

THE AGENCY OF GOD: TWENTY-ONE THESES

Schubert M. Ogden

1. Although "the agency of God" is a topic that may fall to be considered in pursuing different inquiries, our interest in it here arises out of the inquiry distinctive of Christian theology, and, more exactly, Christian systematic theology.

2. This means, among other things, that we can discuss our topic adequately only by putting two closely related but logically distinct questions to everything that not only we ourselves but Christians generally have thought and said on the topic: first, the question whether it is appropriate to Jesus Christ because or insofar as it either is the witness of the apostles or substantially agrees with their witness as attested by scripture and tradition; and, second, the question whether it is credible to human existence because or insofar as it is confirmed by common human experience and reason as attested by culture and religion generally.

3. Because the Christian witness to which we put these questions is constituted explicitly as such by some formulation or other of the twofold assertion that Jesus is the Christ of God and God is the God of Jesus Christ, the proper procedure for us to follow in formulating any statements about the agency of God is to explicate the understanding of God, and thus of strictly ultimate reality, necessarily implied by this twofold constitutive assertion.

4. Central to any such explication is the image of God as "pure, unbounded love," and thus as the one strictly universal individual who both loves and is loved by all others as well as self, and who as such is unsurpassably good, wise, and powerful and at once the sole primal source of all things and their sole final end.

5. Thought and speech about the agency of God, like many, although not all, of the other things that Christians have to think and say about God, are plainly symbolic rather than literal in meaning.

6. For the purposes of our discussion, we may assume that ordinarily the word "agent" means someone who acts or has the power or right to act; and that the word "agency," accordingly, means the capacity, condition, or state of being an agent in this sense, and hence is roughly synonymous with the word "action."

7. "The agency of God," then, we may provisionally define as the capacity, condition, or state of being the unique agent that God is as "pure, unbounded love," and thus as the universal individual; and so the phrase is

more or less synonymous with "the action of God," where the word "God" is understood to refer to just this unique agent.

8. As the action of boundless love, and thus of the universal individual, the agency of God, comprehensively understood, pertains to both the love of God reflexively, in relation to Godself, and the love of God nonreflexively, in relation to others.

9. The love of God reflexively, in relation to Godself, is the agency of God *ad intra* that constitutes God as essentially triune: God the Father being the primordial unity of God as both loving Godself and loved by Godself; God the Son being God as loved by Godself, and God the Holy Spirit being God as loving Godself, in their primordial difference—from one another and from their primordial unity.

10. The love of God nonreflexively, in relation to others, is the agency of God *ad extra* that constitutes God as essentially the sole primal source and the sole final end of all things, and therefore as the Creator and the Consummator and also the Savior.

11. The agency of God as the Creator and the Consummator and also the Savior pertains in each case to two closely related but nonetheless distinct types of divine action: first, that which is immediately and directly God's own action, whether as the Creator of all things, or as the Consummator thereof, or as the Savior of women and men as well as any other rational beings; and, second, that which is only mediately and indirectly God's own action, since it occurs only through one or more of God's creatures or in cooperation with their immediate and direct action.

12. As the Creator of all things, God acts immediately and directly to establish a world of creatures so ordered as to allow for the possibility of more good than evil being realized through the actions of the creatures themselves; as the Consummator of all things, God acts immediately and directly to accept any world of creatures into God's own unending life, thereby bringing the creatures' lives to completion by allowing them to make a difference to something infinitely more enduring than themselves; and, finally, as the Savior of women and men and any other rational beings, God acts immediately and directly to restore to them the possibility of faith, notwithstanding their having fallen into sin by actualizing the possibility of unfaith.

13. But in all three respects, as the Creator and the Consummator and also the Savior, the intention of God's own immediate and direct action can be fully realized only through God's creatures or in cooperation with their own action.

14. Thus, in creating human beings in such a way as to establish the optimal limits of their action as creatures, God intends that only good shall be actualized rather than evil; but whether or to what extent good instead of evil in fact is actualized depends not only on God's action as the Creator but also on the actions of women and men as obedient creatures of God.

15. In a somewhat different way, God's intention in acting as the Consummator of human beings is that they so accept God's acceptance of them even now in the present as to participate already in God's consummation of their lives and to give expression to it by all that they think, say, and do; but, again, whether or to what extent God's consummation of women and men is thus accepted by them depends upon their own immediate and direct action of faith and witness.

16. In both cases, however, we may quite properly speak of the creatures' action as the mediate and indirect action of God Godself insofar as God's own immediate and direct action as the Creator and the Consummator is met with a cooperating action on the part of the creatures; for not only does their action in that event fully realize the intention of God's own action, but God's action, while clearly distinguishable from theirs, is also its strictly necessary condition, but for which it neither would nor could be at all.

17. Beyond these two cases of God's mediate and indirect action as the Creator and the Consummator, there is the third case of such action that can and must be distinguished—namely, the case of God's action as Savior, where some creature is so experienced by a woman or a man or another rational being who has already fallen into the sin of unfaith that she or he or it is thereby restored to the possibility of faith, thus fully realizing God's intention to save women and men and any other rational beings and to establish valid means of salvation to this end.

18. This third case of God's mediate and indirect action is concretely instanced by the effective use of any valid means of salvation—not only the secondary means of word and sacraments, or even the primary means of the visible church as such, but also, and above all, the primal means of Jesus Christ himself, through whom God's intention that all women and men and any other rational beings be saved is decisively re-presented as the gift and demand of faith.

19. As for any other cases of God's agency such as are sometimes classified as "divine interventions," we may well question whether thinking and speaking of such are either appropriate or credible in the present theological situation.

20. This is not to say, however, that so-called divine interventions are ruled out simply because, according to the supposed implications of a modern

scientific picture of the world, God could not intervene in the ordinary course of events; on the contrary, one may reasonably assume that any God who is "pure, unbounded love," and therefore the universal individual who is unsurpassably good, wise, and powerful, certainly could and would thus intervene if there were good and sufficient reason to do so.

21. But it is not easy to see how any of us could ever be in a position to determine whether there were such a reason; and in any event, such thinking and speaking of divine interventions as systematic theology has to consider can be accounted for both more appropriately and more credibly by reducing them to one or the other of the three cases previously considered of God's mediate and indirect action or agency.

1 December 1988; rev. 8 November 1999