primacy of the causal nexus on its head. Actions, I will argue, do not need to fit into the causal nexus precisely because they transcend it by being able to use it as the infrastructure through which the intentions of the agent are realized. Interference is appropriate in one sense, however, because without agent interference, the scientific explanation is appropriately complete and exhaustive. But if free personal agents exist and act, their acts intrude upon, intervene in, subsume, or interfere with that closed causal web. If the web is absolutely, without remainder, complete and exhaustive, then there is no such thing as freely enacted intentions. But if acts that are brought about by free agents do occur, then the closed causal web is not exhaustive of *everything* that happens, only of those things that are not agent initiated. An act, however, while interfering with or intervening in the web, does not necessarily *violate*

the causal principles or natural laws that explain non-agent caused events. (I do not want to rule out the possibility, perhaps rare, that some divine actions may entail a superceding or *transgression* of the laws of nature, but such transgressions are not required for divine action to take place.) Actions may supervene upon or utilize the causal factors in the closed web without violating its causal infrastructure. In fact, as I shall argue, they deploy or utilize that infrastructure in the attainment of their ends and this notion of the deployment of the causal infrastructure avoids the worst misinterpretations found in the notion of interference. (A common example, the full meaning of which I will develop, is that by choosing to supervene upon the causal factors that normally produce the unconscious and unintended blinking of my eyelids, I can bring about a more rapid or slower blinking of my eyelids. In doing so, I am not contravening the laws of nature, but instead *utilizing* the causal infrastructure for an intention it does not itself initiate. It is appropriate, I believe, to continue to think of this utilization as an interference as long as the latter notion does not presume that my action must “fit into” the causal structure.) If this example is successfully mined, it can provide an overarching explanatory scheme in which God utilizes the laws of nature (without violating them) to accomplish divine ends. But such utilization is not inconsistent with an appropriately understood notion of intervention and interference as would apply to any act that is not solely the result of causal laws or forces. The full explication of this notion will constitute the heart of my argument for the virtue of a view of God as a personal agent.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, what I hope to achieve is the development of a coherent, metaphysically sound argument for the notion of God as a personal agent who can actually act *in* the world in discrete and particular ways in addition to sustaining by a “master” act the entire structure of the world. I believe that such a notion will support the use of the language about God found in the liturgies, scriptures, prayer life, and personal experience of most people in the theistic traditions. It will give faithful practitioners of the theistic traditions a metaphysical leg to stand on and allow them to make sense of the language they employ in their prayers, creeds, scriptures, and liturgies. It will reconcile some of the many tensions that have emerged when, in addition to agent language about God, the theological traditions felt compelled to also employ the language of ontological transcendence or undifferentiated oneness. In the process, it will restore to health a view of God that philosophers and theologians have too often

discarded as too anemic or naïve (too anthropomorphic) to do justice to the religious life and personal relations with God.

I want to think from the primordially of the notion of agency and on that basis find a place for other ways of conceiving or symbolizing God. Most approaches to God think from the primordially of something else: something so ontologically “other” that agency becomes at best only a metaphor or symbol for God but not reflective of God’s essential being. I want to reverse this way of approaching God. I believe that the essential character of agency (and its metaphysically correlative notions of self, agent, and person) *is* the essential character of God and, when mined sensitively, carries within it all that the liturgical, prayerful, and personal approaches to God intend or need.