

Does God Intervene?

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The Death of the God of the Gaps in a World Come of Age

Writing from his cell in Tegel Prison in 1944, less than a year before his execution, Dietrich Bonhoeffer thought deeply about the meaning of Christian faith in a world “come of age,” a world that no longer needed what he referred to as “the God hypothesis,” a world in which Christian faith would have to become “religionless.” In such a world God would no longer be found at the edges of human experience or in the “gaps” of human knowledge (that is, in what they do not know), but in the center of life. It is wrong, Bonhoeffer wrote, “to use God as a stop-gap for the incompleteness of our knowledge.... We are to find God in what we know, not in what we don’t know; God wants us to realize his presence not in unsolved problems, but in those that are solved.”¹

Much has been written about what exactly Bonhoeffer may have meant (and not meant) by “religionless Christianity,” and what he meant (and did not mean) by his claim that in a religionless world, “the church is the church only when it exists for others.”² Tragically, a prison cell and his martyrdom on April 9, 1945 did not allow him to tell us what he meant, if he did indeed have a fully developed proposal in mind. One thing, however, is clear. Bonhoeffer believed God could no longer be understood as “the God of the gaps,” the *deus ex machina*, the God who is kept offstage in the wings of the human drama until all is apparently lost and is then suddenly lowered on to the stage, into the fray, to solve an apparently insoluble problem. This is no longer possible in a “world come of age,” Bonhoeffer argued, because God is no longer needed to explain what we once could not but now can, and because God is not to be found in the gaps, on the edges or the boundaries, of human knowledge and experience, “but at the centre, not in weaknesses but in strength; and therefore not in death and guilt but in man’s life and goodness.”

Why was Bonhoeffer so strongly committed to a “religionless” Christianity and to a faith that no longer relegated God to the margins and gaps of human existence? There are several reasons, but two are particularly important. First, he believed that the “whole nineteen-hundred-year-old Christian preaching and theology rest on the ‘religious *a priori*’ of mankind.” For two hundred years Christian theology attempted to explain “religion” by appealing to an *a priori*, something in the structure of human existence--such as “a taste for the infinite” or the human capacity for self-transcendence--that would explain why humanity (and not just Christians) are “religiously inclined.” But if this *a priori* should come to be understood not as a permanent, ontological feature of human being but as “a historically conditioned and transient form of human self-expression” (as Bonhoeffer thought it had), then religion (including Christianity) would no longer be intelligible, and its defense would be left to “a few ‘last survivors of the age of chivalry’ or a few intellectually dishonest people on whom we can descend as ‘religious.’”³

Second, Bonhoeffer worried that in the “modern” world (He did not know about “postmodernism.”) God has been “increasingly pushed out of a world that has come

of age, out of the spheres of our knowledge and life” and “relegated to a realm beyond the world of experience.”⁴ God and religion are no longer located in what we know and experience, not in daily life, but in the “gaps,” in the inexplicable. For a religious faith based on incarnation, on the claim that “the Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14), God’s banishment from the world and from experience is nothing less than the death of religion and the death of the God of traditional Christian faith. What we need, he proposed, is a “religionless” Christianity, a faith that once again looks for God in what we know and not in what we do not.

Bonhoeffer wanted Christian theology to get out of the boundary business. He argued that God is to be found not on the boundaries of life but in its center because he recognized that the history of human knowledge has been one of constant expansion, while the history of Christian theology has been one of constant retreat and constriction. In too much of modern theology the response to new discoveries in science has been to retreat and recircle the wagons. But while Bonhoeffer was thinking his way through these issues in May, 1944, he was sitting in a Nazi prison and had only eleven months left to live. He surely must have known that if the planned attempt to kill Hitler on July 20, 1944, failed (as it did), his fate was certain. The executioner’s gallows awaited him. In an enigmatic but deeply provocative remark, he wrote, “Belief in the resurrection is *not* the ‘solution’ of the problem of death. God’s ‘beyond’ is not the beyond of our cognitive faculties....God is beyond in the midst of our life. The church stands not at the boundaries where human powers give out, but in the middle of the village.”⁵

But what did Bonhoeffer mean? In what sense is resurrection not “the solution to the problem of death?” And in what sense is God’s “beyond” not that which is beyond our cognitive faculties, but a different kind of “beyond,” one found in the midst of life, in the middle of the village?

