

Human Anguish and God's Power

The power of God and its relevance to human suffering has always been a deeply contested subject. David H. Kelsey is one of the most thoughtful and distinguished theological writers in English, and is well known for his innovative work with George Lindbeck and Hans Frei in pioneering a distinctive 'postliberal' way of doing theology. In this long-awaited new book, he brings a lifetime's learning to bear on one of the most difficult questions that there is: namely, how can we speak meaningfully and authentically to those in anguish while at the same time maintaining plausible talk of divine potency? Kelsey shows that some pastoral approaches to people's distress so often undermine the very case they are making. His nuanced and subtle argument about the paradoxical power/powerlessness of the divine, which includes a path-breaking account of transcendence, transforms our understanding of God's relationship to the world and its creatures.

DAVID H. KELSEY is the Weigle Professor Emeritus of Theology at Yale Divinity School. He is the author of *Proving Doctrine* (1999), *Imagining Redemption* (2005), and *Eccentric Existence* (2 vols., 2009).

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978-1-108-83697-5 — Human Anguish and God's Power
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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India

79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

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www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108836975

DOI: 10.1017/9781108873246

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First published 2021

Printed in the United Kingdom by TJ Books Limited, Padstow Cornwall

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-108-83697-5 Hardback

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For J. V. K.,
and all those, whatever their roles,
who find themselves called to pastor the anguished.

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The Echternach Procession: A Preface

This book is based on my 2011 Warfield Lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary. In those lectures, I reflected on some implications for Christian doctrine of God of a hermeneutical and exegetical move that is central to the theological anthropological project worked out at considerable (some would understandably say “excessive”!) length in *Eccentric Existence*.¹ That “move” turns on the claim that what makes the diverse writings assembled in the Christian bible construed as “canon” a certain sort of “whole” is not, as is usually assumed, a single extended narrative. That narrative, which runs through the canon, tells of God’s relating to all that is not God to create it, to reconcile it to God when it is self-estranged from God, and to consummate it eschatologically. Rather, my claim is, it is a braid of three inseparable but irreducibly different sorts of narrative: respectively, God actively relating in importantly different concrete ways to create, to reconcile estranged creatures, and to draw creatures to eschatological consummation. The patterns of inter-relations among the three ways in which God concretely goes about relating to all that is not God, I argue, serve to rule and shape what may be said on the basis of each of them about God and about all else in relation to God. *Eccentric Existence* explored how those patterns shape what can be said on their basis about human creatures; the Warfield Lectures suggested how those patterns should shape aspects of what is said about God’s glory, kingdom, and power.

¹ *Eccentric Existence* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

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This book's emergence from those lectures has been a slow process, five pages forward daily followed by three deleted, daily. I lamented about this to a friend. "It sounds like the Echternach Procession," he said. "Check it out." I consulted Wikipedia. Sure enough, a religious dancing procession is held every Whit Tuesday in Echternach in eastern Luxembourg. It is held in honor of St. Willibrord the Patron Saint of Luxembourg who established the Abbey of Echternach in the seventh century. Over a distance of about a mile, pilgrims in rows of four or five abreast, sometimes with arms linked, "dance" or "jump" from left to right and thus slowly move forward to the basilica. It has taken other forms in the past. At one time, "pilgrims would take 3 steps forward and 2 steps backwards thus taking five steps in order to advance one." Uplifting as the Echternach Procession may be as an expression of the piety of a public liturgy, it is – at least in my case – a depressingly apt image for the experience of writing theology. At the same time, it is also an apt image for several features of this project for which I can be grateful.

The pilgrims' linked arms in the Echternach Procession is an apt image for the way in which theological projects in progress are always directly or indirectly collaborative. I am deeply grateful to Iain Torrance, the President of Princeton Theological Seminary at the time, to Daniel Migliore my faculty host, and to Professor George Hunsinger for the invitation to deliver the Warfield Lectures and for their generous hospitality while I was there; to students and faculty colleagues at Princeton for their engagement with the lectures; and especially to the lively groups of students who invited me to theological discussion over lunch and coffee during the days of the lecture series.

Parts of Chapter 11 are based on a lecture, "Picturing God in a Fragmented World," delivered at the meeting of the *Societas Homileticus* at Yale Divinity School in August of 2010. An early version of Chapter 6 was presented as a lecture at the University of Tuebingen in June, 2012, and versions of Chapters 5 and 9 were the

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basis of discussion in theology seminars there led by Professor Christoph Schwoebel. I am deeply grateful to the Protestant Theology Faculty of the University of Tuebingen for the invitation to lecture and to our hosts, Professor and Mrs. Schwoebel, for their most thoughtful and generous hospitality to my wife, Julie, and me. In each of these settings, questions and discussion have made collaborators even out of people who were at best dubious about the proposals developed here.

My Echternach Procession might never have come to an end had I not been invited to present my effort to “develop” the Warfield Lectures into a book to the 2014 Graduate Theological Seminar in the Yale Department of Religious Studies. Participants in the seminar (you know who you are!) patiently worked their way through over-long chunks of a “work in process,” gently and most firmly identifying innumerable places where the line of thought disappeared down conceptual rabbit’s holes, weakening the argument and pointlessly inflating length of the manuscript. I abandoned the entire project in the distorted form it had taken up to that point, and I started over. I and my readers owe the members of the seminar deep thanks.

The final steps in the preparation of this text owe a large debt to Ed Watson. I am deeply grateful to him for creating the book’s index and, more broadly, his meticulous spotting of innumerable typos.

Which brings us to a second way in which the Echternach Procession is an apt image for this project. At less than a mile, the procession is a modest pilgrimage, no matter how frustratingly slow its three-steps-forward two-steps-back process may be. Its modesty is an apt image for the central topic of this project, namely, the relation and distinction between God’s sovereignty and God’s power, which are frequently conflated under the name of “God’s Lordship.” That is a modest topic, a subtopic of a subtopic of Christian Trinitarian doctrine of God which is itself only one “place” or “locus” in the whole body of Christian Divinity. This

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book's topic is a subtopic of the larger topic of the intrinsic or "metaphysical perfections" of the Triune God, in contradistinction to God's "relational perfections." That, in turn, is a subtopic of the even more complex topic "divine nature" or "divinity-as-such" in contradistinction to the topic "divine triunity," both of which are subtopics of Christian Trinitarian doctrine of God. Full-ledged Trinitarian doctrines of God must address a huge agenda. This project is far more modest. To keep that clear, it is best if kept (relatively!) brief. As pilgrimage processions go, after all, the Echternach Procession is relatively short.