# GOD'S POWER AND GOD'S PERSONHOOD

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From earliest times, human beings have expressed their most profound awareness of Transcendent Reality in terms of power. Above all, it has been believed that Ultimate Reality which confronts human beings as their source, end, and exemplar, with which each individual has finally to do, is that whose capacity to affect and effect far surpasses that of any earthly creature. A Christian expression of this belief is nicely phrased by Isaac Watts:

> I sing th' almighty power of God, That made the mountains rise,
> That spread the flowing seas abroad, And built the lofty skies.
> There's not a plant or flower below, But makes thy glories known;
> And clouds arise, and tempests blow, By order from thy throne.

But while this may represent a first utterance about God, it cannot remain the final declaration. For he who is the subject of the Christian community's unqualified devotion seeks to make himself present to all his creatures most fundamentally as creative, unconditional love. God's almightiness is that of a heavenly Father:

> I sing the goodness of the Lord, That filled the earth with food;
> He formed the creatures with his Word, And then pronounced them good.
> While all that borrows life from Thee Is ever in thy care,
> And everywhere that man can be, Thou, God, art present there.

Divine power is not the unlimited capacity to do anything whatever. Rather, it is resourcefulness to accomplish all that is willed by a caring, personal being whose essence is lovingly to envision and sustain each creature's distinctive fulfillment.

The purpose of this essay is to explore the implications of such a view for the Christian tradition's persisting unease about anthropomorphisms in its speaking about God. Its appeal is for more anthropomorphism rather than less, out of the conviction that only through such can the primal experience of God in faith be adequately represented conceptually.

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## 1. *God as all-powerful and as all-sufficient*

Though faith's primal experience of God is with a personal presence whose love is from everlasting to everlasting, belief in God has continued to focus on divine almightiness, with the divine power frequently defined in wholly abstract terms, such as the potency to accomplish everything and anything in general (*omnipotence*). The result all too frequently is purely speculative dilemmas which can have the status at best of mere riddles: e.g., since God can do anything, could he lie? Could he make a stone he cannot lift? The idea is that there is finally no other power than God's, that God must bestow some of that power on other beings if they are to become effective agents in their own right at all. In its extreme form, belief in God's omnipotence entails that God does everything and the creature does nothing, except as empowered by God himself: *nothing* in the created order has the capacity to affect anything else, apart from divine agency. God alone is powerful; creatures are impotent. It was not without reason that the nineteenth century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche came to believe that for man to *be*, God must *die;* human beings cannot be in their own right if there also exists a Being who has all power.

It cannot be denied that the Christian tradition frequently speaks of God in such a way as to make Nietzsche's caricature of the options the only possible one. The image of an all-powerful diety is especially evident in the classical doctrine that God created all things out of absolutely nothing: *creatio ex nihilo*. Though the doctrine's primary intent was to affirm the gracious character of existence, that everything which is derives its existence as an utterly free gift of God, its import also is the nothingness of the beings created. But clearly, "omnipotence" is not the primary characteristic apostolic faith discerns in God. Christian belief also celebrates the closeness between God and the creation, and the *sufficiency* of his resources to sustain his purposes for creation in worthy ways. God's power is his capacity to tend his creation caringly; it is the power of a loving Father, to create and to care for that which he creates. It is not power in general, for anything in general; it is the power of the Father of Jesus Christ, in the world Jesus Christ came to love redemptively. God's power is to maximize good in every situation in which the good is threatened and to enable the realization of every positive potentiality in all that is other than himself.

The most pressing difficulty with Christian belief in God has always been that of affirming God as all-sufficient holiness in the face

of seemingly ineradicable evil. But if the existence of evil made questionable believing in an all-*powerful* deity, it makes even more problematic the contention that love is the foundation of reality itself. Its pervasiveness challenges belief in the sufficiency of God's power to sustain the created order lovingly. As Epicurus mused long ago, if God desires to prevent evil and does not, he apparently does not have at his command the resources requisite to the task. And thus, even if there does exist in the universe a supremely loving being who labors incessantly to bring good out of evil with all the resources at his command, if such evil cannot in fact be transcended or transformed at its foundation, it is as if there is no God at all.

