

# *Evolutionary Theodicy*

with Denis Edwards, “Christopher Southgate’s Compound Theodicy: Parallel Searchings”; Ted Peters, “Extinction, Natural Evil, and the Cosmic Cross”; Robert John Russell, “Southgate’s Compound Only-Way Evolutionary Theodicy: Deep Appreciation and Further Directions”; Bethany Sollereider, “Exploring Old and New Paths in Theodicy”; Holmes Rolston, III, “Redeeming a Cruciform Nature”; Ernst M. Conradie, “On Social Evil and Natural Evil: In Conversation with Christopher Southgate”; Philip Clayton and Steven Knapp, “Evolution, Contingency, and Christology”; John F. Haught, “Faith and Compassion in an Unfinished Universe”; Celia Deane-Drummond, “Perceiving Natural Evil through the Lens of Divine Glory? A Conversation with Christopher Southgate”; Nicola Hoggard Creegan, “Theodicy: A Response to Christopher Southgate”; and Neil Messer, “Evolution and Theodicy: How (Not) to Do Science and Theology.”

## EVOLUTION, CONTINGENCY, AND CHRISTOLOGY

by Philip Clayton and Steven Knapp

*Abstract.* Christopher Southgate has made important contributions to theodicy and the theory of divine action in light of the contingency in evolution and the suffering of creation. What happens then when one thinks through the implications of contingency for Christology? One can admit that aesthetic and moral judgments are products of a contingent history and yet affirm that they really are valid. Similarly, we argue, one can acknowledge the contingency of Jesus’ existence, actions, and subsequent impact and still maintain that his will was uniquely united with the divine will. Following a critical engagement with the recent work of Keith Ward, we argue that a high Christology is compatible with the actual contingencies of evolutionary and social history, without the necessity of interventionist divine action.

*Keywords:* Christology; contingency; creation; cultural evolution; divine action; evolution; natural evil; realism; Christopher Southgate; Keith Ward

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From the beginning of our work together, Christopher Southgate has been a natural ally as well as a friend. We are happy to be part of this issue that is being published in his honor. Instead of writing an exposition or critique of Southgate’s work for this volume, we will focus on a topic of

Philip Clayton is Ingraham Professor at Claremont School of Theology and affiliated faculty at the Claremont Graduate University, Claremont, CA, USA; e-mail: pclayton@cst.edu. Steven Knapp is President Emeritus and University Professor of English at George Washington University, Washington, DC, USA; e-mail: sknapp@gwu.edu.

great interest to him and to us: the problem of evil. “The theology of providence can only ever be explored alongside the problem of suffering and evil,” Southgate writes in his well-known volume *God, Humanity and the Cosmos* (2011, 279). He provides a powerful statement of the challenge to Christian belief:

The evolutionary process presents us with the face of the suffering of myriad creatures (the “ontological problem”) and, even worse, the thought that this suffering serves a purpose, in refining species and spurring them on to new and ever more complex and ingenious evolutionary strategies, including those of rationality and consciousness. The victims of evolution, therefore, seem to be merely means to the divine end (the “teleological problem”). Even if the system as a whole is full of value, even if it may be the only way such value could be realized in creation, the suffering of individual creatures might lead one to return one’s theological ticket, either to conclude with Dawkins that evolution is just the way things are: blind, pitiless, and indifferent, or worse, that it is the product of a cosmic sadist rather than a loving Father. (Southgate 2008b, 14)

In determining whether God is responsible for evil, Southgate emphasizes, one must consider the fundamental physical laws of the universe, the nature of evolution, and the kinds of interventions, if any, that God makes over the course of cosmic history. Southgate rightly emphasizes the contingency of evolution, in which “particular historical circumstances, especially those of the great extinctions, contributed enormously to the particular biosphere we have today” (2008b, 305). Such radical contingency suggests a “creation unfolding according to the interplay of chance and physical law” (2008b, 7) and “a God working through the openness and indeterminacy of the natural order” (Southgate 2011, 278).