Bonhoeffer’s reflections raise many important theological questions. By no means did he deny that God has acted and continues to act in human history, but he did reject the notion that God’s activity is to be found only or even primarily at the boundaries of human experience, in the mysteries of birth and in death. But if God is not to be found only in the gaps, if God is not the hypothesis we use to explain what reason cannot, does that mean transcendent, almighty God does not intervene in human history at all—not only at the gaps but in the rest of history as well? What then does Christian faith mean when it affirms that God acts or intervenes in the world?

The Intervening God of the Bible

It certainly seems that the God described in the Bible intervenes in human history. In the Bible not only does God create all that is out of nothing, but God intervenes in human history to create a world, a people, a nation, establishes covenants with them, covenants structured by means of commandments, frees them from bondage in Egypt, feeds them with manna in the wilderness, and leads them into the promised land by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. When Israel ignores the commandments of the covenant, God sends prophets to chastise them, and when they ignore the prophets, God sends foreign armies, Assyrians and Babylonians, to punish them, to destroy Jerusalem, and to send them into exile. This same God hears the cries of the people of Israel and leads them out of exile and back to Jerusalem to rebuild the city and the temple. In God’s own good time God again intervenes and sends the long

promised Messiah to embody God's grace, love, and mercy in human history and to proclaim the nearness of God's kingdom in the person of the Messiah. Yet again Israel rejects God's prophet and kills him. And once again God again intervenes, raises his anointed one to everlasting glory, and sends his Spirit to make the Messiah present and create a church that will witness to what God has done and what God is yet to do—God's transformation of heaven and earth into a new creation. Surely the God described in this biblical story is a God who intervenes in human affairs. And in this story no "act of God" is more of an "intervention" than the Christian claim that God "raised up" Jesus. That is the "mother lode" of all of God's interventions and the basis of Christian faith. Why then have so many theologians in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries objected to an "interventionist" God?

Bonhoeffer was by no means the first theologian to worry about Christianity's banishment of God to the gaps of human experience. Since the European Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, theologians in the Christian West have struggled with the challenge of reconciling the God of the biblical story with nature and history as they have come to be described in the modern world, a description that, as Bonhoeffer recognized, has little need of a "God hypothesis." The problem was clearly stated fifteen years after Bonhoeffer's death, in 1960, by Langdon Gilkey in an article entitled "Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language." Gilkey argued that there is a fundamental difference between biblical language about God acting and intervening and the everyday use of these terms to describe human experience. Too often we use terms such as "act" to describe God the same way we use them to describe human action and events in everyday experience. That is, we use them literally and univocally.

Even though theologians have long argued that biblical language about God should not be interpreted literally, modern Christians frequently fail to recognize that terms like "act" should not be used to refer to God in the same way we use them to refer to human beings. Rather, such language should be understood analogically. The narratives describing the Exodus "event," Gilkey argued, are "not so much *histories* of what God actually did and said as *parables* expressive of the faith the post-Exodus Jews had, namely, belief in a God who was active, did deeds, spoke promises and commands, and so on.... Thus the Bible is a book descriptive not of the acts of God but of Hebrew religion."⁶ What we desperately need, Gilkey proposed over fifty years ago, "is a theological ontology that will put intelligible and credible meanings into our analogical categories of divine deeds and of divine self-manifestation through events."⁷ He suggested two changes that might move theology in that direction. First, biblical theology must recognize the distinction between univocal and analogical discourse and take cosmology and ontology more seriously than it has. It might do so by identifying what biblical writers meant to say and then by stating "what *we* believe God actually to have done." Second, "we must also try to understand what we might mean in systematic theology by the general activity of God." That is, we must "have some conception of how God acts in ordinary events.... some understanding of the relation of God to general experience."⁸ One can imagine that Bonhoeffer might have supported Gilkey's latter suggestion—clarifying how God acts in ordinary events or, as Bonhoeffer put it, "in the middle of the village" and not in the gaps.

Bonhoeffer's and Gilkey's concerns about Christian claims that God intervenes in human events are similar, but also different. Bonhoeffer worries that if Christians

surrender everyday experience to purely secular description and restrict God's activity to the inexplicable, they effectively eliminate God from the world; that is, God "dies." Gilkey, on the other hand, worries that Christians uncritically assume that they can speak of God "acting" in the same way that they speak of human beings "acting" because they fail to recognize that the cosmology of the Bible is vastly different from that of modernity and consequently fail to understand that words used univocally to describe human experience can be used only analogically in relation to God.

