Can Liberals Still Believe that God (Literally) Does Anything?

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The notion of divine action is central to the Christian tradition. The God of the Bible is continually involved in direct actions at specific times and places within the world. The Israelite prophets attest to their role by miraculous acts; Moses wins freedom for the people of Israel through the ten plagues; and Yahweh shows his superiority to the gods of the peoples by manifesting greater power than they are able to muster. In his excellent book-length study, *The God of the Prophets*, William Paul Griffin demonstrates how fundamental is the image of God as an acting agent in the Hebrew scriptures. Fundamentally, God is "a thinking, valuing being who acts in ways which affect the physical and mental well-being of others," as well as being "the recipient of mental and physical activities by others."[1]

Throughout the New Testament Jesus' ministry is characterized by powerful miracles: turning water into wine, healing the sick, casting out demons, even raising the dead. And the pinnacle of the Christian kergyma, the decisive moment of salvation history, is the resurrection: the supernatural act by which God brought Jesus back to life from the dead. As Paul Gwynne writes, "The notion that God not only exists as creator and sustainer of the cosmos but is also actively involved in his creation is arguably one of the most fundamental and pervasive elements of the Christian faith."[2] Indeed, it would seem strange to believe that God exists but never actually does anything.

The Challenge to Divine Action

Unfortunately, the modern age has been harder on the idea of divine action than on perhaps any other religious notion. One of the foremost voices among the critics is that of David Hume. In *On Miracles* he writes

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[1] William Paul Griffin, *The God of the Prophets: An Analysis of Divine Action*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 249 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 11.

[2] See the excellent treatment by Paul Gwynne, *Special Divine Action: Key Issues in the Contemporary Debate (1965-1995)* (Rome: Editrice Pontificia Universita Gregoriana, 1996), quote p. 7. Other central books on divine action include Thomas F. Tracy, ed., *The God Who Acts: Philosophical and Theological Explorations* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1994); Thomas V. Morris, ed., *Divine and Human Action: Essays in the Metaphysics of Theism* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1988); Owen Thomas, ed., *God's Activity in the World: The Contemporary Problem* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983); and, on mental causation more generally, see John Heil and Alfred Mele, eds., *Mental Causation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995).

> Though the Being to whom [an alleged] miracle is ascribed, be, in this case, Almighty, it does not, upon that account, become a whit more probable; since it is impossible for us to know the attributes or actions of such a Being, otherwise than from the experience which we have of his productions, in the usual course of nature. This still reduces us to past observation, and obliges us to compare [on the one hand] the instances of the violation of truth in the testimony of men, with those of the violation of the laws of nature by miracles [on the other], in order to judge which of them is the most likely and probable.[3]

A miracle is by definition, Hume argues, an exception to the overwhelming experience of human beings in the world. Hence, he concludes, "there is no testimony for any [miracle], even those which have not been expressly detected, that is not opposed by an infinite number of witnesses; so that not only the miracle destroys the credit of testimony, but the testimony destroys itself" (p. 40).

Of course, one does not have to go back to the 17th century to find arguments against direct divine action. The last decades resound with additional reasons for theists to be skeptical or agnostic on the question whether God ever (actually) does anything in the world. Let's consider three, two very briefly and the third in somewhat more detail.

First, claims to divine action raise the problem of evil in virulent form. Imagine that God occasionally intervened in the world, setting aside the normal results of human actions or the normal consequences of natural events. What then of the cases in which God does not intervene? God did not prevent the incredible suffering of Jews and others in the Holocaust, nor did God act a few months ago to douse the fire and prevent the World Trade Center buildings from collapsing. (Some Christians have argued that the collapse and the resulting deaths *were* an act of God to punish Americans for our immorality in allowing abortions and legalizing homosexual relationships. But, as Bishop Spong argued in Harvard's Memorial Church on the Sunday following September 11th, if it were true that the Christian God causes terrorist attacks to punish homosexuality, I'd rather side with the atheists.)

The problem of evil arises if God is *able* to prevent great suffering and evil but neglects to do so, for in this case God becomes responsible for the suffering that results. Consider the parallel: if you were able to lower a drawbridge for an express train to cross, and you regularly did so, but on one occasion you intentionally chose *not* to lower the bridge, so that all the passengers died in a flaming wreck, would we not hold you responsible for this conscious decision to abstain from action? Yet it seems that the defenders of divine intervention face precisely this difficulty.