One wants to affirm divine providence, which seems to have guided this “open” evolutionary process to produce beauty and other values and at least one species that is capable of knowing and loving God. Yet one must also acknowledge the enormous cost: “[A]t the level of the individual creature, the divine desire for creaturely flourishing is frequently unrealized, and where it is realized, it is only so at the expense of other possibilities, and often at the expense of the flourishing of other organisms” (Southgate 2008a, 72).

Southgate’s work is particularly important in that he foregrounds the contingency of evolution, emphasizes the severity of the problem of evil, and seeks an account of the God–world relation consistent with both. Many traditional responses fail to meet these standards. Southgate clearly recognizes “how paradoxical the theology of evolutionary creation must be, given the Christian affirmation that a good God has given rise to a good creation, and yet as we have seen the creation is shot through with ambiguity. The purposes of God are, and are not, realized in the life of any given creature” (2008a, 71). In light of the challenges of radical contingency

and suffering, one wonders if there is any way to preserve belief in divine revelation and divine–human interaction. In particular, what becomes of Christology, or the claim that “God became man” in the midst of history?

#### NATURAL EVIL AND THE CONTINGENCY OF DIVINE ACTION

In the summer of 2005, the Vatican Observatory and the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences (CTNS) convened a week-long consultation at the Pope’s summer residence at Castel Gandolfo outside of Rome; the results were published in a collection titled *Physics and Cosmology: Scientific Perspectives on the Problem of Natural Evil* (Russell and Murphy 2007). The consultation was in part a response to the terrible Indian Ocean tsunami that had caused the deaths of nearly a quarter million people in a dozen countries across South and Southeast Asia. Christopher Southgate and the other participants were asked to reflect on the implications of such events in the light of both modern science and theology. Our contribution (Clayton and Knapp 2007), which eventually became the third chapter of our 2011 book *The Predicament of Belief*, was a hypothetical account of what God’s permitting such massive suffering indicated about the nature of divine action.

Our immediate point of departure was the work of another conference participant, Wesley Wildman, who earlier had derived from the problem of evil a moral objection to all forms of personalistic theism that he called the Argument from Neglect.<sup>1</sup> In failing to prevent innocent suffering, Wildman had argued, a personal God, if such a God existed, must also fail the moral test that would disqualify any human mother or father from counting as a loving parent.

The force of this objection, as Wildman rightly argued, does not depend on a theory of divine omnipotence. Innocent suffering is so pervasive, and many instances would be so easy to prevent, that even a modest assumption of divine efficacy would result in a different world from the one we see all around us. Why, for instance, could an active God not have planted a warning in the minds of those about to be swept away by the tsunami, prompting them to seek higher ground?

The Argument from Neglect successfully shows, in our judgment, that if God is indeed a personal or, as we prefer to say, a not less than personal agent, and if God has benevolent intentions toward God’s creatures, then there must be a reason why God does not intervene in situations where doing so would prevent or relieve innocent suffering. Our (once again) hypothetical candidate for such a reason was embodied in what we called the “not-even-once principle.” “A benevolent God,” we wrote, “could not intervene *even once* without incurring the responsibility to intervene in every case in which doing so would prevent a case of innocent suffering” (Clayton and Knapp 2011, 49). God, after all, is not a finite agent with

limited time and energy; God does not suffer, as we humans do, from “compassion fatigue” or a narrow attention span. God, we suggested, “lacks the luxury of our finitude. God therefore has no reason to intervene in the case of what we regard as unusual suffering while tolerating the less visible suffering that God perceives across the spectrum of sentient life” (Clayton and Knapp 2011, 51). So, in short, if God were to prevent or relieve a single instance of innocent suffering, why not intervene in all such cases?

Our answer, which in some ways resembles the “Irenaean” or “soul-making” theodicy famously developed by John Hick (Hick 1966), is that a universe in which God continually interfered with the operations of nature would not be a universe in which rational, autonomous beings could emerge. It would lack the regularity, stability, and hence predictability that finite agents need if they are to develop a conception of their own identity and agency. We can only come to know ourselves “by interacting with a reality we can come to understand,” a reality that “is *not* subject to alteration by human—or more than human—fiat” (Clayton and Knapp 2011, 48).