Christian faith has insisted, from the outset and rightly, that the reality of evil can be confronted only through an ever-deepening understanding of the crucifixion of Jesus. While philosophical analysis can contribute to an adequate response to the problem, to deal with evil without reference to Jesus' undeserved suffering also reduces it to *merely* an abstract philosophical problem, e.g., of how the *idea* of divine sufficiency is commensurate with the *experience* of real evil in the world. Believers understand evil through encountering it in their ongoing life, and through learning its place in the value-system of one to whom they owe their primary allegiance, in the life, ministry, and death of Jesus Christ. The "Problem" of evil involves more than logical inconsistency in beliefs. For the Christian, it is a matter of discerning the point of "dying with Christ." It is the task of seeing the sign-value of evil, what evil points *to*, both in the created order and beyond: to one whose redemptive work transforms but never permits escape from suffering the full consequences of the evils which do genuinely exist, in a world whose purpose can never be utterly defeated by them. The "solution" to the problem consists also in experiencing for oneself the power of love to endure and transform evil, through suffering if need be, after the example of Jesus, whom no evil could destroy or prevent his fulfilling his ownmost possibilities as God's Son.

### 2. *God as Person*

It is extraordinarily difficult to speak rightly of God as personal, primarily because centuries of interpretation have excised the obvious meanings of God as Father and imposed significations which are anything but obvious. Indeed, orthodox teaching on this point is subtle and erudite. It eliminates many genuine difficulties accompanying thinking about God anthropomorphically, but at the expense also of primal Christian experience of God as a conscious and caring person,

who experiences and responds to the world in which he always is lovingly present. Constantly scrutinizing what is happening in his creation, God is constantly at work in it to sustain its structure and his purposes for its every region. God's fatherhood, according to such experience, consists in his caring provision of that which his creatures require for their actualization of the possibilities he envisions for them, precisely the sort of providing exhibited by the earthly fathers believers either had or wish they did have.

God the Father is that One who exercises his cosmic governance through attentiveness to every contingent detail in order of being, and through seeking to influence fulfillment of what he anticipates to be genuinely possible for every being. Continually aware of all that transpires in the ongoing lives of his creatures, God is also continually soliciting what is best for each and every one. God, then, is the supreme embodiment of what parental nurture *could* be like, though no human being has experienced it fully from any earthly parent. Whether from a father or a mother, or an appropriate surrogate, the experience of parental nurture is what is crucial for the Christian understanding of God; when the Church speaks about God, it must speak fundamentally of a being whose nurture is wholly fulfilling. Partriarchal images in the tradition may obscure this truth in fact, but never in principle. Whether God is addressed as "he" or "she" is determined culturally; but that God nurtures every creature as a parent ought to nurture a child transcends cultural relativities.

It is beyond reasonable doubt that Jesus thought of God in such wise. He spoke *to* as well as *about* God, and his addresses were couched in most intimate terms. His unique insight into the "fatherhood" of God appears to have been his willingness to concretize the thought of God's love on an individual as well as a communal level; he seems to have been more conscious than most Jews of his day that God was *his own* as well as Israel's father, although advancing a new understanding of God for its own sake was not the major concern. What is clear from the tradition is that Jesus conceived of God in unmistakably *anthropomorphic* terms, precisely those which have provoked consternation among sophisticated hearers of the Gospel from the beginning. For some, it is disconcerting in the extreme to entertain the prospect that God is in any respect at all like a human being; the literalism of such thinking appears both shocking and blasphemous. That God is said to rejoice, to feel pity, to be saddened seems strictly to entail that God, like his creatures, is embodied, or even corruptible. And indeed, uncritical anthropomorphism spews forth an endless series of preposterous questions: is the Divine Word translatable into some

languages more effectively than others? Does God speak that Word in a strong bass voice, or rather with the brilliance of a coloratura soprano?! Does Jesus, after all, really sit to his right in heaven? (Evidently, too, with the majority of his fellow creatures, God is right-handed, and left-brain dominated.)

