Rel. Stud. **35**, pp. 441–460 Printed in the United Kingdom

The activity of the quadriplegic God

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Abstract. Since theistic faith involves the notion of God as personally agential and since it faces difficulties in establishing its credibility in view both of problems in warrantably ascribing natural, historical and personal states to divine activity and of the counterevidence of evil, this paper takes up the story of a quadriplegic patient and certain remarks by Whitehead and Hartshorne to explore the viability of a concept of divine activity that is non-coercive but significant. In order to develop this concept of God's agency and to warrant its credibility, the essential kenoticism of the divine is also discussed.

I
INTRODUCTION

Theism today faces a crisis of credibility. It is not a new crisis. Critics have long proclaimed that theistic faith is in terminal decay. It is, nonetheless, a serious crisis. It arises because theistic faith (or at any rate that form of it that is to be considered in this paper – i.e., the form of theism that is typically entertained in the Jewish, Christian and Muslim faiths, whatever non-realist views of theism current revisers of such faith might wish to promote) claims to be a matter of understanding of what is actually (and fundamentally) the case. Theists maintain (and where their theism is authentic as their *primal faith*) that reality as a whole makes sense (even if it be difficult or impossible to perceive what that sense is) and is, or at least will finally be found to be, fundamentally purposive and fair, and that the personal agency of God as creator, director and final judge of all is the reason, and ultimately the only reason, why reality has this character. Rational reflection, however, makes it clear that it is difficult to find convincing evidence to warrant that faith as an understanding of how things are rather than as an expression of hope or of desire about how they might be. The crux of the problem for theism accordingly lies in justifying the basic claim that references to God are to a real (i.e., to a mind-independent) agent that is ultimate in being, value and rationality. This being so, the purpose of this paper is to consider why a sound notion of divine activity is critical for the credibility of theism, to suggest why various attempts that have been made to identify such a notion may be judged to have failed and, finally, to explore how the story of Mark, a quadriplegic patient, may provide a model for developing a rationally tenable conception of divine activity.

II
THE PROBLEM OF ESTABLISHING THE REALITY OF DIVINE AGENCY

Things are real when they have effects, either when they resist us when we attempt to move them or, more dramatically, when they exert forces that move us. It is a point made by Samuel Alexander when, citing Lotze, he states that 'things are in so far as they act',[1] and by Charles Hartshorne when he says that 'to be is to act, to be as individual is to act individually'.[2] The reality of agents is established by their effects being found to be a product of intentional activity, and the reality of personal agents is shown by that intentional activity being self-conscious. Although it is not easy to specify the kind of evidence that establishes that something occurs as the result of self-conscious activity (consider, for example, the extensive discussions about the kind of evidence that would demonstrate that one is communicating with a self-conscious person and not with a machine having artificial intelligence), it does not follow that there is any doubt that some self-consciously intentional agents exist. I have a basic conviction that I am one such, and I also have a basic conviction that those who read this article not only are such but also have similar basic convictions about their own nature. Talk of writing and reading an article which does not presuppose self-conscious activity by persons (in contrast to the case of a machine which types out an article, or a scanner which converts written instructions into activity) uses the terms 'writing' and 'reading' metaphorically. The root notion of the terms refers to the activity by an agent who is, at least potentially, aware of what she or he is intending to do.

A basic problem for theism is that when attention turns to the notion of the personal agency of God, it is found that there are difficulties in warranting claims about the mind-independent existence of such an agent. Even though each of us has no doubts about her or his existence as an individual agent and about the similar character of the human beings who encounter us, it is not always clear whether other agents to which we refer are or are not figments of our imagination. The 'gremlin' that is said to have made a cam belt snap in an engine is an imaginative personification of an unexpected and unintended physical state. According to some analyses, references to 'God' as one who challenges, inspires, guides and alienates are similarly to be understood as referring to an imaginative projection by which human beings exteriorize and respond to values to which they are committed.

On reflection, however, it becomes clear that if theism is to sustain its character as a matter of fundamental understanding, it cannot afford to be unconcerned about the nature of the reality of the object of faith. Whatever be the pragmatic effectiveness of entertaining a particular concept of God,

[1] Samuel Alexander *Beauty and Other Forms of Value* (London: Macmillan, 1933), 289.
[2] Charles Hartshorne *Creative Synthesis and Philosophic Method* (London: SCM Press, 1970), 293.

so far as it is considered to be part of the essence of theism that it claims to identify what is ultimately the case, theistic faith stands or falls by the justifiability of its assertion of the reality of God. According to this perception of its nature, theism is not merely a matter of seeing the world in a particular way and responding to it in an appropriate manner, seeing what is *as if* it had such-and-such a fundamental character, or *as if* it were grounded in the purposes of the divine; it claims to disclose what is its character. *Seeing* the world *as* such and such a kind of thing and acting accordingly may be a heroic stance towards what is absurd and uncaring. It produces pockets of temporary and local meaning in what has no meaning but is the accidental product of mindless interactions – an unintentional sport in cosmic processes that have generated, among other things, beings that can be aware of those pointless processes and vainly seek to discern meaning in them. For theistic faith, in contrast, the notion of God is the notion of what is the ground of and gives meaningful coherence to the story of reality as it actually is.[3] Since, however, theistic faith holds that meaning and purpose are intrinsic in what is and are derived from the creative intentionality of God as a personal agent, it follows that its credibility depends on the rational warrantability of its basic affirmation and identification of the reality of God as a personal agent. Can such a rational warrant be established and, in particular, can an understanding of divine agency be identified that is compatible with what is found to happen in the world? This is the critical issue for theistic faith today.

One result of this situation has been that considerable attention has been paid in recent years to the meaning and justifiability of claims about the activity of God.[4] This is because claims about an underlying divine agency are found to run into difficulties when attempts are made to attribute particular states and events to such agency. Developments in the cosmological and evolutionary sciences, for instance, mean that theists who are aware of the natural sciences find themselves in difficulties when they try to find convincing warrants for holding God to be responsible, at least to an important extent, for how the world now is. Since the natural sciences offer

[3] It should be noted that while there could not be a universe that did not have some basic coherence, coherence does not entail God. This is because whatever emerged as a universe could be the unintentionally coherent product of an accidental concatenation of initial states. For theism the reality of God means that there is not only a universe (i.e., a somewhat coherent system of things) but a universe that has a meaning because in some significant way it is the product of intentional activity.

