

## 1 | Introduction: Consoling Anguish and Making It Worse

Despite the title of this Introduction, this book is about the concept of God's power. It does not focus directly on the dynamics of anguish or how best to console it. In the division of intellectual labor in contemporary Christian academic theology, it falls into the area of "doctrinal theology" rather than the area of "pastoral theology." However, behind it is the conviction that much talk by Christians who seek to console those who anguish about others' horrific suffering is itself problematic from the perspective of central Christian theological beliefs. It is problematic because it mischaracterizes the Triune God. Its mischaracterization, in turn, implies a picture of the nature of God's power that, rather than consoling anguish, simply makes it worse. That conviction defines the focus and shapes the approach of these proposals concerning how to talk about the power of God in ways that are faithful to the ways in which God relates to us.

The sort of anguish I have in mind here is often evoked, not just by terrible things that have happened to us, but by terrible things that happen to other people. They may be people we know well and love; they may equally well be passing acquaintances or complete strangers we know about only through the news. Such anguish is a complicated tangle of feelings: horror at the circumstances that cause others' suffering; outrage that such circumstances can occur; fear at the abrupt reminder that such things could suddenly happen to us; an intense desire that such circumstances be taken away from our common world, i.e., from both them and us; and an overwhelming feeling of helplessness in the face of those circumstances

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and the suffering they cause. It is a bone-deep emotional ache that suffuses the core of one's being, burdening every moment the way an intense headache does, weighing one down. The problematic ways of talking about God's power that focus the proposals in this book are addressed for the most part to console both people who are themselves undergoing horrific suffering and those who anguish about what is happening to others.

The problematic forms of would-be consolation that I have in mind use variations on a few conventional themes. For example, anguished persons are often consoled by being told that the circumstance evoking horrific suffering are "God's will," "have a reason," "are sent by God for a purpose," or that "God has a plan in this," or "God never sends more suffering than you can bear." They are platitudes of conventional wisdom. In *Everything Happens for a Reason, and Other Lies I've Loved*,<sup>1</sup> Kate Bowler's theologically wise and moving book about being on the receiving end of such comments, she notes in these sentiments the "trite cruelty in the logic of the perfectly certain."<sup>2</sup> Maybe most people who use them would identify themselves as "people of faith." In any case, those ways of speaking remain commonplace in our culture, even as it becomes increasingly secularized. Well-intentioned would-be consolers need not necessarily be themselves devoutly religious or deeply spiritual people. Not knowing what to say to those in anguish, we easily slip into using familiar clichés about God's power whether we "believe in God" or not.

One sign that such efforts to console the anguished are problematic is that, rather than easing anguish, such words of "consolation" often make the anguish worse; they evoke an entirely understandable outrage at God in particular. "Don't talk to me about a loving God!" our friend raged. "A God of love would not have let him

<sup>1</sup> Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens for a Reason, and Other Lies I've Loved* (New York: Random House, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

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suffer the way he did.” Her husband had died after enduring days of intense pain from bone cancer, pain that sophisticated palliative care could not ease. “And don’t tell me that God knows better what is good for us than we do ourselves, or that God sent this whole thing for a reason, or that God never gives more than you can handle. I could only hate a God like that.”

Rare and intensely painful disease is not the only sort of circumstance that evokes anguish in others. Natural catastrophes do also. As I write this chapter, Mexico City has endured two earthquakes and three hurricanes in one month. Today a small army of volunteers attempts to remove the debris of an earthquake-collapsed school building in which a dozen children were trapped, some of whom may still live and others who suffocated to death. It is not difficult to imagine the outrage with which their parents might greet the “consoling” suggestion that God had a “purpose” in “sending” that earthquake. One does not even need to “believe in God” to be angered by the suggestion that God, whom we should praise and love with all our hearts, minds and souls, is a God who has the power to cause such circumstances for some “purpose” or as a part of some “plan.” Even if one does not believe in the reality of God, one can understandably rage at the very hypothesis that a supposedly loving God would exercise God’s power intentionally to do such things. Anger at the reality of such a God, or only at the concept of such a God, makes the burden of anguish worse. It does not ease any of the inter-braided feelings that make up the anguish. It only complexifies and intensifies that tangle of feelings even more than they already are. Well-intentioned efforts to console the anguished by invoking the power of God have the unintended consequence of making the anguish even worse, simply by evoking anger at the God portrayed in those efforts.