Contemporary expressions of this consternation were most pertinently anticipated in the thought of Feuerbach and Freud who, each in his own way, maintained that when people speak of a cosmic, caring person, they are giving vent only to wish-fulfillment mired in confusion, however dedicated they may be religiously. Any supposition that there might exist a Transcendent Tender of the Universe reflects only the work of fertile imagination, perhaps in order to ease the passage from infantile to civilized existence, in Freud's terminology. For Freud and Feuerbach, and countless other thoughtful contemporaries, it would seem, religious beliefs exhibit powerfully the creative work of human imagination, but they bear no relationship to objective reality whatsoever.

Anthropomorphic thinking, therefore, has always seemed to many, whether unbelievers, or unbelievers, simply a matter of human beings' creating divine reality/realities in their own image. So-called "enlightened" understanding of such thinking reduces its significance to something like the following: on the basis of satisfying encounters with, and fond memories of, one's earthly father, and in the face of the certainties of moving into a life of one's own, beyond his protective nurture, one conjures that behind the firmament resides a Heavenly Father who will never fail to be and to care, long after earthly fathers are no more. Or: knowing that punishment for transgressing rules is a universal experience, societies inculcate in their members belief in a Transcendent Authority figure as a way of reinforcing what are in fact humanly devised standards for behavior; obedience is elicited through fear of divine as well as human reprisal for disobedience to the standards. The implication of either view, and all such views, is evident; the Christian churches have come to be at all merely to provide their members mutual reinforcement of their respective flights of fancy and of their legal and moral codes.

The doctrine of God's fatherhood worked out by many classical theologians, both within and following upon the Scriptures, has the obvious advantage of overcoming all such criticism of Christian belief simply by transcending anthropomorphism altogether. According to this tradition, God is Father, from all eternity, before all worlds, in an eternal possession within the triune divine life. He is Father in begetting, not creating, the Son, who is himself the Eternal Logos by

Whom the world was created. Clearly, such thinking hardly could be called anthropomorphic: "fatherhood" in this context has no clear analogy whatever with anything designated by the term in ordinary experience. But without such analogy, it is no longer possible to speak of God as a caring being, Who loves the world he calls good in and through responding to it and being affected by what transpires within it. Whatever may be suggested by the idea of an eternal Father eternally begetting the Son, the idea does not readily bring to mind a solicitude for *finite* beings which enhances both them and the One solicitous of their welfare.

The difference between these two expressions of God as Father rests upon two widely divergent sets of presupposed *values*. Each conception of divine reality, e.g., as conscious, caring person and as eternal begetter of the Divine Logos, represents an attempt to extrapolate to ultimate limits a prior understanding of what state of being or mode of existence is to be regarded as of greater worth than others, to be sought for its own sake. God comes to be conceived as the perfect embodiment of that scale of values previously affirmed as worthy of human striving. In classical trinitarian thinking, the important values cluster clearly around the concept of *eternity,* that which transcends both temporal sequences and time itself. (God is not merely everlasting.) In his eternity, God is also immutable, utterly impervious to any sort of change, and therefore incapable of corruption. It is that sort of perfection which allegedly is shared with the members of the Trinity, but not with the created members of the finite order. The value-system which is presupposed is evident: what is most valued, of which God is the supreme instance, is that which remains constant, whose self-identity is a function of its constancy. Thus, in classical trinitarian thinking, there is no cumulative advance in the eternal procession of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; each concrete manifestation (*hypostasis*) retains its own essentiality through all eternity, identical yet differentiated within the Godhead, but undergoing no alteration whatever in their interrelations. In constructing its God-concept on the basis of such a cluster of values, classical thinking had to speak of God as *trans*-personal: the Father who begets a Son eternally cannot be a person in any ordinary sense of the term, *precisely because he remains what he is in his eternal begetting.* The transcendent character of both Father and Son's personhood is so extreme in this regard that it is really more accurate to speak of them as impersonal, even as the humanity of the incarnate Christ came to be specified as *im*personal humanity.