[4] See, for example, Schubert M. Ogden 'What sense does it make to say "God acts in history"?' in *The Reality of God* (London: SCM Press, 1967); Gordon D. Kaufman, 'On the meaning of "act of God"' in *God the Problem* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1972); Ian T. Ramsey *Models for Divine Activity* (London: SCM Press, 1973); Owen C. Thomas (ed.) *God's Activity in the World: The Contemporary Problem* (Chico CA: Scholars Press, 1983); Thomas F. Tracy *God, Action, and Embodiment* (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1984); Maurice Wiles *God's Action in the World* (London: SCM Press, 1986); Gustavo Gutiérrez *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1987); Maurice Wiles 'In what contexts does it make sense to say, "God acts in history"?' in Philip E. Devenish and George L. Goodwin (eds) *Witness and Existence* (Chicago IL and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Keith Ward *Divine Action* (London: Collins, 1990); Thomas F. Tracy (ed.) *The God Who Acts: Philosophical and Theological Explorations* (University Park PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994).

plausible explanations of the way in which the present state of affairs in the cosmos has come to be without employing significant references to divine agency, some theists have concluded that the activity of God as creator has to be conceived as confined to the first jiffy or two of the initial hot Big Bang that initiated this cosmic epoch,[5] with additional agency occurring in the interstices of quantum indeterminacy (where it seems to be distinguishable from random chance only by the fact that what are alleged to be God-occasioned events have unexpectedly happy outcomes).

If attention moves from the natural order to the historical, the problems in justifying theistic understanding do not diminish. Reports about what happened tend to be written by the victors. Hence when conquering colonialists describe and interpret their successes, they may not find it difficult to allege divine agency in bringing them about. Those they subjugate may not, however, be persuaded of this identification of divine agency. Less partisan reading of history that is not theistically motivated seems to find no grounds for discerning signs of the purposive and moral guidance of divine agency in what happened in the past. Consideration of individuals' experiences similarly appears unable to provide convincing evidence to persuade doubters of the reality of God's personal agency. While some individuals assert that they have been divinely guided, inspired and helped, others wonder about the ways in which individuals interpret their personal experiences. Without doubting the sincerity of those testifying to what they understand themselves to have experienced, it is not hard to suspect that their witness tells us much more about how they see things, maybe quite mistakenly, than about how things actually are.

In an attempt to avoid problems with the supposed evidence, it may be suggested that primal faith in the meaningfulness and fairness of reality and collateral claims about divine activity underlying nature, history and personal life are to be regarded as *postulates* by which people seek to make sense of reality (and of their lives in particular), and that it is a mistake to consider that they present descriptions of the basic structure of reality for which it is appropriate to seek compelling rational justification.[6] As has been noted, however, theists are unlikely to be satisfied with attempts to salvage their faith by interpreting it wholly in terms of a kind of 'seeing as if'. They typically consider that statements of their faith, when properly appreciated, involve constative assertions about what is held to be the fundamental character of reality.

Another attempt to overcome problems with the evidence traditionally adduced to warrant theistic faith's understanding presents a pragmatic

[5] Some supposedly theistic interpretations of the anthropic principle thus restrict God's role to that of establishing the basic structure of the cosmos in a minute fraction of its first second.

[6] Cf. how Immanuel Kant in the *Critique of Practical Reason* maintains that freedom, immortality and God are 'postulates' needed to make sense of the practical (i.e., moral) reason.

argument to justify that faith. This maintains that because of the way in which theistic faith is found in practice to make sense of reality and, when appropriately applied, to lead to satisfying and fruitful modes of living, it is reasonable to conclude that the understanding found in this primal faith basically agrees with how things are. Hence what may be regarded as theistic 'postulates' in fact identify reality's basic character.

This argument is importantly different from the pragmatic one that may be used to justify a particular medical treatment of a condition when it is not known why patients given that treatment (say, by being prescribed a specific drug) are restored to health without detrimental side effects. The medical practice may be defended on the grounds that since the treatment is found in double-blind trials to be effective and non-harmful, it is justifiable both to use it and to consider that, because it works in practice, it must in some (yet unknown) way fit the condition.[7] The theistic pragmatic argument is more like that which might be used by a physicist who holds that a particular particle (or a particular kind of force) must exist even though it has not yet been detected, because only so does it seem to be possible to make sense of what has been observed to happen. In that case the hunt will be on to detect the as-yet undetected. In the case of God, however, it appears that such a pragmatic argument for theism could not get beyond arguing that reality makes sense (in strong forms of the argument, *only* makes sense) in terms of the theistic story, and that those who live on the basis of that story find it to be appropriately fruitful.

III

THE PROBLEM POSED BY EVIL

Unfortunately for those who are attracted by the last-mentioned argument, a serious obstacle confronts attempts to justify claims about the reality of God as a personal agent by this kind of pragmatic argument. This is because it appears that there are strong grounds for considering that in many cases what actually happens in the world is irreconcilable with rationally warranted assent to the reality of God.

The matter is complicated because statements about divine existence are necessary truths whose provenance is not only the actual world in which we find ourselves but also any possible world. Accordingly, in reply to the case against theism as, for example, presented by Antony Flew in his contribution to the 'Theology and Falsification Debate',[8] it may be argued that claims about divine existence are not liable to empirical falsification since they are

[7] Some might even claim that it 'corresponds' to what is needed to remedy the condition but this is a large claim that raises profound problems about the use of models and about the correspondence view of truth that it is not appropriate to go into here.

