

Models of Divine Action in Creation

Here we shall consider the question: How does God acts in the world. An admirable introduction to this topic is given by Sarah Lane Ritchie:¹

At any given moment, an untold number of individuals around the world find themselves experiencing something that has been attested throughout human history: the conscious experience of divine activity, both within their own minds and elsewhere in the world. Prayer, meditation, worship, music, art, contemplation, even theological thinking - these are just a few of the avenues through which religious believers have sought either interaction with God or God's intentional action in specific circumstances. Indeed, Christian Scriptures and tradition portray a God who, while transcendent, is also immanent in the world - to humans and the rest of creation, often to seemingly dramatic effect. Yet at the same moment, physicists, cosmologists, mathematicians, biologists, and cognitive scientists in laboratories and research centres around the world are increasingly discovering the sorts of verifiable, predictable, and empirical mechanisms that would account for the same phenomena experienced by religious believers as divine activity.

Now there are different ways of understanding how God acts in the world, some of which presuppose that theological truth and scientific truth are in conflict with each other; but there are other models of divine activity, fully consistent with Scripture and Tradition, that respect science as a reliable guide to how the world works. Since Orthodox Christian theology does not suppose any conflict with science, or indeed any other form of truth seeking in human endeavour, we need to explore these compatibilist models further. First let us consider those models of divine activity that should be rightly rejected:-

Defective late western Models

¹ Sarah Lane Ritchie, *Divine Action and the Human Mind*, Current Issues in Theology (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019), p3.

1. **Disruptive supernaturalism:** This is what we might call the Monty Python Big Foot Effect² where God stamps his presence on the world from afar, supernaturally disrupting the natural order of things and then withdrawing again once more. Against this disruptive account, even unusual, unaccounted for events, interpreted by believers as God's activity, do not require a God who routinely breaks the very same physical laws that He Himself designed into His creation. We shall show how and why this might be so later. Consider the consequences however of subscribing to the disruptive supernaturalist model. This would render creation chaotic and unpredictable making the business of scientific investigation impossible. It would also mean that God was ordinarily absent from Creation and only became present when He chose to "invade" it from "outside"; even if in a benign manner. In Orthodox Christianity, God is never absent from His creation, nor does He tinker around with or manipulate natural laws to make Himself known. In Orthodox Christian theology miracles are ordinary events not extraordinary ones, no matter how unusual they might at first appear to those who have limited their own spiritual vision.
2. **Deism:** We must also reject the exact opposite of disruptive supernaturalism, which is the deist idea that God created the universe with natural laws that govern its operation and that He now leaves creation to its own devices without any kind of special action within it of Himself. This became a popular position among Enlightenment thinkers of the 18th century who clung onto the idea of a creator God but one who did not perform miracles, answer prayer or generally get involved in His creation at all. Deism arose at a time when it was supposed that science and religion were in competition with each other in giving a true explanation of the world and how it worked. From an Orthodox Christian point of view this is completely unsupportable for both the scientist and the priest do God's work in exploring different facets of His creation and by answering quite different questions. For

² <https://youtu.be/vL6ton0Dbz4>

science, these are the “how” questions; for theology the “why” questions. All these erroneous ideas arose in the late Christian west which had long since departed from Orthodoxy. It is important then for Orthodox Christians to identify these errors and not let them affect our thinking today.

3. **The Causal Joint:** in searching for a way in which God might interact with His creation and not violate natural laws, some have supposed that this may be found in the idea of a causal joint. The causal joint is a point of contact between God and the physical order, a specific and particular point, rather than multiple points, which would sustain universal access. Michelangelo’s painting of the Creation of Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican³ is a famous and well-known artistic expression of this idea. The tip of Adam’s finger barely touches the finger of God. Where there is such a glancing connection, then there is such a causal joint. The joint is held to function in some aspect of creation that is naturally open to divine action. The causal joint theory is also somewhat connected to the idea of the ‘God of the gaps’ where God is invoked to explain something we do not yet understand according to science. These points of ignorance correlate to the causal joints, until of course those gaps are close by new and tested scientific explanations. Where these joints are thought to exist, however, has changed radically over the centuries in the west.

In the modern era thinkers have supposed the causal joint to operate in the seat of human consciousness, in quantum mechanics (the physics of the very small and indeterminate) or in chaos theory where apparently random physical processes are held to give God some sort of “wriggle room” to act. However, all these causal joint examples share the same defect from an Orthodox Christian point of view; namely that God’s activity is limited to these joints or gaps in the system. As soon as science closes one of these joints or gaps, theology has nowhere else to go and the room for

³ <https://www.italianrenaissance.org/michelangelo-creation-of-adam/>

God's activity simply shrinks and shrinks - in the end back into deism.