A second potential reason for agnosticism about divine intervention has to do with religious pluralism. We find major disagreements between the religious traditions over who God is and what God does. Divine actions, if any exist, must be part of a broader set of divine intentions for

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[3] David Hume, *Of Miracles* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1985), p. 53.

human history and the history of the cosmos. But we find no unified account among the religions about the existence and nature of God, much less about the specifics of salvation history. Is God acting to reveal his law through the Jewish people, or to reveal his means of salvation through the church, or to reveal his will for humanity through the five pillars of Islam? Add the Eastern traditions, indigenous religions, and New Age alternatives, and the reasons for skepticism about any particular account are multiplied beyond calculation. In response, liberals have grown increasingly skeptical about any specific claims to divine action.

Third and finally, liberals have difficulties with idea that a disembodied, supernatural God directly brings about results in the world because (it is claimed) divine action conflicts with the success of scientific explanations. Let's call it *the problem of intervention*. The argument often begins by noting that scientific research has not provided evidence that God did, or does, bring about miracles in the natural world. Indeed, such miracles don't seem to be the sort of thing for which one *could* obtain empirical evidence. Worse, the argument continues, the basic methodology of science seems to stand opposed to even the possibility of such events. The following four principles are often taken as basic assumptions of the scientific method.[4] Although I will later criticize them, we must admit that these particular tenets are widely accepted by men and women in the "age of science":

(a) If science is to be successful, it must be able in principle to explain all empirical events. Thus McLain writes, "It is the consensus of the modern effort to understand the natural and historical realms that *all* events which occur must be conceived as part of a unified and ordered world."[5]

(b) A scientific explanation of an event can be given only if the full causal history that produced that event is accessible, in principle, to scientific research and reconstruction. Imagine that you began to explore the causal history of a result in your lab, say the growth of a culture in a petri dish or the movement of subatomic particles through a cloud chamber. Now imagine that you had to constantly consider the possibility that, a few steps back in the causal chain, God might have directly initiated part or all of the causal sequence with no physical connection to the events that preceded that intervention. The mere existence of this *possibility*, critics claim, conflicts with the assumptions that are necessary to do empirical natural science.

(c) Science presupposes regularities in the natural world that can be formulated in terms of natural laws. The ideal toward which natural science strives is to give formal, mathematical expression to these laws. I will never forget the experience of watching my postmodern philosophy students plot the period of a pendulum and seeing their amazement that their data points lined up along the line predicted by the equations.

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[4] I am indebted here to Paul Gwynne, *Special Divine Action*, esp. pp. 122ff.

[5] See F. M. McLain, "On Theological Models," *Harvard Theological Review* 62 (1969): 155-87.

(d) In order to succeed at these first three goals, science must assume that the natural world is autonomous, closed, and physically self-explanatory. If each individual electron were a "law unto itself", or if its behaviors were a response to pushes, pulls and tugs from outside the universe, there could be no physics. Jürgen Moltmann nicely summarizes the difficulty in his major work, *God in Creation*:

> When the machine is taken as model for the world, the underlying premise is an unbroken chain of causality which determines every event in the world. The laws of nature are eternal laws which regulate all happening. ... [C]hance events are merely subjective impressions based on laws which are not yet comprehended.[6]

Again, these four assumptions are widely shared, even if we find ourselves forced to challenge one or another of them (as I will do below). Note that each has its roots in one core underlying principle: the presumption of naturalism. We might formulate the presumption of naturalism as the belief that, when faced with both a naturalistic and a supernatural explanation for some event in the world, not only are we more inclined to think that the naturalistic explanation is true, *but also that we are justified in so thinking*.

Let me make it clear that I accept the presumption of naturalism, at least in this limited form.[7] At the same time I am theist, one who is committed to some form of divine action. If you share with me this often uncomfortable position, you share the difficulty with which the rest of this paper will be wrestling.

Theologians Respond to the Challenge

Of course, these challenges have not gone unanswered. A variety of conservative defenses of God's special interventions (miracles) have been offered, some of them significant and effective.[8]

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[6] Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation*: *A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 314.