Gilkey is also concerned about the intelligibility of Christian language about God. In their religious lives many modern Christians have no difficulty speaking about God as a supernatural reality who miraculously intervenes in human life. That cosmology, however, often disappears in their Monday through Saturday lives. They assume an altogether different cosmology in their everyday existence. They may never have heard of Ernst Troeltsch, but they make assumptions about reality that reflect Troeltsch's claim that modern people understand history on the basis of the principles of analogy and correlation, principles that assume an interconnectedness between events and that reject the notion of unique or anomalous events, "miracles" that have no relation to events that precede or follow them. When children become ill, Christian parents may indeed pray to God, but the first thing most of them do call a doctor. There is a different cosmology in the world described by the Bible than that reflected in the way many contemporary Christians in the Western world understand and describe their daily experience. A moral dilemma arises when Christians reject the supernatural claims made by other religious faiths, dismissing them as "superstition," but insist the world make room for their particular miracles. One does not have to agree with Troeltsch's claim that Christians must adhere to the principles of analogy and correlation in human events or accept the claim that there cannot be anomalous events to agree that it is morally inconsistent to have two sets of rules in religious discourse—one that applies to my faith and that allows appeals to supernatural intervention and a second that applies to all other faiths and that dismisses such appeals as superstition.

Constructive Proposals

In "classical" Christian theology (theology prior to the European Enlightenment), a frequent model describing God's activity in the world employed a distinction between first and second causes. Not surprisingly, this distinction was often invoked in discussions of God's providential activity. "The Christian heart," wrote John Calvin, "persuaded that all things happen by God's plan, and that nothing takes place by chance, will ever look to him as the principal cause of things, yet will give attention to the secondary causes in their proper place."⁹ Hence, "a godly man will not overlook the secondary causes," and should anyone suffer loss because of negligence or imprudence, "he will conclude that it came about by the Lord's will, but also impute it to himself."¹⁰ This distinction between the first or primary cause (God's will) and secondary causes (probable "laws" of nature) enabled Calvin to affirm the "sovereignty" of divine agency while still acknowledging the reality of natural laws and human agency. The Westminster Confession of Faith, written in the middle of the seventeenth century, follows suite. Although God, as first cause, is the reason "all things come to pass immutably and infallibly, yet, by the same providence, he ordereth them to fall out according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily,

freely, or contingently.”¹¹

In “modern” (post-Enlightenment) Western theology, theologians have offered various reinterpretations of God’s agency that have attempted to avoid describing God as a first cause, who exists “above” nature (that is, a “supernatural” God) and who from time to time intervenes in the secondary causes of creation. An “early modern” proposal came from Friedrich Schleiermacher, who rejected distinctions between first and second causes, God’s actuality and potentiality, God’s necessary and free will, and reinterpreted God’s omnipotence on the basis of what he described as a human feeling of absolute or utter dependence. Divine omnipotence, he argued, is not a supplement to natural causes, but can “only be conceived as eternal and omnipresent,” and hence “it is inadmissible to suppose that at any time anything should begin to be through omnipotence; on the contrary, through omnipotence everything is *already* posited which comes into existence through finite causes, in time and space.”¹² Divine omnipotence, therefore, is not to be found outside of or apart from the natural order; rather, “everything is and becomes altogether by means of the natural order, so that each takes place through all and all wholly through the divine omnipotence.” God’s omnipotence, therefore, “presents itself completely and exhaustively in the totality of finite being.”¹³

A second model for interpreting God’s activity comes from the last third of the twentieth century and bears some striking similarities to Schleiermacher’s. For Catholic theologian Karl Rahner, the word “God” is grounded in “the transcendental experience of our orientation towards the absolute mystery,” and the “concept ‘God’ is not a grasp of God by which a person masters the mystery, but it is letting oneself be grasped by the mystery which is ever present and yet ever distant.”¹⁴ The God who is understood as that “which operates and functions as an individual existent alongside other existents, and who would thus as it were be a member of the larger household of all reality”¹⁵ does not exist. We know God not “as one individual object alongside others, but only as the term of transcendence.”¹⁶ But is not God a person? God is a person, Rahner argues, but not an individual person and not a person in the same sense that humans are; rather, God is “the absolute person who stands in absolute freedom vis-à-vis everything which he establishes as different from himself.”¹⁷

Does Rahner’s God intervene in the world? Not if that means “that by his activity he inserts himself as a link in this chain of causes as one cause among them.”¹⁸ “God intervenes” can only be understood as “the historical concreteness of the transcendental self-communication of God which is already intrinsic to the concrete world.” It is “always only the becoming historical and becoming concrete of that ‘intervention’ in which God as the transcendental ground of the world has from the outset embedded himself in this world as its self-communicating ground.”¹⁹ Does God hear prayers, work signs, and intervene in history? Not if by “intervention” we mean that God is “in principle removed from the causal relationships of the world,” but only when we, on the one hand, “accept this concrete world in all its concreteness,” and, on the other hand, also accept our subjective transcendental relationship to God.²⁰