If God cannot interfere with natural processes either continually or occasionally, what happens to the very notion of divine action in the world? Are we left with a deistic universe, set in motion by an ultimate reality that is thereafter locked out of any possibility of interacting with it? We avoid that consequence by developing a modified version of the classical *participatory* theory of divine action.<sup>2</sup> On this account, God can indeed act in the world, but only in a noncoercive way that does not cancel the effects of natural processes or compel the responses of autonomous agents—as would occur, for instance, if God placed miraculous warnings in the minds of potential flood victims. Instead, God can be conceived as acting noncoercively, for instance through the mechanism that process theologians have intriguingly called the divine “lure” (Ford 1978). If we suppose that “God continually lures all of creation to conformity with the divine nature,”

this divine attraction does not need to be understood as impersonal, like the force of magnetism, nor as a universal message offering the same content to all agents, as if it were a kind of divine radio broadcast. Instead, it is possible that the lure is highly differentiated, calling different individuals to different types of action or response. The problem of evil, however, has made clear that the message to each agent cannot arrive fully formed and formulated, as if each person needed only to turn on her inner receiver to know precisely what God would have her do. Instead, it is a lure that only becomes a definite message as it is interpreted and formulated by each recipient. (Clayton and Knapp 2011, 62f.)

The participatory theory of divine action has profound consequences for traditional Christian understandings of divine revelation. Above all, it

entails that the *content* of revelation, even though the act of revelation is initiated by God, is a product of the reciprocal and indeed the dialectically fused agency of the divine messenger and the human recipient. As we wrote in “Participation and Emergence,” humans “are not merely interpreters of the divine lure; we co-constitute what that message becomes.” Indeed, we suggest that the participatory nature of divine–human communication is evident in the history of human religions:

The great religious prophets and leaders have often described the divine lure as the call to compassion, to selflessness, and to altruism. Of course, they have also given some radically different accounts of what God is (if they believed there was a God). According to the participatory theory, this is not merely a matter of conflicting interpretations of a single content—a single set of propositions in the divine mind. Instead, what becomes the content of revelation is in part determined by the constructive activities of human agents. Revelation is a joint product of participatory communication. (Walters, Clayton, and Knapp 2014, 173f.)

Such, in any case, was the view of divine action and hence of divine revelation that we proposed in the elaboration of the Castel Gandolfo contribution that became the third chapter of *The Predicament of Belief*. What we did not fully grasp when we developed that argument was its unavoidable implication that the content of divine action, including what Christians take to be the actions of God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, must be conceived as radically and indeed irreducibly *contingent*. Such actions need not have occurred in anything like the way they did, and given a different human context and a different set of human responses, they would not have.

#### CONTINGENCY AND CREATION

In responding to the problem of evil, particularly the version developed by Wildman as the Argument from Neglect, we found it necessary to focus on the nature of divine action within the created universe, including God’s actions in communicating with finite creatures capable of responding to the divine lure. We concluded that such action must be noncoercive and therefore participatory in nature. The fact that God’s communication with humans is partly dependent on human responses means that the content of revelation itself must be conceived as a contingent result of divine/human interaction rather than a preexisting set of divine ideas or intentions.

These conclusions may not be altogether surprising to those who regard physical and biological evolution as intrinsic features of creation itself. If evolution is real and if natural processes therefore possess at least a relative autonomy, then the particular outcomes of those processes cannot have been predetermined by a divine will or by any preexisting

necessity. At the same time, for those of us who combine an evolutionary picture of the created universe with a personalistic theism, the relative autonomy of creation reflects the absolute autonomy of a creator who chose to bring about the existence of a world outside the creator's self.