[8] Antony Flew 'Theology and falsification' in Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (eds) *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1955), 96–99, 106–108.

metaphysical claims that refer to what must be the case in any possible world. Nevertheless, although the intrinsic nature of the divine means that claims about the existence of God are to be treated as necessary truths, it is questionable whether a credible theism is possible if it apparently fails to cohere with what seems actually to happen in the world as we observe it. As Charles Hartshorne observes, recognition of the non-contingent character of divine existence and the existence of evil means that 'either theism is an absurdity or God's existence is compatible with the existence of evil'.[9] But if it be compatible, theism will only be credible if it can show why it can be regarded as compatible. Consequently, as Ian T. Ramsey suggests, faith-claims are to be tested, among other things, by their 'empirical fit'.[10] Such 'fit' is impossible when claims contradict for, as Horace Bushnell points out, while we may hold that some things 'taken in their form, are contrary one to the other – contrary in diction', and so are entertainable (e.g., as paradoxes), we should not and cannot ever 'believe anything that is really absurd or contradictory'.[11] And this particularly applies to contradictions between reality and descriptions of it, as well as to contradictions between statements.

This being so, it may be argued in theory that the conclusion of the pragmatic argument for theism suggested earlier is legitimately to be regarded as factually significant because the resulting theistic claims are open to empirical falsification. This is because the argument maintains that it is credible to hold that things are the way that theism asserts because to see them in that way is found to 'work' – to make sense of what we find in our experience and to indicate appropriate ways of response that are in practice found to be effective in leading to satisfying life. In principle, however, this conclusion would be undermined if there were found to be sound evidence that what faith asserts does not 'work' in the way that its apologists claim that it does. And, as the huge corpus of theological writing on the so-called problem of evil[12] indicates, the pragmatic justification of theism is faced in practice by the major obstacle that a great deal that happens in the world does seem to falsify the belief that what is found to be the case fits what is to be expected of a world grounded in the general providence and subject to the particular providences of the reality of God as an effective personal agent. In event after event and state after state, the question arises, 'Why did an agential God *either* do this *or* allow other agents to bring it about?'

Theists may try to answer the question by holding that bad things occur through the accidental conjunction of trajectories of events that are unproblematic in themselves, or due to the relative autonomy of the constituents of the created order, or because divine intervention would prevent the world

[9] Hartshorne *Creative Synthesis and Philosophic Method*, 292.
[10] Ian T. Ramsey *Models and Mystery* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), 17, 38f.
[11] Horace Bushnell *God in Christ* (London: Richard D. Dickinson, n.d.), 60.
[12] For the 'so-called', cf. my *Probing the Foundations: A Study in Theistic Reconstruction* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1994), 133–142.

being a place for personal maturation and moral development, or since giving freedom involves risks and every actual entity as such enjoys some degree of freedom, or in order that people may be faced with challenges that stimulate growth in character. Alternatively they may give up trying to pretend that there is a conceivable solution to the intellectual problem of evil,[13] affirming that it is presumptuous to seek to explain what is hidden in the mystery of God. A powerful version of the last-mentioned attempt at a solution to the problem posed by evil is put forward by Gustavo Gutiérrez in *On Job*. He holds that the insight of The Book of Job is that authentic theistic faith is disinterested and that the acts of God are gratuitous and unpredictable. Whereas 'the satan' (as Gutiérrez translates) questions 'the disinterestedness of Job's service of God, his lack of concern for a reward', and whereas Job's interlocutors see faith in God as a matter of rewards and retributions, the author of Job maintains 'that a utilitarian religion lacks depth and authenticity; in addition, it has something of the satanic about it' (4f). Not only do God's speeches reject 'a purely anthropocentric view of creation' as they affirm that the natural world was made to express 'the freedom and delight of God in creating' rather than 'to be directly useful to human beings' (74); they also show that we must not presume to know what God must or will do in certain circumstances. God is thus held to attack the presumptuous theology that tries 'to pigeonhole the divine action in history' and pretends to be able to predict how God will respond to situations. Authentic theistic faith must recognize that 'nothing, not even the world of justice, can shackle God' (72). Contrary to the theology that assumes that God's acts must 'necessarily fit hand in glove with the theological categories that reason has developed', Gutiérrez presents God as asserting that 'it is impossible to discover in detail the reasons for God's action, so as to be able to foresee it and, as it were, manage it' (75). Rational pride that fails to appreciate this point is condemned since it 'leads in the final analysis to the replacement of God with self and to the usurpation of God's place. It leads, in other words, to the denial of God' (79). While, then, God also asserts that divine power to intervene in the world is limited by the need to respect human freedom (see 77, 79),[14] the main thrust of the case presented by The Book of Job is that, according to Gutiérrez, there is 'a contradiction between the free, gratuitous, and creative love of God' and theological doctrines that attempt 'to pigeonhole God' (88).

Such supposed answers to the problem of evil may convince some who do

[13] Theists – and others – should not, however, use failure to solve the intellectual puzzle of reconciling the reality of God with the incidence of evil in the world as an excuse for not acting to eradicate evil. The most important thing may not be to make sense of things but to incarnate God's compassion in resisting evil and realizing love, as Wendy Farley suggests in *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion: A Contemporary Theodicy* (Louisville KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990).

[14] 'Yahweh too has his limits, which are self-imposed. Human beings are insignificant in Job's judgment, but they are great enough for God, the almighty, to stop at the threshold of their freedom and ask for their collaboration in the building of the world and in its just governance', Gutiérrez *On Job*, 79.

not experience unrelievable pain or mental disintegration or conditions that destroy any possibility of responsible and creative living. Theists who are aware of how horrible the world can be find, however, that they are faced with an apparently intractable dilemma. On the one hand, the greater and the more specific are their claims about the reality of God as personally agential, the greater is the problem for their theism posed by evil; for if God be held to have brought about this state and that event, it does not make sense why God has not similarly intervened elsewhere to prevent (or at least to alleviate) cases of horrific and pointless suffering. On the other hand, if theists attempt to solve the problem of evil by denying either the activity of God or the material content of references to it, they only solve the problem of evil by in effect denying the significance of the reality of God; for if it be held either that God is not an agent or that the nature of that agency cannot be conjectured, the price of affirming that God cannot be held responsible for what happens and hence that there can be no problem of evil for theism is that references to God are vacuous. In view of the defeasance threatened by this dilemma, the question arises of whether there may be any other option for theism to take up.