Such horrific suffering does not always evoke anger at God. Especially in believers, it leads to a deeply anguished on-going struggle with many conventional Christian spiritual practices. Writing about her young adult daughter’s multiply diagnosed

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problems – “Oppositional defiance. High-functioning Asperger’s. Clinical depression. Generalized anxiety. Social anxiety. Obsessive compulsive disorder,” – Debie Thomas writes “My daughter’s limitations block her from accessing the effective benefits of religion: a sense of belonging, inner peace, the joys of worship, deliverance from existential despair.” “On my worst days,” Thomas writes, “or on my daughter’s – I have thrown the words of Scripture right back in God’s face. ‘The peace that passes understanding? Abundant life? An easy yoke and a light burden? Daughter, your faith has made you well – go in peace? Are you kidding me?’” As a preteen, her daughter referred to her problem as “a wall.” About herself Thomas says, “I’ve inherited a Christian vocabulary that is rich and beautiful – but also impoverished when it comes to deep psychological anguish.” “So now I simply sit next to the wall” – i.e., next to the limitations that wall her daughter from a “normal” life.

I face it and endure it. I live each day in its shadow, hoping my daughter will decide to keep on living too, even in that chilly darkness – and hoping that my presence at the wall shows her something of God’s steady presence in its shadow too. . . I read about Jesus at Gethsemane, deserted and afraid. I read about manna – mysterious substance for one day at a time. And I read about the lost lamb the shepherd follows into the treacherous night, the little one who can’t help but wander. The exhausted, endangered one who needs so badly to come home but just can’t find the way.<sup>3</sup>

There are several ways in which trying to console those who anguish by speaking of God in this fashion is problematic. In the chapters that follow, I focus on only one: Assumptions about what the phrase “the power of God” means in a Christian context. They are assumptions that are symbolized by the common, unqualified

<sup>3</sup> ‘My Daughter’s Wall,’ *The Christian Century*, August 1, 2018, p. 35.

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use of the adjective “almighty” to describe God, as though what makes God “God” is that God has “all might or power” or that God has “absolute and unqualified” might or power.

Those assumptions, I suggest, lie deep in the theological and cultural background of such exchanges between those who anguish and those who would console them. They lie implicit in the exchanges’ theological *background* because, in the exchanges themselves, nobody is explicitly engaged in reflection on theological concepts. Nor should they be. No one can be consoled by being argued with about theological questions or by being subjected to an informal lecture on relevant theological topics. No one can be placated in the heat of their anger at God by being shown that the anger is “irrational” or “inconsistent with other ideas you do hold dear.” Not only would the psychological obtuseness of such efforts count as pastoral care malpractice but the very idea of trying to console someone by talking to them that way is laughable on the face of it.

The assumptions about God’s power on which the rest of this book focuses lie also in the broader cultural background of such exchanges. They are so deeply entrenched in North American culture, at least, and reinforced by conventional ways of talking about the God in whom one either does not or does “believe,” ways of talking in both the culture generally and in communities of Christian faith particularly, that everyone whose identity is formed by that culture is so deeply shaped by those assumptions that their appropriateness is rarely questioned.