Rahner’s proposal attempts to demonstrate “how God can really be God and not simply an element of the world, and how, nevertheless, in our religious relationship to the world we are to understand him as not remaining outside the world.”²¹ In other words Rahner attempts to find God not in what Bonhoeffer described as the “gaps,” but in the center of human life. In response to issues raised by Gilkey, Rahner attempts to

describe how Christians can speak of God's activity without living schizophrenically in two different cosmologies.

Rahner's is only one of many attempts by modern theologians to interpret God's intervention in the world differently than did Calvin and other classical theologians. A third example is Gordon Kaufmann's proposal that we think of an "act" of God not as "a miraculous act that God directly causes," but as a "master act," "not a new event that suddenly and without adequate prior conditions rips inexplicably into the fabric of existence," but as that which "gives the world the structure it has and gives natural and historical processes their direction."²² God's act, therefore, refers to the "whole complicated and intricate teleological movement of all nature and history" and "provides the context and meaning of all that occurs."²³

A fourth example of recent attempts to reinterpret God's "intervention" is Austin Farrer's "paradox of double agency," in which a single action can be understood to the result of both divine and human agency.²⁴ And yet a final example is Kathryn Tanner's suggestion that God's transcendence and immanence be understood "noncontrastively." Tanner agrees with Rahner that "the dilemma of the 'immanence' or 'transcendence' of God must be overcome without sacrificing either the one or the other concern."²⁵ Christian speech about a transcendent God who is directly involved in the world will be coherent, therefore, if it observes two rules. First, we should "avoid both a simple univocal attribution of predicates to God and world and a simple contrast of divine and non-divine predicates." In other words God's transcendence is neither univocal or simple contrast or equivocal. Second, in talk about God's creative agency, we should avoid "all suggestions of limitation in scope or manner."²⁶ If these rules are followed and if God is understood to be "a self-determined transcendence essentially independent of a contrast with the non-divine," then "God's transcendence over and against the world and God's immanent presence within it become non-exclusive possibilities."²⁷

These various proposals attempt in quite different ways to reconcile God's transcendence with God's immanence and divine agency with human freedom. Rarely, however, do they concentrate on that event which, more than any other, is the basis for Christian claims that God does "intervene" in the world—namely, the proclamation of the early church that "this Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses" (Acts 2:32). Not incarnation, not atonement, but God's "raising up" of Jesus is the foundational claim of Christian faith. Apart from Easter there is neither incarnation nor atonement. It is striking how infrequently the event of resurrection is discussed in the theological literature we have been reviewing. Interestingly, Schleiermacher argues that "the redeeming efficacy of Christ depends upon the being of God in Him, and faith in Him is grounded upon the impression that such a being of God indwells Him." The disciples "recognized in Him [Christ] the Son of God without having the faintest premonition of his resurrection and ascension and we too may say the same of ourselves." For Rahner the resurrection is "the permanent validity of his [Jesus'] person and his cause," and "*faith* in his resurrection is an intrinsic element of this resurrection itself." In words that sound like they could have been written by Rudolf Bultmann, Rahner concludes, "We not only can but must say that Jesus is risen into the faith of his disciples."²⁸ In both cases Christian language about God's "raising up" Jesus is redeemed from supernaturalism, but only at the dear cost of anything resembling the New Testament claim that God did it.

The Resurrection as God's Intervention

The resurrection seems to be the rock on which many contemporary attempts to reinterpret God's interventionism founder. Unless contemporary string theory can eventually provide a means for reinterpreting causation in the everyday world and in so doing transform our understanding of reality, it is difficult to imagine how the Christian claim "God raised him up" can be explained in terms that are, to use Rahner's words, "already intrinsic to the concrete world." A recent attempt to do so is Denis Edwards' *How God Acts: Creation, Redemption and Special Divine Action*. Edwards borrows heavily from Rahner. In a chapter entitled "The Divine Act of Resurrection," Edwards makes the case for "a noninterventionist view of divine action where God is understood as acting in self-bestowing love, and this act of self-bestowing love takes effect in the whole range of created, secondary causes, including persons, words, and deeds."²⁹ Hence to claim that God's activity in raising Jesus is "noninterventionist" means that God is acting in and through created causes, and not from outside of them or "supernaturally." Such an interpretation of resurrection is important to Edwards because it enables him to argue that evolution can be understood eschatologically as culminating in the healing of creation.