Anthropomorphic thinking about God, by contrast, rests upon an

entirely different cluster of values, one of the most important of which is *temporality,* within which cummulative advance, realization of possibility, can occur. Anthropomorphic thinking is time-bound, but in its openness to time it can entertain the possibility of real change and growth in God as well, of a sort which would be experienced by any genuinely personal being. Mutuality rather than autonomy is elevated to primary importance: the mutuality, across indefinite time, of yet-to-be-completely-fulfilled interrelated beings is deemed more value-laden than the completeness of three eternal modes of being in the divine life. Temporal, developing, and interelated, therefore, God is supremely capable of being affected by all that is other than himself, and of being claimed by others for relationships enriching to all. According to this thinking, earthly fathers are bound to a temporal order in which things can develop and complement one another. As persons, they are what they are by virtue of relationships with others which constantly stimulate a wider responsibility to the whole order of mutually supportive relations. From the standpoint of Christian faith, it is *good, very* good, that just such beings and just such relationships abide. God's fatherhood is like unto earthly fatherhood, in its affectivity, openness, and development.

It is very difficult any longer to suppose that eternality represents a higher mode of existing than does temporality, or that immutability is superior to responsiveness to genuine change and development, even with all of the risks of degeneration and decay. Thus, it is fundamental to any contemporary expression of God's fatherhood to affirm the sovereignty and sufficiency of a conscious, caring person as the ground of experienced reality. What is altogether crucial is that *personal existence* is the clue to the meaning of reality itself, finite and ultimate. The reality of *anything* is as an object of God's care, and God's distinctive being is as a limitlessly caring person. To believe in God as Father, therefore, is to believe that the One who upholds everything upbuilds everything as well, that he is at work constantly, eliciting from every creature capable of it a sense of responsibility for participating in an order made trustworthy by virtue of its being constantly cared for, everlastingly.

Human beings can come to believe truly in the fatherhood of God only through their own experience of becoming persons and through their growing awareness of how their personal existence in turn is a sign pointing beyond itself to a transcendent ground, a transcendent act of caring by a supremely personal being. Within the Christian community, the fatherhood of God is especially suggested by reference to the values which Jesus of Nazareth affirmed. By

learning to stand firm upon those values for which Jesus stood, and for which he died, believers are enabled to see the sacramental character of personal existence perhaps for the first time, as not only intrinsically satisfying but also as pointing to the fatherhood of God as the ground of finite personal existence and of all that sustains it. Participating in the values in which Jesus of Nazareth participated can enable one to recognize that it is God, after all, who can be experienced continuously as the transcendent dimension in all personal existence.

There is no single image or concept for God more important to contemporary attention and exposition than that of God as Father. In the face of every temptation either to think of belief in God as regression to childishness, one instead must be courageous in continuing to affirm, from the depths of her or his being, that the human environing world is cared for by One who consciously attends to, responds to, and grows with all that transpires within it, grace upon grace, enabling all who dwell therein to experience the abundant life of fulfilled possibility.

### 3. *God as creator*

As the previous exposition should have made evident, the creator of all things is to be understood as an Eminent Person, caring everlastingly for everything of which he is creator. In the Apostles' Creed, the article "maker of heaven and earth" depends for its full meaning almost wholly upon the article preceding it, and is itself merely an elaboration of that which precedes; "creator" adds content to the idea of an All-Sufficient Father. The earliest versions of the creed may not have included the article at all; if it did so appear, its insertion almost certainly was for polemical purposes, against Gnostic deprecators of the physical world.