[7] See Clayton, *God and Contemporary Science* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), chapter 7.

[8] John Earman attacks Hume's argument against miracles in *Hume's Abject Failure: The Argument Against Miracles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). Brian Hebblethwaite defends traditional theism in answer to more liberal doctrines of God (esp. Don Cupitt's) in *The Ocean of Truth: A Defense of Objective Theism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). Gary Habermas defends the miracle of the bodily resurrection in in Habermas and Antony Flew, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead? The Resurrection Debate*, ed. Terry Miethe (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987) and miracles in history in Habermas and R. Douglas Geivett, eds., *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God's Action in History* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997). Luke Timothy Johnson defends the historicity of the gospels against

But how have liberals responded to the Humean challenge? Recall that we are struggling with the question of special divine action. By *special divine action* I mean the claim that God (at least occasionally) carries out direct actions at specific times and places within the world. God's initial act of creating the world, or God's somehow "intending" history as a whole[9], would thus not be sufficient for special divine action.

Liberals have been particularly critical of the traditional Thomistic notion of miracles. St. Thomas suggested that a miracle is a direct special divine act that bypasses natural causality. But even Karl Rahner is reticent to accept special divine action in this sense. In his *Foundations of Christian Faith*[10] Rahner resists the idea of "an occasional suspension of the laws of nature." Such suspensions are always possible, as long as we believe that God is omnipotent. But we could never know for sure that a particular event in fact involved a suspension of natural law; hence "most miracles ... can never or extremely rarely be shown certainly and positively to be a suspension of the laws of nature." The theologian Walter Kasper is even less guarded in his response: "divine intervention in the sense of a directly visible action of God is theological nonsense."[11]

The most widespread response instead has been to interpret language about divine action as metaphorical, figurative or symbolic. Friedrich Schleiermacher, the father of liberal theology, turned to Jesus' God-consciousness as his central attribute. Miracles were later additions, he held, attempts to express Jesus' sense of absolute dependence on God. Rudolf Bultmann continued this tradition when he sought to give a thoroughgoing existential reading of the New Testament. Special divine action is not an essential feature of the Christian faith, he argued; along with the three-tiered universe, along with heaven and hell and the afterlife, it can be discarded. Instead, the essential, enduring message of the biblical texts is the idea of existential wholeness, living authentically. Although Paul Tillich's later thought moved in different directions, his most widely read book, *The Courage to Be*, likewise focused on the existential attitude of ultimate concern as the heart of the Christian religion.

Crossan and the Jesus Seminar *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996). Phillip Johnson defends God's action in evolutionary history against Darwinian accounts in *Darwin on Trial*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993) and e.g. *Reason in the Balance: The Case Against Naturalism in Science, Law and Education* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995). See also Geoff Price, *Miracles: True Stories of How God Acts Today* (London: Macmillan, 1995).

[9] This is apparently the view of Maurice Wiles in *God's Action in the World* (London: SCM, 1986).

[10] Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (London, 1978), 258f.

[11] Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ* (London, 1976), p. 95, quoted from Gwynne, p. 76n80.

Each of these authors provided a figurative reading of divine action claims as metaphors that symbolize a more fundamental existential concern or truth. If space allowed, we could explore the major schools within theology of the last 40 years as a series of re-readings of divine action, each one interpreting divine action claims as figurative representations of a particular deeper concern that, they argue, is basic to Christian faith and practice. (If one were to write a dissertation on the topic, she could call it *Varieties of Metaphorical Experience*.)

I have no doubt that it is possible to speak of divine action in a metaphorical or figurative manner. For when we speak that way, we don't necessarily make any literal claims about the world, no claims about what has actually caused specific natural events, no claims about what God has actually done. As critics have pointed out repeatedly, to say that all language about divine action is figurative is tacitly to grant the validity of the critic's attack. Thus my question: *Can liberals still believe that God (literally) does anything*? I will attempt to spell out an account of divine action according to which in at least one case, Jesus' relationship to God, God literally does something. The goal is to offer a proposal that is philosophically rigorous, theologically adequate, responsive to science — *and* one that is potentially credible for thinking persons today.[12]