Edwards' argument involves three claims: the resurrection "can be seen as a free act of God that comes from within creation and gives creation its deepest meaning;" it entails an ontological transformation of reality; and, finally, "it is an act of God that finds expression in secondary causes."³⁰ Edwards' first point, which sounds somewhat similar to Kaufman's proposal, is that Jesus' resurrection is a "unique and objective act of God," but it is not "an intervention in the universe from without."³¹ Resurrection, as Edwards interprets it, is "the self-giving love of God who is present in every ancient oak tree, every ant, and every kangaroo, closer than they are to themselves, as the source of their being and the enabler of their action."³² Resurrection is simply one part of a single "differentiated act of divine self-bestowal" that begins in creation and culminates in God's transformation of all things. Resurrection, then, is the meaning of creation.

Edwards' "noninterventionist" interpretation of resurrection means that God acts not from outside of creation but from within it and that human beings experience the effects of Jesus' resurrection in and through creaturely realities in the world or "secondary causes." The problem, of course, is whether Jesus' resurrection—not the effects of his resurrection, but the "resurrection event" itself—can be explained from within the processes of creation. Here Edwards takes a pass. For two reasons he refuses to discuss "the great act by which God raises up and transforms Christ crucified." First, we do not have direct access to the event (there were no witnesses to what happened inside Jesus' tomb), and second, this "transcendent act of God is hidden from our sight, and we know it only through its effects on the Christian community."³³ The problem is not simply one of "access," of not knowing enough or not having enough information. Notice Edwards' use of the word *hidden*. One might conclude from what the gospels say about Jesus' resurrection that even if one had stood outside Jesus' tomb, one may not have been able to see and understand Jesus' resurrection. Luke's story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus comes to mind; "their eyes were kept from recognizing him" (24:16). With good reason the response of the three women in Mark's Gospel to what they experienced in the empty tomb was terror and amazement (16:8).

If “God raised up Jesus” means that God acted to bring the crucified, dead, and buried Jesus to life—and not only to life but to eternal life, to life set free from the bonds and sting of death, to what Paul describes as “imperishability”—then that “act” cannot be described in terms of any set of secondary causes. If “God raised up Jesus” means that Jesus was not simply resuscitated, but “raised from the dead,” Edwards cannot describe this great act of God because it cannot be described as something that occurred in and through natural causes. Some events of transformation can be understood from within history and nature. This one cannot because it is the first fruits of the transformation of all things and “all things” cannot transform themselves.

Notes

- 1 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers From Prison: The Enlarged Edition*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 311.
- 2 Ibid., 382.
- 3 Ibid., 280.
- 4 Ibid., 341.
- 5 Ibid., 382.
- 6 Langdon Gilkey, “Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language” in *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 41 (1961), 197.
- 7 Ibid., 203.
- 8 Ibid., 204-5.
- 9 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 2 Vols., I: 218 (I, 17, 6).
- 10 Ibid., I:221-2 (I, 17, 9).
- 11 “The Westminster Confession of Faith” in *Book of Confessions: Study Edition* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1996), 179 (6.025).
- 12 Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*. Eds. H.R. Mackintosh and S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1928), 212 (#54.1), italics mine.
- 13 Ibid., 213 (#54.2).
- 14 Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: The Seabury Press, A Crossword Book, 1978), 54.
- 15 Ibid., 63.
- 16 Ibid., 64.
- 17 Ibid., 73.
- 18 Ibid., 86.
- 19 Ibid., 87.
- 20 Ibid., 88.
- 21 Ibid., 87.
- 22 Gordon D. Kaufman, “On the Meaning of ‘Act of God,’” in *God the Problem* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1972), 137-8.
- 23 Ibid., 137.
- 24 For example, see Brian Hebblethwaite and Edward Henderson, eds., *Divine Action: Studies Inspired by the Philosophical Theology of Austin Farrer*, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1990) and Thomas F. Tracy, ed. *The God Who Acts: Philosophical and Theological Explorations*. (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994).
- 25 Rahner, *Foundations*, 87.
- 26 Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1988), 47.
- 27 Ibid., 79.
- 28 Rahner, *Foundations*, 267-8.
- 29 Denis Edwards, *How God Acts: Creation, Redemption, and Special Divine Action* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 91.
- 30 Ibid., 92.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Ibid., 93.
- 33 Ibid., 100.