God's creativity is the creativity of a conscious, caring person; the import of God's creative relationships with all things is disclosed primarily in the constant, demanding, sustaining, loving presence to human beings. The primary relation is to that order within which human beings dwell, frequently referred to as the order of *history;* God's relationship with the natural order is a secondary relationship. God becomes present in nature through his presence in human beings' conscious experience of intending and acting, their choosing from conceived possibilities and their engaging in relevant action to effect what they intend. God and the world interrelate, therefore, at the points of understanding, freedom, responsibility, and creativity. As the faith of ancient Israel witnesses, the God understood as creator of *all* things has been

encountered first as a redemptive power in *human* life and society: "He Who brought us out of Egypt" is the maker of heaven and earth.

The world of which God can be said most fundamentally to be creator is the human environment, that totality of meanings which affect the quality of human experience. "World" in this sense means not primarily an order of beings which remain what they are independently of their impingement upon human history, beings incapable of concern for human life, impersonal nature. Frequently, *the* "world" is indeed so understood, as an implacable congeries of powers to be confronted in dread, overcome only by amassing still greater power, perhaps by cajoling whatever deities one may be persuaded to affirm. For instance, the flagrant misuse of the privilege of petitionary prayer frequently arises from a misunderstanding of worldly powers and the degree to which they are subjugated to the sovereign design of an all-sufficient love.

In Israel's faith, God's relationship with the created order was exemplified especially in the Exodus narrative rather than in the accounts of creation. The latter serve as an addendum to the altogether more crucial passages which disclose God in his liberating presence and power to creatures mired in situations of bondage. And in Jesus' message, what was of primary importance was the reign of God, the present dawning of a new communal life with God, to be consumated in the very near future for which creatures must make ready. The "kingdom" which Jesus announced included especially the transformation of human society into a new integrity and mutuality, by divine grace. To conceive of God's relationship with the world in kingly imagery at all is surely to conceive of "world" in the fullest sense as a human environing world: *nature* can be referred to in kingly images only through the use of metaphor. Finally, when St. Paul spoke of "cosmos," he seems to have deliberately used the term in an unprecedented way. Contrary to the view of ancient Greek tradition, *cosmos* for St. Paul was not a self-contained, self-sufficient, harmonious, ordered and integrated whole, present before human beings as a spectacle determining their destiny, independent of their wishes. Rather, the term referred to the "fallen world," that order of being mysteriously infected throughout with the consequences of *human* apostasy.

Because the world of which God is creator is more an historical than a natural order, then, speculation about the possibility of a prime mover or first cause of things cannot have much to do with Christian celebration of God's Fatherhood and the sufficiency of his resources as Father. Such a being cannot be brought into view if one begins

only by observing the world and positing a God who might be the cause of observed effects in that world. Whatever sort of reality could be approached this way will be another sort of reality than that of God the Father. Thus, it is quite strange that St. Thomas could conclude several of his proofs for the existence of first cause, unmoved mover, necessary being, etc., with the observation "and this, we know, is God." Whatever "prime mover," for example, means, it is *not* obvious that it means an All-Sufficient *Father* encountered in the human environing world.

As noted previously, "maker of heaven and earth" found its way into an early creed for a polemical purpose. It affirms an understanding of God's relationship to a "world" which from the outset is defined differently from the way in which Christian faith understands it. In Hellenistic culture "world" meant a totality of beings which are and remain what they are independent of any impingements upon human consciousness. Each has its own place in space and time and is related to all others according to principles of cause and effect. The totality abides, whether or not there are human beings to perceive it and to struggle in it. "World" in this sense is that which is merely *there*, impervious to human asperations. Only infrequently can human beings mold the things of *this* sort of world to their own purposes. At best, upon this view, the human environment is subservient to the world, and at worst, it is radically alienated from it.