"Maximalist" and "Minimalist" Views of Divine Action

The remainder of the paper attempts to develop a specific constructive proposal. First, however, we must agree on what is required for something to count as the result of an action. Christoph Schwöbel, drawing on the classic works by Anthony Kenny (*Will, Freedom and Power*) and G.E.M. Anscombe (*Intention*) provides an excellent brief account:

> If an event is described as the result of intentional action it is implied [1] that this event would not have occurred if it had not been brought about by an agent whose action can be named as the necessary condition for the occurrence of the event. Furthermore, it is presupposed [2] that the agent pursues a particular purpose with the action and that his or her action can be regulated to bring about the purpose. It is moreover assumed [3] that the action-directing intention is the result of a conscious choice of aims of action and that [4] the regulation of action is the result of a conscious choice of means of action. With these presuppositions we ascribe to the agent freedom of choice and freedom of action.[13]

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[12] As background for this paper I have in mind a form of process theism (in the non-technical sense of the term), which presupposes that there is a God who is responsive to the world, whether or not this God intervenes miraculously in the world. Of course this assumption also needs explaining and defending — just not here.

[13] See Christoph Schwöbel, *God: Action and Revelation* (Kampen, The Netherlands: Kok Pharos, 1992), 36. Schwöbel continues by strengthening the status of his claims, "Only if these conditions are met does it become possible to describe an event as the result of intentional action and ascribe it to an agent who possesses knowledge of the aims and means of action and

Actions are, on this definition, intentional. They are therefore to be distinguished from behaviors, say the behavior of water molecules in a cloud. Note that Schwöbel's four criteria could be employed regardless of which position one takes in the free will debate. You may believe that free actions are compatible with determinism, or your may hold (as I do) that determinism and free will are incompatible. In either case we could, I believe, agree on something like Schwöbel's conditions for intentional action. The question is whether we can credibly ascribe any events in the world to *God's* intentional action.

Perhaps I could be forgiven for turning at this crucial juncture to the specific resources of my own tradition. Questions about Jesus' God-consciousness, miracles and resurrection are among the most difficult and disputed in the Christian tradition. But the theologian has no choice: if we do not mine the resources of our traditions to see what they have to offer, if (in my case) I do not mine the resources the Christian tradition, then I have little hope of developing a distinctively Christian response on the nature of divine action. So what are my options?[14]

Clearly one possibility for interpreting the Jesus event is that God responded individually to each of Jesus' requests: sometimes killing the virus that was harming a sick child, sometimes healing the brain lesions that were causing epileptic seizures, on one occasion introducing grape particles and alcohol molecules into water barrels (as a resident of Sonoma County, I find that one *especially* hard to grasp!), sometimes speaking audibly ("this is my son, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased"), always answering Jesus' requests and providing the power to act. Of the numerous miraculous acts of God associated with the life of Jesus, the greatest, on this account, was the resurrection, when God intervened into the natural world in order to introduce a new order of existence altogether. In this most mighty of all his acts, God restored the body of Jesus to life (with the uncountable number of repairs that would entail), brought his spirit back from death, reunited body and spirit, provided Jesus with supernatural powers during the days after his resurrection when he was seen by numerous people, and finally raised him bodily into heaven at the ascension. Many find themselves still able to assent to these propositions, and I have no interest in proselytizing them away from their convictions. I will just say that, for many liberals such as myself, it has become increasingly difficult to form the beliefs required by this position. I have no need or desire to revise the tradition any further than necessary, recognizing that the more the tradition is revised, the less justification I have in continuing to call the resulting beliefs "Christian." So what are the other alternatives?

One other possibility is to say that Jesus accessed a divine power or knowledge that is

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competence for the employment of these means of action. If an event can be described as the result of intentional action then the ascription of the event to the intentional agency of a free agent provides a sufficient explanation for the occurrence of the event" (ibid.).