This question emerges from consideration of the position put forward by Gutiérrez in *On Job*. Although this response to the problem of evil may appear to present a properly theocentric appreciation of theistic faith, it is open to the kind of devastating criticism that John Stuart Mill levelled at Henry Longueville Mansel's thesis in his Bampton Lectures for 1858.[15] If we accept that we cannot predict what is to be expected to happen because of God's love, we are not simply prevented from 'pigeonholing' God (to use Gutiérrez's term) but are denying that reference to divine 'love' has any significant material content. What, then, appears at first to be a deeply theocentric understanding of the reality of 'God' turns out on analysis to be effectively vacuous. Are there, then, any other options?

Two other responses to the problem of evil that have been made but have profound difficulties in satisfying both rational reflection and theistic conviction are, first, to deny the reality of God and, secondly, to deny that God is personally agential. To deny the reality of God eradicates the problem of evil by making it impossible to ask for reasons why God does anything or allows anything to happen. At the same time, however, this atheistic option undermines the credibility of primal faith in the meaningfulness and ultimate fairness of reality (although, as is shown by real-life characters who resemble Dr Rieux in Albert Camus' *The Plague* in resisting evil but do not believe that there is a God who guarantees the ultimate meaningfulness and fairness of life, this atheist position is compatible with an eminently heroic and admirable stance). The question for the theist is whether the events and states that

[15] See John Stuart Mill *Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1865), ch. 7.

pose the problem of evil are merely contrary to what theistic faith expects to happen but can be reconciled with it, or whether they make it absurd to hold that faith. This being so, attempts may be made, secondly, to reconcile the reality of God with evil happenings in the world by holding that it is wrong to conceive of God as a conscious, personal agent. Dorothy Emmet, for example, holds that while God is to be thought of as 'Being' having 'ultimacy and intimacy' with everything, the divine is not to be thought of as having 'a particular specification' as an individual person.[16] This suggested solution, however, also undermines the basic theistic faith in the meaningfulness and fairness of reality because it denies the personal agency of God and hence that there is conscious intentionality determining the ultimate character of reality.

IV
WHICH AGENT IS RESPONSIBLE FOR EVIL?

There is, however, another possible response to the difficulties posed by evil. On the grounds that God is not the sole agent in determining what happens in the world, this response holds that God is not to be held responsible for the evil that occurs. Evil is due to other agents than the divine. Does this response have any better prospect of leading to a rationally credible understanding of theistic primal faith? Gutiérrez, for example, interprets Job not only as maintaining that the divine is unpredictably free but also as suggesting that while God seeks justice, 'God cannot impose it, for the nature of created beings must be respected. God's power is limited by human freedom .... In other words, the all-powerful God is also a "weak" God.'[17] It is position that has also been developed by a number of process theologians. Charles Hartshorne, for instance, asserts that the widespread monopolistic understanding of 'divine omnipotence' is not merely mistaken but also intrinsically incoherent. He maintains that 'It cannot be that the details of cosmic history are divinely decided. Countless cooks made the historical broth, not just the Unsurpassable cook.'[18] By this means he seeks to absolve God of responsibility for the evils that occur in the world. Whether accidental or deliberate, they are to be ascribed to the agency of others.

The difficulty with this response to the problem of evil, as with Gutiérrez's rejection of attempts to 'pigeonhole' divine action, is that it is in danger of making theism vacuous because, if God be not responsible for what is evil, it is not clear that there is any justification for ascribing to God what is good. In that case God's agency appears to have no material significance, for

[16] Dorothy M. Emmet, 'Could God be a person?' in *Modern Believing*, **27** (1996), 9. Professor Emmet's view of religion as characterized by ultimacy and intimacy is derived from C. C. J. Webb.

[17] Gutiérrez *On Job*, 77.

[18] Hartshorne *Creative Synthesis and Philosophic Method*, 293; cf. also his *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (Albany NY: State of New York Press, 1984).

nothing may be known to be a result of divine activity. And if no effects can be ascribed to the God and since, as was pointed out earlier, to be real is to have effects, there seems to be no difference between theism and atheism, at least as ways of understanding. In that case the price for eradicating the problem of evil is the material significance of theism.

Hartshorne, however, does not entertain this radical development of the third response to the problem of evil. He holds that God is a significant agent. For example, he states that, among other things, God determines the boundaries of what may happen and so, in terms of human being, may be said to 'rule the world and order it' by 'setting optimal limits for our free action'.[19] The question then arises why, if this be so, the boundaries are not drawn somewhat differently so that some, at least, of the apparently pointless and unquestionably horrendous things that happen would not be possible. While, for instance, infant teachers are praised for allowing children in their charge to create, to explore and to meet challenges, they would be condemned if they allowed the children to experiment with poison or to play with live grenades. There are limits to what is considered justifiable for the children to try out. The problem of evil in this respect is that the limits – or, rather, the apparent lack of limits – that govern what happens in the world do not seem to be defensible as the deliberate product of divine activity. Claims about the reality of God as a personal agent who determines the bounds of what is allowable thus provoke grave problems for those who wish to reconcile what happens with the worshipfulness of the divine. Furthermore, a theism that thinks of God's agency wholly in terms of the initial defining of boundaries does not provide a robust basis for its primal faith. Consequently we seem to be back with the basic problem of how to understand the reality of God's agency in a way that is consistent with the evil found in the world.