For those who both thought deeply about God, and conceived of the world in such terms, the religious question could only become: what is God's relationship to *that sort* of world? And in attempting to deal seriously with and in the terms of such a question, Christian thought had to incorporate into its own inner life and thought the fundamental question of whether God is sovereign over *that* kind of world in the same way that faith judges him to be sovereign over the human environing world. Classical theology considered the question earnestly, out of the conviction that it had to be answered in order for faith's primary affirmations to win a hearing at all. Out of that concern came the classical doctrine of creation, with fateful consequences.

During the second century there were at least two ways of conceiving God's relationship to the kind of object-world just sketched. One denies that God is All-Sovereign: the object-world is mired in evil matter over which not even God has final control. Upon this view, God can only assist in the escape of a limited number of those entrapped; he cannot redeem the totality by redeeming the very matter of which it is composed. Over against such an extreme dualism, which

came to fullest expression in third-century Manichaeism, theology affirmed that the Almighty Father is also the maker of *earth;* and because he is, earth, too, is good. The so-called facts of evil are not as they appear: God is not the victim of an evil material order which defies his control; he is the all-sufficient creator not only of highest heaven but of the mundane world as well.

In the other way of thinking about the God-world relationship, God was conceived as the very substance of the world. The implication is that experienced conflicts between evil and good are apparent only, and not real. Though experience may seem at times to point to some all-pervasive cosmic struggle of good and evil, underlying the appearances is the unperturbed presence of One whose own being is the being of the world. To such a monistic outlook, expressed most completely in Stoicism and Neo-Platonism, Christian theology replied that though God is the world's maker, he is not its substance; in its own being, the world is quite other than God. The being of the world is not merely the overflowing of the divine substance. But though the world is other than God, it also is dependent upon God for its being; it is in essence a *created* world. The point of the reply was to insist upon God's otherness to those who would identify God's being as the being of the world. Christian faith understood rightly that any identification of this sort makes the fact of evil and sin wholly incomprehensible. And appearances are not deceiveing; there *is* real struggle between good and evil. In a world whose substance is divine, however, it is inconceivable that this could be so.

Even those Christian theologians who thought about creation faith most intensely, however, such as Irenaeus, knew that there were qualifications to be made in this view of God as creator. Though the image of creator intends to express the otherness of God to the world, it can suggest wrongly a dependence of God upon the world that he made, analogous to the way in which he must work: e.g., one cannot expect more from a scluptor than the quality of the bronze or marble will allow. According to the traditional view, there can be no suggestion that the image of God as maker of heaven and earth, while emphasizing his otherness, should represent God's sovereignty as restricted by the limitations of the materials with which he created. In order to avoid even the hint of limited sovereignty in God, Irenaeus developed an altogether interesting qualifier of the original creation analogy, arguing that God creates in a manner utterly different from the ways in which humans create, with the implication that his creativity is not to be understood at all as imposing form upon extant materials, after the fashion, say, of sculpture. Rather, Irenaeus main-

tained, God also makes the very materials themselves, out of absolutely nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*). By so arguing, Irenaeus and all who followed him could at once insist upon a real difference between God and the world, and yet also affirm God's sovereignty over the world rather than his dependence upon the materials he uses to create.

But there are serious consequences which follow from such an hypothesis, much the most important of which is that it threatens Christian belief with sheer unintelligibility. Purporting to be doctrine commanding unqualified affirmation, *creatio ex nihilo* in reality articulates that which is not merely beyond reason, but quite against reason. For it is not coherently conceivable that, from nothing, something comes. From *something*, something quite different may and does frequently develop. But it makes no sense whatever to say that from *nothing* something comes, even if the name of God is invoked as the creative source. Not even God could say or do something intelligibile about absolute non-being, for doing something with nothing is not a possible act for any being whatever. Thus, though it is impressive the way in which the doctrine of creation first arose from theology's aggressive entering into cultures not its own, for the sake of translating faith into a genuine alternative for life within that culture, contemporary believers hardly should admire the result: a confession requiring language which is utter self-contradiction.