[14] The reflections presented here stem from ongoing discussions with Steven Knapp at Johns Hopkins University. Dr. Knapp is not however responsible for any parts of the following argument that might be obscure, unclear, or obviously false.

available to all humans, perhaps like someone with good antennae can receive the radio waves that are continually streaming along the surface of the earth. Or, to use a different metaphor, perhaps Jesus tapped into a spiritual reservoir in the way that someone might dig a well and access a rich water source in an underground aquifer. Call this the *religious genius* view. We might imagine that God is a resource that is continually available to humanity (or to all living things for that matter), The unchanging solace and strength of the divine presence is always available to all persons, to the extent that they are able to access it. Jesus mined these depths, and in his teaching shared what he had learned with others. On this particular liberal view, there is no resurrection of the individual Jesus, but one could well say that after his death the "mind of Christ" — Jesus' means of accessing the divine depths and the insights he gained — remained available to his students and later to their followers in the church. Unfortunately, however, I do not think that it would match common parlance to speak of the result of "tapping the well" as an act of God, given the definitions of "act" we considered a moment ago. For on this view God does not respond to an individual or situation; rather, God is always and at all times available for those who know how to plumb the depths.

So what *would* be necessary to constitute the result as an act of God? God would have to invite, or respond in some way to, the one who sought to connect with the divine, such that the resulting action carried out by the human being could properly be spoken of as, at least in part, a divine action as well. Again, let's not ask for *proof* that one or more special divine acts occurred in the case of Jesus, at least not today; let's merely try to understand what it would *mean* for such an act to have occurred.

Two responses are available that don't actually represent answers to our question. One can always respond that she asserts "by faith alone" that God was acting in the life and deeds of Jesus, that supernatural power extended Jesus' own capacities to know and to do, even though she sees no way to reconcile this claim with modern science. Similarly, one can always say that both primary and secondary causes were at work in each of Jesus actions.[15] His human insight and powers represented a string of secondary causes that can be explained in purely immanent, finite terms; the divine component represents a sort of primary supernatural cause that was also at work; and the two somehow coincide, even if we can't say how. But neither of these responses actually solves the problem we are wrestling with — even if they are true. The challenge is to think together the human and divine cause.

"The Mind of Christ"

Let's now explore a possible solution. St. Paul writes, "Have this mind among you, which you have also in Christ Jesus, who although he was found in the form of God did not count equality with God something to be grasped but emptied himself..." (Phil. 2:4ff.). The disciples experienced Jesus as the most powerful individual they had ever met — so powerful that, they

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[15] See Brian Hebblethwaite and Edward Henderson, eds., *Divine Action: Studies Inspired by the Philosophical Theology of Austin Farrer* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990).

felt, he could only be divinely powerful. And yet he did not "lord this power" over others "like the Gentiles." Instead, he "[took] the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men" (Phil. 2: 7, RSV). The sentences about Jesus' self-knowledge that John inserts just before Jesus begins to wash the disciples' feet continue to strike me as a uniquely potent expression of this strange juxtaposition of power and self-humbling.

What was it like to be in the presence of Jesus? It was to experience a unique form of (personal, moral, intellectual, religious) power and, at the same time, to hear repeatedly "not me, but my Father who is in me...." How could the disciples not draw the moral — which Jesus may well have intended — that Jesus' incredible force was a direct result of his submitting his will to the divine will? Remember that it would have been beyond question to the disciples that God was responding to Jesus. But then Jesus died. Although he somehow seemed powerful to the end, and although he continued to refer to his Father, that Father remained silent.

For now we may remain agnostic about which events were the first catalysts for the resurrection belief.[16] The process might have involved visions or hallucinations, or inferences drawn from celebrating the eucharist (Lk. 24), or an inner divine leading that the disciples interpreted as the direct voice of Jesus. What happened on the human side, certainly, was that the disciples began to live the life they had seen modeled in Jesus, more intensely and more confidently than they had ever done while he was with them in the flesh. In living in the way of the Christ, they seemed to experience the same divine power that Jesus had apparently drawn on. How could they *not* believe that God's Spirit, and even Jesus himself in resurrected form, was present to them and acting through them?

But what should *we* believe was happening? Perhaps you cannot interpret the NT data as entailing the continuing personal existence of Jesus. But it is consistent to believe that a divine power and presence is manifested when one adopts, internalizes, and thereby shares in the "mind of Christ" — "not my will, but thine be done." Allowing the will of God to be worked through one's own actions in this way could manifest the power of a mode of being where not the individual human ego but the divinely intended outcome is enabled.