There are, of course, other ways in which it is problematic to try to console those who anguish by reminding them that God has the power to control all things. Some of the ways that it is problematic are more immediately present up front in such exchanges and not in the background. They are both *psychologically* problematic and, from a “spiritual” point of view, *pastorally* problematic. Those aspects of the problematic character of such efforts to console the anguished are certainly important, because they directly distort the

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effort to console. However, many of the questions they raise are different than the conceptual questions that are raised in the examination of how such efforts are also theologically problematic. What is *theologically* problematic about them only indirectly distorts their effort to console. This book does not directly address ways in which efforts to console the anguished are psychologically and pastorally problematic. It focuses only on theologically problematic ways of talking about God's power that lie in the background of those inadequacies. All the same, as the book progresses, I aim to exhibit how an examination of the concept of the power of God in a Christian conceptual context cumulatively has, over the long haul, practical relevance to the reshaping of ways to address in God's name people's anguish at others' suffering that are less problematic. That is one way in which the focus of the book is narrowed.

**Theological Goals**

A second way in which the book's focus is narrowed lies in its aspiration. Theological writings may have any of several goals they aspire to realize. Many of them share the aim to explain some theological concept, as this one aims to clarify the claim that God is powerful.

Of those works that aim to explain the concept of God's power, many also aim to defend the claim that God is "almighty" in the face of "the problem of evil." Their explanations of God's power are exercises in "theodicy" i.e., exercises in justifying claims about the power of a loving and just God in the face of the reality of evil that seems to be scattered randomly and unjustly in the lives of humankind. Affirmation of (a) the reality of evil seems to bring with it strong reasons to deny the reality of a God who is at once, (b) loving, (c) just, and (d) "almighty" or "omnipotent." The four are inconsistent – if evil is real, then either God cannot prevent it

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despite God's love for creatures and therefore is not "almighty"; or God could prevent it but does not and therefore is not "just"; or God is incapable of preventing it although in love God wants to, and therefore is not "almighty." Hence, the argument against God's existence concludes, such a God cannot exist. Indeed, the objection goes, such a God cannot even be coherently conceived. Just that objection seems to be what is going on in the angry responses of many who are anguished by others' horrific suffering to conventional efforts to console them. Hence, in addition to aiming to clarify the claim that God is powerful, the theological projects engaged in theodicy also aim to engage in "apologetics." They offer arguments to show how affirmation of God's reality can cohere with affirmations of God's love, justice and power.

There is nothing novel in modern theology about a theological project like this book that proposes to analyze what it means to characterize God as "almighty" or "omnipotent."

In contemporary theology, many such projects also aim to be an "apologetic theology." They offer a justification for affirming the reality of a God of power (in some sense of the word "power"), who is also loving and just, in the face of the undeniable reality of horrendous suffering that evokes anguish. Their "apologias" are one sort or another of theodicy. They have often been formulated on the basis of a systematic metaphysics, such as the process metaphysics of Charles Hartshorne or Alfred North Whitehead,<sup>4</sup> or on the basis of an ontology, such as the one developed by Paul Tillich and modified by Kyle Pasewark.<sup>5</sup> Or, like Edward Farley, the

<sup>4</sup> Cf. John B. Cobb, *A Christian Natural Theology* (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1964); John B. Cobb and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition*; (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1976); Anna Case-Winters, *God's Power: Traditional Understandings and Contemporary Challenges* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> *A Theology of Power: Being Beyond Domination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993).

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challenge can be formulated on the basis of a phenomenological analysis of the conditions of the possibility of human consciousness and free agency.<sup>6</sup>