V

A QUADRIPLEGIC MODEL FOR DIVINE ACTIVITY

Is there, then, any other way to seek to justify theism as a rationally credible way of understanding? There may be. According to this solution the basic difficulty with claims about the reality of God as a personal agent does not lie with what happens in the world but with the way in which the nature of divine activity is understood. In many of his works Hartshorne has argued that various traditional conceptions of the divine attributes need to be revised if they are to be coherent and if theists are not to undermine theism by foisting onto God models of personal activity that are not compatible with the reality of God. Difficulties in making sense of God's activity and in justifying claims about it are thus held to have arisen because theists (as well as would-be

[19] Charles Hartshorne, *The Divine Relativity: A Social Conception of God* (New Haven CT and London: Yale University Press, 1964), 142.

theists, agnostics and atheists) have not considered seriously enough that they may be mistaken in regarding what is meant by God's activity as an eminent form of the effective, controlling activity that is the way in which personal agency is generally understood (e.g., as the kind of activity that I display when I pick up a pen or unfold a piece of paper). In the remainder of this paper, therefore, I want to draw attention to the possibility of using a very different model for divine activity. This model suggests a way in which God may be envisaged as a significant personal agent without implying that God may as a consequence be held responsible, either by acting or by failing to act, for the evil that occurs in the world.

In order to introduce this revised model for understanding the nature of divine activity, I want to outline Mark's story. Mark was quadriplegic. He lay in a bed in the far corner of an old 'Nightingale' ward in a large district hospital. People went by his bed on the way to bathroom. He was unable to do anything for himself beyond speak in a quiet whisper. His mind was alert but his body was paralysed. He was nearly blind. He needed everything doing for him. After a few months he died. It is interesting how greatly he was missed by the staff and patients in that ward. They discovered what an enormous influence for good he had been. How was this? It was because he was not interested in his own state but in others – patients and staff and visitors. He was concerned about others; some even thought at times that he was a little presumptuous in his interest, although they soon realized that he never betrayed confidences. People found that they could talk to him. He sympathized and encouraged; he shared their worries and cherished their hopes. They came to realize that he thought about them as individuals who were important to him and that he was concerned about their wellbeing. He did not make people feel embarrassed at the way they complained when they saw how he suffered without complaining; they discovered that he sympathized with their feelings and helped them to understand why they felt that way. They detected that he felt hurt when they were – and yet that he never wanted to be shielded from the real persons that they were and the situations that they were in. He giggled at the daft things that sometimes happened and helped others to see the funny side of embarrassing procedures. He thought about what they told him and sometimes gently suggested that there might be a different way of seeing things and of tackling difficulties. As he lay quietly in the corner it seemed that he was pondering about how they might see solutions to the problems that disturbed them and find ways to enhance their lives. When other patients were going home, he was happy with them; he never took the edge of their happiness by saying 'Oh, I wish I were the one who is going home'.

Mark's presence was one of benign grace. He never lifted a finger to do anything for anyone. He could not. And yet he did a great deal for those in the ward. When he died they missed him.

When people think of the activity of God, they generally consider that it must be thought of as the exercise of an unsurpassably powerful, controlling effectiveness. It is assumed that whatever God wills must be so, for that is what is held to be entailed in being God: 'God said … So it was' (cf. Genesis 1.24). Is, however, the assumption that God's activity is of this kind mistaken? Perhaps the model for understanding divine activity is rather to be conceived in terms of what Mark did and of how he did it. If this be so, it is a basic (albeit prevalent) error for theism to ground the ultimate purpose, value and meaning in reality by reference to what God's personal agency determines irresistibly to be the case. Instead of conceiving God's activity on the model of controlling persons and imperial nation states who force others to conform to what they will, maybe the activity of God, so far as human beings are concerned, is to be regarded as that of providing an understanding of where things are going wrong and a vision of what might be. It is, however, an understanding and a vision to which they are left free to respond or not as they choose.

Such an understanding of God may be held to emerge from reflection on remarks that Whitehead makes in the final part of *Process and Reality*. While he judges that 'the brief Galilean vision of humility flickered throughout the ages, uncertainly',[20] he presents a vision of God as one who, as 'the lure for feeling, the eternal urge of desire',[21] is 'best conceived' as 'a tender care that nothing be lost'.[22] As 'the great companion – the fellow-sufferer who understands'[23] God 'saves' the world as 'the poet of the world, with tender patience leading it by his vision of truth, beauty, and goodness'.[24] Strangers to Whitehead may suspect this somewhat flowery language of being empty rhetoric. Its poetic expressions suggest, however, a fruitful way to make sense of the agency of God.

Although Whitehead does not develop the notion of 'superject' to any great extent,[25] his comments on the nature of divine activity in the final chapter of *Process and Reality* may be interpreted as indicating the character of the superjective aspect of God in relation to the world. While the 'primordial nature' of God gives ontological grounding to what is possible, and

[20] Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, edited by D. R. Griffin and D. W. Sherburne, (New York NY: The Free Press, 1978), 342. [21] *Ibid.*, 344.
[22] *Ibid.*, 346. [23] *Ibid.*, 351.
[24] *Ibid.*, 346; in the Macmillan text Whitehead crossed out 'leading' and wrote 'persuading' and 'swaying' in the margin, but he never indicated which word he wanted.
[25] In Part V of *Process and Reality*, Whitehead does not use a threefold distinction in the divine reality of primordial, consequent and superjective natures but includes what is distinguishable as the superjective (since it is a response to what is in the consequent nature by reference to the possibilities in the primordial nature) in his treatment of the consequent nature of God. Hence Whitehead himself states in this part of the work that God's nature is 'dipolar' (345). It should be noted, however, that what Whitehead means by speaking of a 'dipolar' understanding of the divine reality is not what Hartshorne means by this description. Furthermore, although this is not the place to argue it, it is arguable that a threefold differentiation that distinguishes the superjective from the primordial and consequent natures of the divine is a clearer way of apprehending how Whitehead understands the divine reality.

the 'consequent nature' of God embraces as objects all that has been actualized,[26] the superjective nature of God

> prehends every actuality for what it can be … – its sufferings, its sorrows, its failures, its triumphs, its immediacies of joy – woven by rightness of feeling into the harmony of the universal feeling, which is always immediate, always many, always one, always with novel advance, moving onward and never perishing … . He saves the world as it passes into the immediacy of his own life. It is the judgment of a tenderness which loses nothing that can be saved. It is also the judgment of a wisdom which uses what in the temporal world is mere wreckage.[27]