What's attractive about this approach is that, if one accepts the picture, one has already incorporated the divine act into Jesus' God-consciousness. It's not as if there is a description of the Jesus story on the one hand and, on the other, a separate metaphysical superstructure of divine intervention added on top. Instead, to describe the historical Jesus in this way *just is* to give an account of God's involvement. In virtue of subsuming his will to the divine will, Jesus caused his actions to become *part of* the divine act. There are not two actions, but one: Jesus manifests the divine power by subsuming his will to God's; at the same time (or for the same reason, or in virtue of the same act) God used Jesus to manifest the divine will and bring about the divine

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[16] For the non-faint-hearted I recommend John Dominic Crossan's massive volume, *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering What Happened in the Years Immediately after the Execution of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998).

intentions. As Steven Knapp has formulated the position[17],

> the manifestation of divine power and presence *just is* (what we mean by) divine action. There is no "action" that God "performs" within the created universe other than becoming manifest. Is this view not consistent with, or even implied by, the process-theological notion of divine "luring"?

Knapp's argument seems correct to me: just as the process theologian Lewis Ford describes divine action as "the lure of God,"[18] and just as traditional theology refuses to separate the act of God and the revelation of God, we too should understand God's intentional revealing of God's nature through human agents who aim to submit themselves to the will of God as the essence of divine action. As a woman put the point at a Quaker Meeting recently, "Perhaps God's only act is to make manifest the divine love. Is this not enough?"

In this "mind" which Jesus had perfectly, he set aside that natural striving that each living thing has to advance its own causes and interests, putting in their place an overriding concern with the will of God. It's my suggestion that this gives us a workable model of divine action: when the principle of one's own action is that God's general nature and specific will be manifested through what one does, the result can be an action that is both specifically human and specifically divine.

Divine Action at the Level of Mind

Now if having this mindset was only a philosophical move on Jesus' part — something like living for the ideal of justice — we could not speak of it as a special divine action. At best it would be another version of accessing the underground aquifer, the "religious genius" view we discussed above. But if we imagine not only that God's nature is love, but also that God wills to manifest particular aspects of that love in particular situations through particular persons, then something interesting happens. Individual agents have the chance to become *a part of* the movement of divine self-manifestation, to be in their actions part of the act of God.

We have already seen that liberals have difficulties with a disembodied, supernatural God directly bringing about results in the world (what I called above "the problem of intervention"). But what if God, by a intentional divine self-limitation, chooses to bring about God's purposes in the world only through the actions of worldly creatures? In this case one could speak of Jesus' resulting actions as also acts of God. Consider the parallel: you are an extremely gifted painter, able to create beautiful works of art through subtle movements of your hand. But one day you decide to take the hand of your friend at the wrist and through a combination of verbal cues and guiding her hand across the paper to compose an artwork. (Let's assume for the moment that she

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[17] Steven Knapp, personal communication.

[18] See Lewis Ford, *The Lure of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).

is particularly ungifted in artistic matters.) Your friend must use the muscles in her hand and be responsive to your guidance and direction. But she must also set aside (release) her will to control her hand and allow your will to act through her. The resulting painting becomes both a product of her action and your action together.

How, the, does God's hand guide Jesus'? God does not physically cause Jesus to move, but "the Father" does convey information, leading and motivation to the mind of Jesus. Jesus is open to the will of God, and the divine will fills him. It is the divine leading at the level of consciousness, or at least semi-conscious awareness, that constitutes the divine act in which Jesus the man participates.

How clear or explicit might we imagine this input, this conscious guiding, to be? In the case of Jesus, believers might imagine, it was exceptionally clear. If he was indeed remarkably, even uniquely, open to the leading of the divine will, then he could have been sensitive and responsive to even subtle forms of direction from God, so that God could have conveyed specific thoughts or ideas, or what we might call *propositional content*, to him in a highly reliable fashion. But even here my position requires several qualifications. It is still *the man Jesus* who remains a human actor; hence whatever content is communicated in the divine speech act must be mediated through his own understanding and thought processes — no doctrine of plenary inspiration or dictation here. I also view the nature and thoughts of God that are apprehended by humans to be themselves a combination of human and divine contributions, rather than a pre-formed propositional content in the eternal mind of God, for reasons that I trace back to Immanuel Kant — but that's an issue for another day.