What follows from this examination is that though the polemical aims in the doctrine of creation must be regarded seriously, the language in which it came to expression need not be deemed authoritative for present generations without appropriate reinterpretation. *Creatio ex nihilo* represents a laudable effort at translating across conceptualities in order that others might be touched by the power of belief for their lives as it came to be couched in terms and concepts derived from another culture. And indeed, as long as there remain people preoccupied with the question of the sufficiency of God in the world, and who understand "world" in the terms supplied by ancient Greek philosophy and science, there will be potential recipients for the doctrine.

God's creativity, for contemporary understanding, is to be understood as source and ideal of personal self-consciousness. God's sovereignty over all that is not personal is effected through the personal, and is the sovereignty of a conscious and caring person who cannot act in any way other than personally, with other persons. God actualizes his power over the non-personal through decidedly personal acts which, of necessity, involve co-creativity with other personal beings. This means that God is a caring presence, and not a causal agent; his governance of the created order is the loving persuasiveness

of a caring presence, not the force-full-ness of a first and final cause. Because God is essentially a conscious, caring person, his sovereignty must be limited in many respects, most especially in the respect that he must everlastingly elicit persons with whom to sustain relationships and through whom to exercise creativity in the domain of the non-personal which he everlastingly confronts. God is therefore everlastingly the creator of meaning-worlds out of thing-worlds, through the persons whom he calls out from the non-personal. The all-inclusiveness of his sovereignty (*pater pantokratora*) consists in his capacity to seek personal companions and co-creators tirelessly: nothing in all creation can annul the patient, tireless working of his personal will.

### 4. *God and human devotion*

But what is there about the characterization of God previously given which would warrant *worship* of being? Can such a being inspire unqualified loyalty and reverence? The implication of the foregoing section is that God inspires devoted worship and trust by the utter constancy of his caring presence, the inviolability of his promise to be with his creatures always, in ways worthy of their adoration and emulation. He cannot be other than the conscious, constant, caring presence which he everlastingly discloses himself to be. His glory and majesty, eliciting human beings' most profound reverence, is his unlimited capacity to be forevermore what he now is: a loving being, lovingly present and lovingly guiding every being to an end lovingly envisioned.

Tradition has always affirmed that one profound difference between God and human beings lies in the fact that God cannot be other than what he is. By contrast, what any human being "is" is bounded on all sides by contingencies; the fundamental feature of human existence is *that* it is, and that human beings can assume a variety of characteristics, enobling and degrading. Though freedom and creativity are to be profoundly respected, in their human expressions they do not always inspire unqualified confidence and trust. God, however, is a being who cannot be other than he is. But this inviolability of essence, God's incapacity to be other than he is essentially, must be grasped as the permanent and encompassing reality of a responsive, caring person. It is *that* possibility which makes faith possible, in its fullest expression, as an act of trust. Human beings, who cannot be counted on as having a reliable stance toward anything, will become trustworthy not through being confronted by the demands of an awesomely powerful being, but through the patient

persistence of a divine love which never will be other than it now is. Over the course of time, the constancy of that divine love can become effectively present even to those who seem steadfastly to resist his promptings to new life, to new being as a caring presence to others in the human environing world. Learning to believe is learning to affirm that no one finally will escape the overpowering impact of a firm but tender love which knows no bounds.

The traditional alternative to the view maintained in these pages is that human devotion can be only to a God capable of chosing both to create a world at all and to relate to that world he creates. According to this classical perspective, what becomes adorable about God is the fact that he does what he does without constraint of any sort; his transcendence is his freedom. In essence transcending all relationships, God nevertheless, but by grace, chooses to enter freely into them. From such a perspective, any suggestion that God by nature *must* enter into caring relationships with beings other than himself would be tantamount to an improper regard for his holiness. Venerable as this tradition of thinking may be, and certainly at the heart of Christian orthodoxy, it is, however, difficult to understand how anyone could remain truly devoted to being whose holiness is so specified. A divine being transcending by nature the matrix of caring relationships in the created order would prompt more a state of mind of fearfulness than of devotion, for his would be a holiness which cannot be approached or affected by anyone or anything. The divine life is sustained wholly internally; he only condescends to create and to abide with what he creates. But the effects of his creativity have no bearing upon his holiness; since nothing can constrain him to create, his holiness in no way can be enhanced by his creating.