All this is done, furthermore, with 'infinite patience', for 'God's role is not the combat of productive force with productive force, of destructive force with destructive force; it lies in the patient operation of the over-powering rationality of his conceptual harmonization'.[28] (The use of 'over-powering' in this context is perhaps unfortunate since it has overtones that conflict somewhat with the persuasive patience of the divine activity that Whitehead is affirming. As Samuel Alexander remarked, 'Might is not right; … . But right is might; only, because that proposition is so easily misapprehended, it were better replaced by the less pointed one, that right is what is suited to prevail in the judgments of men.')[29]

Hartshorne describes Whitehead's understanding of the non-coercive nature of God's relationship to the world as 'one of the greatest metaphysical discoveries'. It is an understanding that he endorses. As he puts it, for Whitehead the 'divine method of world control is called "persuasion"'. This expresses his 'clear realization that it is by molding himself that God molds us, by presenting at each moment a partly new ideal or order of preference which our unselfconscious awareness takes as object, and thus renders influential upon our entire activity'. God thus inspires us 'with novel ideals for novel occasions' by changing Godself for, 'as Plato correctly said', the 'divine mover is self-moved'. As a result 'we take our cues for this moment by seeing, that is, feeling, what God as of this moment desiderates'.[30] Later Hartshorne speaks of God as guiding 'all things (subject to the limits assigned to freedom) by the persuasiveness of his sensitivity' – a sensitivity that is the product of 'unlimited and universal responsiveness'.[31]

These remarks by Whitehead and Hartshorne indicate how a model for understanding the nature of God's activity may be found in the gentle sympathy and caring suggestions of quadriplegic Mark. Furthermore, this way of understanding the activity of God may be attractive to theists because in principle it offers them a way to reconcile their faith in God with what is observed to happen in the world – for, according to this model, while God

[26] Whitehead *Process and Reality*, 345. [27] *Ibid*., 346. [28] *Ibid*.
[29] Samuel Alexander 'Artistic creation and cosmic creation', a paper given to the British Academy in November 1927, reprinted in *Philosophical and Literary Pieces* (London: Macmillan, 1939), 276.
[30] Hartshorne *Divine Relativity*, 142. [31] *Ibid*., 154.

presents visions of what will realize truth, beauty and goodness, it is up to the non-divine agents who are offered the visions to decide whether or not they will follow them. Although, according to this model, God is not to be conceived as some irresistible force that has the power to destroy whatever might harm us (this is the illusion of a supreme being who can protect us against the pitiless forces of nature, society and other persons that Freud suggests is developed by believers when they find that their parents are inadequate defenders), nevertheless the notion of divine activity has significance in that it refers to a persuasiveness that affects all non-divine agents. Whatever is in the process of concrescing itself feels, among its prehensions, God's lure towards what will produce for it the highest creative enrichment that is compatible with the highest enrichment of all others.

VI
DISCERNING GOD'S VISION OF THE GOOD

In practice, however, the credibility of this model depends on the ability of those who present it to answer the question: how is God's vision of truth, beauty and goodness actually prehended? It is here that the model with Mark breaks down. Although Mark was physically limited in many ways, he was able to speak to those around him. Accordingly when Mark wished to make suggestions and people were prepared to listen to him, they had no problem in hearing clearly and accurately what he wanted to share with them. In the case of God there is a radical communication problem. While theism, particularly as understood in the revised form that Hartshorne calls 'panentheism', holds that God is everywhere and that all is in God, so that there is no location and there never has been and never will be any occasion to which God is not immediately and intimately present,[32] the problem for self-conscious agents like human beings is to discern how to apprehend the guiding suggestions that allegedly emanate from the divine evaluation of the best possibility to be sought in each situation.

On the one hand, while claims that God is heard directly in a quasi-audible form as an inner voice offering specific ideas are presumably acceptable to those who consider that they have heard such a 'voice', they are not likely to persuade others who are not aware of having had such an experience, that they are rationally significant claims about experience of the divine. Examination of such claims suggests that what people, individually as well as in groups, may 'hear' as a direct 'word' from God can be plausibly interpreted

[32] Whereas traditionally theism may have maintained that 'God is expressed to us here on every side, shining out as a Form of Intelligence in every object round us', which understanding is what Horace Bushnell considered to be 'the real virtue of Paley's argument' (*God in Christ*, 65), current understanding indicates that God is not to be seen as the constructor of the natural and social order. Rather, as panentheistic notions suggest, God is to be understood as an all-embracing ambience within whose presence and gracious influence developments occur.

as projections onto the divine of their own wishes or, less self-interestedly, of what they consider would be good, true and beautiful. On the other hand there seems to be a deep sympathy in people that makes them uncomfortable when they are aware of others' suffering. Such awareness evokes in them a strong urge to help. People also seem to be attracted to what offers goodness, truth and beauty.[33] At least, this seems to be the case with those who are sensitive persons – and it is arguable that those whose sensitivity is restricted or apparently absent show themselves in that respect to be limited in their humanity. If, however, responsiveness to values be granted to be part of the character of authentic human being, it may be possible to develop an answer to the question of how people become aware of the divine vision for themselves and for others. This answer is that the awareness lies in the appreciation of what is (and of what may become) true, beautiful and good, and in the recognition of the supreme desirability of its actualization. Even if, as Alexander puts it, 'God is something higher than man or man's creations, knowledge and beauty and goodness, and in the order of significance of things, absorbs and presupposes them and all things below them',[34] the will of God may be held to be perceived and worshipped in the joy that comes from seeking and finding truth, beauty and goodness in all that is as well as in what transcends it.