You see that within this position there is need for some agnosticism on how clearly or precisely Jesus was able to hear and respond to the will of God and how precise that content itself was. The agnosticism becomes even more pronounced in the case of present-day disciples. Here one should expect that, where wills are only imperfectly submitted to the divine will, the divine input will be much less clearly received. Thus one can speak the resulting action as a divine act only in a more partial sense, since less of the act can be ascribed to God. Specific divine intentions may be perceived as vague lures toward goodness or "authenticity"; ideas about divine leading regarding specific actions and decisions will often be misinterpreted. As we saw last September, religious persons can attribute to God's will acts that are genuinely evil.

The view of divine action I am defending does entail a limitation to the rule of natural law discussed earlier. The position presupposes that human thought will not ultimately be explained in terms of physical or biologial laws, nor, of course, in terms of the miraculous *breaking* of natural laws. Here I follow emergentist theories of mind and the anomalous monism of Donald Davidson. If you are a reductive materialist, you will disagree with this position, and I with yours. The J. K. Russell Research Conference on November 10, 2001, was devoted to this debate, and it continues to be one of the most intense, and potentially one of the most fruitful, debates in the

entire field of science and religion today.[19]

Could the divine act in Jesus' case also include physical miracles? It depends what you mean by the question. If you mean, "Is it *metaphysically* possible that God break natural laws and regularities within the body of Jesus?" then I must answer, Yes, of course: an omnipotent Creator *could* set aside his own patterns and laws at any time — though I believe that there are some pretty strong theological reasons to doubt that this occurs. But if you mean, "Do we have good reason to think that God worked physical miracles through Jesus, above and beyond the divine leading that I have spoken about so far?" then I must answer No. On the liberal view I have defended, it is the body, brain and mind of the human being Jesus that must respond. And epistemically, I suggest, following Hume, we always have more reason to think that the natural regularities hold in the natural world than that they have been supernaturally set aside. In summary: it is indeed divine action, but only as mediated through the mind and body of a human being (or other living thing), and only with the concurrence of his or her will.

Incidentally, what role does this view give Jesus after his death? Imagine that Jesus uniquely expressed the state of setting aside his individual will to allow God to use his thoughts and person for the divine purposes; indeed, imagine that he did this perfectly. Then we might say that all who similarly allow God to act through them in this manner "have the mind of Christ," as Paul puts it in Philippians. "The mind of Christ" becomes not a reference to an individual human being Jesus who continued to live after his death, but rather to that perfect fusion of finite individual and divine will that the earthly Jesus manifested and that represents, in the Christian tradition, the highest goal for humanity. Note that this view even allows for an eschatological dimension. Eschatological existence would involve finite persons retaining their personhood, character and habits of mind. But in the heavenly state they would submit those individual distinctive abilities to God in the way in which Jesus did so — in short, they would have the mind of Christ.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I have told the story in Christian terms, as behooves a Christian theologian. But I presume that similar accounts could be developed within other traditions. In fact, resources already exist. Examples include references to the Buddha mind, the emulation of the Buddha by boddisatvas, and the state of perfect receptiveness shown by God's prophet as he received the dictation of the Koran (as reflected, e.g., in the ideals of Sufi mysticism).

Could a liberal position be developed in which the Jesus narrative is understood in purely immanent terms, as a series of purely human events, with no divine act involved? Yes, without question. But my burden today has been to show that the opposite is also possible: that the Jesus

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[19] See Clayton, *The Emergence of Spirit,* forthcoming. See also the various articles in Robert John Russell, Nancey Murphy, Theo C. Meyering and Michael Arbib, eds., *Neuroscience and the Person: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action* (Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory Publications, 1999).

event — and by extrapolation, other events in the natural world — can also credibly be understood as representing one or more divine acts.

Of course, the question remains: *Is* there a God who exercises a continual lure on humanity? *Did* the historical Jesus live in such a way that he uniquely manifested God's power? In the end, these may be the more important questions, and I have not even begun to address them. This paper's task was the more humble one: to develop a more-than-metaphorical account of divine action using "the mind of Christ" as a guide. If I have provided a credible description of the unique consciousness that the historical Jesus may have possessed — and I do find it believable — then we *can* continue to speak of special divine action, albeit in the much more limited sense that I have described here.