The Fundamental Flaw

The more fundamental reason perhaps why all these three models of divine activity developed in the late Christian west fail is because they all share the same erroneous assumption; namely, that God is ordinarily absent from the creation in its entirety for most of the time. Whereas it is accepted that miracles do happen and intercessory prayer is answered, this is usually explained by a special extraordinary intervention, either against the laws of nature or in gaps or joints between the "woodwork" of natural processes.

None of this is Orthodox Christian in character. Our faith insist that God is everywhere and always present and that there is no place in the created order and no time when He is not active. Therefore miracles, answers to intercessory prayer and experiences of the Light of God are normal and ordinary for us, not abnormal or extraordinary.

Aquinas to the Rescue?

Before we consider a more orthodox model of divine activity we should perhaps briefly survey an alternative in late western Christianity which is closer to the Orthodoxy, a conception developed by Thomas Aquinas. In his view, for every event, there is both a primary cause, God, and an associated secondary cause in the natural process itself. For Aquinas, causal joints are everywhere, and they are neither exceptional nor limited to gaps in the system. This is clearly a much more satisfactory from an Orthodox point of view because it fulfils our requirement for God to be always and everywhere present. However, Aquinas' Aristotelian dualistic causal model is arguably merely a theoretical, philosophical construct and does little to explain how God's action intersects with natural processes.

In Orthodox Christianity there is a better way of expressing this universality of God's action which avoids all of these errors and inadequacies of western Christian thought, and it lies in the idea of theistic naturalism.

Theistic Naturalism

The Scriptures, in the Tradition of the Church, at least as sustained from the apostolic period and onwards by the Orthodoxy, is committed to the belief that there is nowhere in creation where God is absent at any time. This even applies to hell where God's loving presence among the damned, those of course who have chosen irrevocably against God, is experienced as a torturous burning rather than as a warm purifying and enlightening fire. The scriptural basis for this belief can be summarised in a key passage from the Psalms:-

Where can I go from Your Spirit?
or where can I flee from Your presence?
If I ascend into heaven, You are there;
If I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there.
If I take the wings of the morning,
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
even there Your hand shall lead me,
and Your right hand shall hold me.
If I say, "Surely the darkness shall fall on me,"
even the night shall be light about me;
indeed, the darkness shall not hide from You,
but the night shines as the day;
the darkness and the light are both alike to You. [Psalm 139(138): 7-12]

In the Fathers this testimony to universal divine presence and action has consistently been maintained, but none more so than in the writings of St Maximus the Confessor who incorporated the pre-Christian Greek metaphysical idea of the action of the Logos as manifested in and through the 'logoi' of each created thing. The 'logoi' are those rationally accessible orderly and creative principles at work in all things, whereby the energies of God (not the essence or divine nature) enable them to achieve their created purpose and goal. This is sometimes called panentheism⁴. In Orthodox Christian teaching there is no need for gaps or joints for God to act in creation. He is not ordinarily absent and sometimes present. He is, rather, present, and active always and never absent. When something happens that appears to be extraordinary or unusual, either by way of a miracle, answered prayer or divine guidance, then these should be seen as normal events, in the sense that they achieve their true created and natural state.

According to this way of thinking about our question, in their fallen states both humans and creation are found to be *subnatural*. In their sanctified states they become glorified and thoroughly natural; hence we ascribe these states to theistic naturalism. In the Eucharist bread and wine are taken from the fallen order of things, but then these are consecrated through prayer to be transformed into their truly natural (not supernatural) state, the Body and Blood of Christ. We treat the Holy Gifts with great reverence in that they belong to the New Creation, not the old. We consume them to become more truly what we are, members of the Body of Christ. We should treat each other, therefore, with the same reverence! ... and indeed, we should extend this reverence to all created things bearing the imprint or logoi of their Maker.

Before we close this short study, we should perhaps remember that wherever the Logos is active, (the second person or hypostasis of the Trinity), there also is active the Holy Spirit. In the same way that the Logos embraces the logoi of all created things so also does

⁴ Not to be confused with pantheism which is the doctrine that the universe itself is God.

the Holy Spirit Himself, always and everywhere present, energise and bring to fulfilment everything created. The Orthodox refer to the energies of God when they describe how God is present and active as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. How else could this be otherwise when it is the Trinity who acts in all these circumstances? The essence of God, however, His nature, always remains beyond our grasp or ability to speak. Such is the mystery of God who has made himself known in Christ; the Logos made flesh.⁵

⁵ John 1:18