By way of contrast, in human relationships, affirming *merely* the freedom of persons to enter into a relationship tends to communicate also that the relations themselves, to a large extent, are indifferent matters. Freedom to enter is always freedom to withdraw; the free person can be an uncaring person as well. Thus, the fundamental fact about human existence cannot be freedom to the exclusion of relationality. And neither can it be the ultimate truth about God. If God is thought of as the eminent instance merely of freedom, there must arise the ominous possibility that at some time the supremely holy being might choose no longer to care for his creatures. If God truly transcends all caring relationships in such a manner that his holiness is never genuinely enriched by those for whom he cares, then he is at any moment open to the possibility of indifference or even hostility to his creatures. His freedom might just as appropri-

ately be exercised by exacting a suitable price for their refusal to respond to his demands, by giving his creatures their just due, untempered with mercy. Certainly, according to tradition at least, believers are to understand themselves as having no legitimate complaint against God were he to punish them forever for their sins. But is such a being deserving of worship and devotion, who does not even meet the highest ideals which finite human beings can conceive? Surely it is not a higher order of being to transcend responsibility for caring relationships, to be essentially beyond real presence to others. "Glory to God in the highest" ought to express instead awareness of the holy limitedness of God, God's incapacity to be other than a caring presence, by virtue of which he is to be valued more highly than all else that human beings can experience and know. It is for that holy limitedness that God deserves unending praise.

If this is indeed the case, then it is difficult to draw any other conclusion than that, in order for God to be what he is, it is *necessary* for there to be others for whom he can care and with whom he can create. As essentially a caring presence, God is essentially related to the beings cared about, in the same sense that as a conscious being, he is essentially oriented toward the objects of his consciousness. Caring is caring *for,* just as consciousness is consciousness *of.* Both are interrelational, between a conscious center and that of which that center is conscious: consciousness which cares for and is cared for. Indeed, conscious beings discover themselves in and through the experiences they have of other beings, most especially as they learn the meaning of caring by being cared for by other conscious selves. To speak of God as a conscious, caring person, then, necessarily requires reference also to that meaning-world of which he is conscious and for which he cares. Everlastingly there must be beings other than God, to whom God can be lovingly present and who are developing in their own capacity to love themselves, their neighbors, and God in return.

## 5 *Conclusion*

This essay has focused upon God as person, becoming present to that which already is other than himself, in order both to preserve and to transform its possibilities and destiny. God intends to create personal realities out of a sub-personal realm which in many ways may resist his creativity and thwart his purposes. But his resources are sufficient for the furthering of his aims, and because they are, it becomes possible to affirm that the caring presence of this loving being is

the fundamental principle of reality itself and the end for everything which is at all.

Belief's concern is with discerning what God is doing in an order of being which is other than himself, not with the status of that order in itself, except as it discerns God creatively engaging with it. From a speculative standpoint, even the most faithful might experience periodic doubts about whether or not God is adequate to the task of carrying out his intentions for that order of being. The traditional doctrine of creation has functioned as one answer to such doubts, but the doubts themselves do not warrant such a direct answer at all. For the life of faith proceeds from trusting with one's whole being in God's sufficiency, without demonstration, trusting that the destiny of everything will come to its appropriate completion in the personal engagement between God and the world. If one asks for an objective grounding for such trust, one misunderstands what the enterprise itself is in which one is called to engage. Believing is trusting in the sufficiency of that One whom one slowly learns to call "Father," and in the ultimate worthwhileness of his intentions. It is that kind of trust by which believers are called to live, and it is that kind of God Whose they are, everlastingly.