

## *On Divine Intervention*

“Intervention” is the abstract noun cognate with the infinitive “to intervene” (L: *intervenire* = to come between), in the sense of coming between to hinder or modify, to interfere in, the affairs of others, usually through force or the threat thereof. Thus to speak of divine intervention is presumably to speak of God’s coming between creaturely decisions and actions so as to hinder or modify them, hence of God’s interfering in creaturely affairs through omnipotent, overriding force.

But God doesn’t have to intervene in this sense in order to be effectively present to the world—any more than a parent has to make her or his child’s decisions for the child in order to be effectively present to the child. The fundamental problem with the whole idea of divine intervention is that it implies that, in principle, God and creatures, God and the world, are in conflict with one another—God’s doing, at least now and then, what creatures can and should do for themselves and one another, or creatures’ doing, or at any rate trying to do, what only God could conceivably be in a position to do. On the contrary, God and creatures are not rivals for the same roles—not, in any event, if one is to make sense of the most fundamental of Christian claims. For in creating the world, and preeminently in creating woman and man, God creates free beings who both are and, in the case of human beings, are called to be cocreators with God in the ongoing work of creation. Therefore, God’s activity as Creator neither does not can do what the creatures can and should do for themselves and each other, but, precisely as the activity of pure, unbounded love, devotes itself to establishing and maintaining the necessary conditions of the possibility of their own creative activity. Likewise, in consummating the world and human beings by embracing all things in God’s own everlasting life, God does nothing that any creature does or even could do for itself or its fellow creatures. Indeed, the only thing that creatures can possibly do that conflicts with God’s activity as the Consummator—and even this God lovingly suffers—is the sinful striving of human beings somehow to consummate themselves; and, far from being a proper human activity, such striving is the very thing that keeps our activity

from being truly human by so binding us to ourselves and the world that we are not really free to exist and to act for them.

But if God so understood cannot be meaningfully said to intervene in the world, doing for the creatures what they both can and should do for themselves and one another, God nevertheless is effectively present to the world and makes a difference to it, even as—in fact, just because—the world is effectively present to God and makes a difference to God. The point, however, is that God is always effectively present to the world as only God can be, making just the difference that God alone can make, whereas on the divine intervention model of God's action, God is effectively present to the world only in the same way in which the creatures are effectively present to it and makes only the same kind of difference that creatures can and should make to themselves and each other.

Of course, faith trustingly looks to God to act, to be effectively present, and to make just the difference that God alone can possibly make. But this means that faith does not look to God to do what women and men can and loyally should do themselves if it is to be done at all; rather, it looks to God to do what only God can do and unfailingly does do, so that faith working through love is always possible and the labor of faith is never in vain.

In this trust in God's creative and consummative activity, the Christian can and, in loyalty, should assume responsibility to work together with God for the world's liberation—for the freedom of all creatures from every evil and injustice that oppresses them, and this means for the freedom of all human beings from the evils of want and oppression as well as of ignorance and error and from the unjust social and cultural structures that enforce these evils.