VII
THE KENOTICISM OF THE QUADRIPLEGIC GOD

Critics may challenge this solution to the problem of discerning the will of God on the grounds that it converts awareness of God into something that does not need reference to God. They may argue that if awareness of what is true, beautiful and good, wherever it be found and wherever it be sought, is what is important, there is no need to allow theism to complicate matters by interpreting this awareness as an awareness of *God*. Is there merit in this criticism? In the end the crux of the issue so far as theistic faith is concerned seems to be the question of whether the reference to God and the awareness of God as God is theistically important. The question, however, is not simply whether it matters if God be not perceived as such. The crux of the question concerns whether or not theistic faith must maintain that it is to be thought

[33] Sceptics may say that this is because what is held to be beautiful, true and good is identified by what attracts. Although this is not the place to attempt to rebut the sceptics's subjective view, the argument here implies an objective view of fundamental values.

[34] Alexander *Beauty and Other Forms of Value*, 294. In this passage Alexander further states that God transcends truth, beauty and goodness but is not their creator; rather 'his deity is (as I think) their outcome and they are a preparation for it'. It is arguably preferable, however, to hold that these ultimate values are neither dependent on God (as divine creations) nor external to God (as independent standards that God must accept) but are necessarily intrinsic to what it is to be God – in Whitehead's phrase, they are 'founded upon the necessities of the nature of God', *Adventures of Ideas*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933), 215. See on this my *Anthropological Character of Theology: Conditioning Theological Understanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 73f.

important to *God* to be perceived as the source of the visions of truth, beauty and goodness.

Many theists will probably respond to this question by holding that it is theistically unacceptable to suggest that the recognition of God may not matter to God. They may, for example, point out that God may be defined as the proper and totally adequate object of worship, and that the chief end of the human is held to be the worship of God. The two points, the nature of God and the ultimate duty of the human, are either seen as inseparable or the latter is regarded as a clear consequence of the former. The common interpretation of this position, however, may not be as self-evident as it is widely considered to be. It may be understood to express a projection of human selfishness onto God rather than authentic insight into the divine.

Although the first commandment to 'love God' with the whole of one's being (Matthew 22.37f) may appear to conflict with the view of God being suggested in this section, it is arguable that, even if the commandment be given binding dominical status, it is to be interpreted not as an order to pander to the vanity of God (for a being demanding such a response would be radically unworshipful) but as a call to love (and so to seek to actualize in every possible way) that which instantiates the divine being, namely by being totally devoted to respecting and expressing truth, beauty and goodness. If this be so, it does not follow from the definitive worshipfulness of God that it is God's primary desire to be worshipped. It may be that a more adequate conception of the divine may be found by considering the concept of a *kenotic* God.

In Christian doctrine the theological notion of *kenosis* is generally used in connection with some christological theories about the character of the incarnation of God in Jesus as the Christ. As such it is sometimes employed in a way that intimates that the event of Jesus as the Christ is an act of divine condescension and accommodation in which God takes on human nature and shares its experiences rather as temporarily-abled students may use wheelchairs for a few days to get an inkling of what it may feel like to be disabled, or as politicians may spend a night or two in cardboard boxes on the street to get a feeling of what it may be like to be homeless, *when* the first basically know they can walk away and the second that they have comfortable homes to return to in the morning for food and hot baths. It is arguable, however, that if there were real incarnation of the divine in the event of Jesus as the Christ, then Jesus could not have such awareness of the temporary (and as such somewhat artificial) nature of his human experiences. The cry of dereliction may accordingly be taken to indicate that the *kenosis* of the divine was an unqualified identification with the human state.

However, whatever may be the correct way to use the notion of *kenosis* in christological doctrine (a topic that is outside the domain of this paper), it is worth considering whether the notion of *kenosis* ought not to be applied

more radically, namely, by applying it to the intrinsic nature of God. Perhaps believers and theologians ought to appreciate that God is not self-regarding, and that the notion of God as one who enjoys being worshipped, let alone as one who seeks (or even demands) to be worshipped, is blasphemous.

This idea may be hard to entertain because human beings are so self-centred that they cannot feel comfortable with the idea of a perfect being that as such is fundamentally other-centred. Young children delight in affirming themselves. Their relationship with others is often marked by such phrases as 'Let me do it', 'Look what I did'. As they grow up they may learn that it is socially unacceptable to be self-centred and so adopt strategies to avoid letting it be obvious. Nevertheless, in many people, basic self-centredness persists. Although in some cases it is heavily disguised, it also finds expression in foolish and childish assertions of 'I did it my way'. They consider that they find satisfaction in 'doing their own thing' and in controlling others to make them conform to their wishes. The greater the control that a person is seen to exercise, the greater that person is considered to be. Thus people seek power and, as Van Der Leeuw puts it at the end of his extensive study of religion, if people cannot find it in themselves to an extent that satisfies them, they seek to draw it into their own life through religion.[35]

Self-centred images of selfhood are, however, not only the antithesis of authentic theistic faith; they are also profoundly misleading and destructive when used to construct images of ideal selfhood. Persons find authentic being in other-centred relationships with fellow human beings. Self-centredness prevents such relationships developing. Furthermore, while self-centred images of selfhood are harmful as guides to the nature of human flourishing, they may be even more disastrous when they are applied to God. As Whitehead suggests, they lead to the idolatry of fashioning notions of 'God in the image of an imperial ruler, God in the image of a personification of moral energy, God in the image of an ultimate philosophical principle' in contrast to 'the Galilean origin of Christianity' that 'does not emphasize the ruling Caesar, or the ruthless moralist, or the unmoved mover' but 'dwells upon the tender elements in the world, which slowly and in quietness operate by love'.[36]

There seems to be something fundamentally unsatisfactory with holding that God wants, even demands, to be the centre of attention. Such a conception of God ascribes to the divine characteristics typical of an insecure person. It also appears more than a little odd that theists who affirm that God is love and that we are to love, and who consequently consider that faith demands that we see egoism as wrong and that we should surrender ourselves to God, at the same time suggest that God is the absolute, supreme egoist. As was suggested earlier, the common understanding of the first command-

[35] G. Van Der Leeuw (translated by J. E. Turner) *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1964), 679.