This book's focus limits itself to the single aim of analyzing the Christian theological concept of the power of God. The "logic" of anyone's coming to trust in and "believe" the reality of God is another and quite separate question. An exploration of the "logic" or "grammar" of Christian beliefs is not necessarily an exploration of the "logic" of "coming to Christian belief." It does not aim to be an apologetics. It is self-limited to exploring what is often referred to as the informal "logic" or the "generative grammar" of Christian talk about God – in this case talk about God's power. In such contexts, "logic" and "grammar" are both used analogically. The analogy with "logic" suggests that the essay aims to explore how the concept of "power" is related to other key theological concepts: Some are "more basic" than others, some necessarily imply others, some may imply others but not necessarily, some are incoherent with others, etc. The analogy with grammar suggests that the essay aims to explore something like "grammatical rules" in Christian discourse about God, and discourse about all else in relation to God, in virtue of which what is said grammatically is intelligible to any one who has learned to speak that language or dialect. However, the rules do not dictate the content of what one says. Instead, such grammatical rules are the condition of the possibility of intelligible communication. They are socially constructed and can change. However, logic and grammar are only analogies for the sort of analysis this essay aims to realize. The success of the analysis has to be assessed on the basis of what it manages to show about the concept of God's power and not on the basis of how closely it approximates an essay in either logic or grammar. Nor can it be assessed on how successful it is in "solving the problem of evil."

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Edward Farley, *Divine Empathy* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996).



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It does not even try to do that, although it may contribute to dissolving it in the form in which it is usually posed.

**What Makes It “Christian”?**

I have already signaled that the focus of this essay is also limited in a third way. As a reflection on the concept of the power of God, it is specifically a “Christian” theology. It is not a proposal about the sense in which power might be ascribed to generic “transcendence,” “holy mystery,” or “sacredness.” What makes it more narrowly and particularly “Christian”? I suggest that, put in a concise formula, the answer is that this essay counts as Christian insofar as (a) it is grounded in the ways in which God actively relates to all that is not God, (b) those ways of relating as told in Christian canonical scripture as (c) that scripture is read through the lens of the life-trajectory of Jesus Christ as it is variously narrated in the canonical Gospels and, in very brief accounts, in other New Testament texts (mostly letters). These supplementary texts comment on the significance of Jesus and what he did and underwent. Put broadly, it counts as Christian insofar as it is in that fashion “Christocentric.”<sup>7</sup> It proceeds in that way without attempting to defend the decision to do so.

It needs to be noted that that decision does not necessarily imply that proceeding in this fashion is the only procedure that entitles a theological proposal to count as “truly Christian.” It merely claims that it is one way in which a theological project may count as Christian, and it is the one adopted here.

In doing so, it is obvious that this book, whose theological focus is explicitly Christian, proceeds on the basis of a number of

<sup>7</sup> In this approach, it follows the basic approach that Daniel Migliore’s adopts in his important book *The Power of God and the Gods of Power* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), although it may develop it in ways Migliore would find problematic.

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background theological assumptions that it does not pretend to have defended. It may be useful to identify five of them at the outset.

First, I assume that a Christian understanding of God is based on the ways in which God goes about actively relating to all that is not God. The traditional name for God's ways of relating is "God's economy."

Second, I assume that there are communities that are self-described as "Christian" that acknowledge canonical Christian scripture as an authoritative collection of texts. These texts tell of the concrete ways in which God goes about relating to all else and these communities seek to shape their common and individual lives in ways that are appropriate responses to the ways in which God has related to them.

I assume, third, that those same communities affirm that what Jesus does and undergoes – through his ministry of proclaiming the immanence of the in-breaking of God's eschatological kingdom by teaching and healing, his trial, arrest, suffering, crucifixion, and resurrection, as narrated in the canonical Gospels – is definitive of the way God goes about relating to all else. This is not to assume that the entire content of what can be said about how God relates to all else can and must be derived from scripture's accounts of what Jesus does and undergoes. "Definitive" does not entail "exhaustive." It does, however, set a negative standard by which any effort to characterize God, including God's power, must meet: It cannot be incoherent with the way in which God relates to all else in and through what Jesus does and undergoes.

Fourth, I assume that the literary structure of canonical New Testament accounts of Jesus warrants the judgment that what is said on the basis of those accounts about the ways in which God relates to all that is not God is most felicitously expressed in Trinitarian accounts of God. Regularly those narratives have three focal characters: Jesus, the One He calls "Father," and the Spirit. That is a structure of the concrete way in which God is said to relate to all else in and through what Jesus does and undergoes. This