[36] Whitehead *Process and Reality*, 342–343.

ment, if not the command itself, may thus be criticized for putting forward a fundamentally misguided projection onto God of the essential character of sin! Theists who adopt this understanding seem to be still operating on a Ptolemaic view of things – except that the centre of their spheres of understanding is not the sun but a self-centred God. They fashion an image of God by projecting their self-centredness onto God (and so attribute to God the basic character of sin) rather than take with radical seriousness the kenotic implications of believing that God is love, radically and unreservedly. Instead of envisaging God as behaving like someone who lacks self-confidence or someone who is selfish, perhaps God should rather be seen as driven by other-directed love and so as one who is not interested in being known by others so long as those others share God's prehension of truth, beauty and goodness – and find satisfaction and joy in pursuing those visions.

When, therefore, we try to find an appropriate model for God's self-effacing, other-directed activity in the divine–human relationship, we might do well to consider thinking of God as intimately present to each person and yet at the same time behaving like polite Navajo Indians[37] who, when they wish to visit people in their *hogan*, wait at a distance from that *hogan* until someone inside comes to the door to invite them in. Furthermore, with unsurpassable love and absolutely clear awareness of what is the best for each person, God may not only be distinct from pushy salespersons, be it for vacuum cleaners or salvation, who pester us to sign up for their wares; appreciation of the other-centred love of God may also imply that God is to be conceived as one whose primary concern is that we see the vision or get the message, not that we recognize and acknowledge its source. A theism that recognizes the other-centred kenotic implications of the notion that God is essentially love and takes it with deep seriousness may thus have to come to recognize that for God it is our perception of truth, beauty and goodness that is important – and that we are lured to enjoy them to full.

VIII

THE CREDIBILITY OF FAITH IN A QUADRIPLEGIC GOD

Is such an understanding of God a viable basis for theistic faith? Does it satisfy the theist's primal faith, or does theistic faith require the notion of a powerful active God who can be thought to do mighty things in general and special providence, even though experience makes it seem doubtful that such a being exists?

The answer to these questions depends on whether it is reasonable to have fundamental confidence in the ultimate meaningfulness and fairness of

[37] I confess that practically all my knowledge of the Navajo comes from Tony Hillerman's novels to which I was introduced by a gift from Edward Farley, and which I trust because Farley told me that the information about the Navajo in these stories is reliable!

reality if God be conceived as an other-centred, omnipresent, gracious ambience that has ceaselessly sought and will for ever ceaselessly seek to attract people to those activities that will give them the highest satisfaction compatible with the satisfaction of all others. The key to the answer lies in whether it is judged appropriate to ground primal faith on the quadriplegic nature of divine activity.

Some may assert that more is necessary if theism is to offer a credible faith for human beings. In *Man's Vision of God* Hartshorne states that

> Proud, willful, uncooperative men will never understand the gentle passivity of God, as weak and flabby men will never understand the energy of his resistance to the excesses of creaturely will at the point where these excesses threaten the destruction of creaturely vitality … . The divine love … seems clearly to include the refusal to provide the unsocial with a monopoly upon the use of coercion. Coercion to prevent the use of coercion to destroy freedom generally is in no way action without social awareness but one of its crucial expressions. Freedom must not be free to destroy freedom.[38]

Illuminating as are many of Hartshorne's insights into the concept of God, this is one that has to be challenged. The evil that is found in nations, institutions, and individuals may well make us wish and, in traditional theistic understanding, expect that in the end God will act coercively to thwart the coercion that prevents the fulfilment of human being. Such a view – perhaps such a hope – seems, however, to be the result of succumbing to the temptation of confusing our wish for, our illusion of, a directly powerful God with the reality of God. This view – this hope – does not seem to be rationally sustainable when we observe what happens in the world. So far as Christianity is concerned, it is also hard to fit with the belief that the character of God is seen supremely in a man being tortured to death rather than in his expected protection by 'twelve legions of angels' (Matthew 26.53). As has been quoted, Whitehead holds that 'God's role is not the combat … of destructive force with destructive force'; 'it lies in the patient operation of the over-powering rationality of his conceptual harmonization'.[39] According to this understanding of theism, God does not promise success or victory but only that God will not cease to be aware of and respond to whatever is coming to be. For a tiny fragment of the cosmic story this is occurring as a response to and a luring of beings that are self-conscious and, to a significant extent, consciously self-determining. They also seem to be beings that can appreciate the final satisfaction to be found in actualizing what is true, beautiful and good.

This may seem to some not to offer a robust enough grounding for a theistic form of primal faith. Those who want something more robust have, however,

[38] Charles Hartshorne *Man's Vision of God and the Logic of Theism* (Hamden CT: Archon Books, 1964), 173; the book was first published in 1941.

[39] Whitehead *Process and Reality*, 346; note the comment made earlier about the use of the term 'over-powering'.

to ask whether what they desire could be credible when what happens in the world is taken seriously. The image of a self-effacing, other-centred, vulnerable God has the advantage that perhaps it is compatible with what the world is like. And, however hurt the eminently passible God may be by the ways we suffer and by the ways we inflict suffering, nothing can destroy God. Whatever comes about, divine activity is 'a tender care that nothing be lost' if it be in any way possible to salvage it for good. It may thus be that God is best conceived as 'the poet of the world, with tender patience leading it by his vision of truth, beauty, and goodness'.[40] It is also a notion of the divine activity that may find it important to take on board Alexander's notion that

> God is not the already perfect being ... but is himself in the making, and his divine quality or deity a stage in time beyond the human quality .... The values, truth, goodness, beauty, are not themselves divine or witnesses to divinity, but are the basis on which it is erected, or the seed from which it springs .... God's deity is nurtured by all that it transcends. And since this nutriment of deity is infinite, being the whole world, so God's distinctive deity is infinite .... The numinous mystery still attaches to a world making for deity; and love given and returned is, as it seems to me, as conceivable towards a being, greater than ourselves, who draws us forward to himself by the force of our own aspirations, as to the one who draws backward to him the creatures which he created to love him.[41]

This, however, is another story.

[40] *Ibid.*
[41] Samuel Alexander 'Theism and pantheism', reprinted in *Philosophical and Literary Pieces*, 330–331.