Unlike many proponents of process theology,<sup>3</sup> we do not regard the act of creation as necessary or the existence of a world outside God as a necessary accompaniment of the divine reality. Although the infinite God was eternally self-sufficient, God chose to bring about the existence of other beings out of a motive that we can only characterize, anthropomorphically of course, as "sheer generosity: sheer love for the finite others for whose sake [God] chooses to limit [God's] own infinite power" (Clayton and Knapp 2011, 40). Hence God chose to create a universe—perhaps more than one—that would not be a mere reflection of the divine mind but would operate according to its own regularities or "laws." Those sentient and ultimately rational beings who would evolve in such a universe would not be mere automata, directly controlled or programmed by the divine will, but would respond to the world, to other beings, and to the divine lure itself in accordance with their own internal principles and, in the case of rational beings, their own choices.

Although the operations of nature produce effects that are not directly willed by God, we do not regard nature or its regularities as located literally outside the divine reality. They would not exist without God's having created them and continuing to sustain them. In that sense, the so-called laws of nature are expressions of divine agency, even if the effects of their operation are not determined in advance by particular divine intentions. At some point, however, those effects included the evolutionary emergence of organisms, and the laws of nature were now combined with finite, created agency. Biological agency, even at its most primitive, entails the goals of survival and reproduction, and goals imply criteria of success or failure or, in other words, at least a minimal set of *values*. As agents grow more complex over time, the complexity of their goals increases as well, and the dimension of value expands.

On the view of divine agency we are exploring, God neither controls nor predetermines the emergence of those values or the particular forms they will take. Can one then interpret statements about values realistically, that is, as statements about ways the world really is? Or are value judgments merely statements that a particular individual or group chooses to view the world *as if* certain things were valuable? Those who affirm the former possibility, as we do, can nevertheless acknowledge that such judgments are the result of a contingent historical process, a process that could have run differently. Before we consider the implications of these issues for Christology, it may be helpful to see how the combination of contingency and reality applies to aesthetic and moral values.

## CONTINGENCY IN ART AND MORALITY

There is no question that, over the course of many decades now, the role of contingency has moved to the forefront of both theory and practice in the study of the humanities and social sciences. Earlier beliefs in an orderly and one-directional evolution in the arts, in culture, in ethical values, or in social and political structures have succumbed to criticism by scholars who call attention to the role of historical accident and contingent social formations in determining what counts as valuable or, in the case of literary studies, what belongs in the canon of classic literary works. In many cases such criticism has reflected what Paul Ricoeur famously called the “hermeneutics of suspicion” (Ricoeur 1970), a tendency to question the motives underlying master narratives of all kinds. That tendency was encouraged no doubt by Freudian, Marxian, Foucauldian, feminist, and deconstructive theories. But it was also evident in less theoretically oriented scholarship, such as the work of historian Edmund Morgan (1975) on the paradoxical dependence of early American ideas of freedom on the institution of slavery.

Whatever its sources, the triumph of contingency in academic accounts of human ideas, values, and institutions has been pervasively influential, even as it has yielded results that earlier generations would have regarded as scandalous. Its effect on accounts of aesthetic value is especially striking. Thus, for example, A. E. B. Coldiron notes, “Critics before the twentieth century devoted energy to describing the inherent qualities that made Shakespeare and his works universally great, ‘for all time . . .’ Critics of the past several decades, on the other hand, have spent their energy demystifying the material processes of ‘contingencies of value’ (Smith 1988) that have gone into Shakespeare’s reputation” (Coldiron 2009, 257–58).<sup>4</sup>

Suppose we grant that the emergence of Shakespearean drama was a contingent event in the literary history of a small island off the coast of Europe. Suppose we acknowledge that it never *had* to happen. Suppose we grant further that the ability of countless generations to read, watch, and appreciate Shakespeare’s plays depended on a host of social and political accidents, not least among them the improbable emergence of England as an imperial power and the elevation of Shakespeare, for various ideological reasons, to the status of an unassailable national and cultural symbol. Similarly, we can grant that there was nothing inevitable about the emergence of the classical style in music or the highly specific, by no means universal system of tonality on which it depended.<sup>5</sup> And we can grant the error of regarding the European novel as a natural successor to earlier modes of fiction, noting its dependence on a rising middle class and a certain industrialization of cultural production and distribution. Does it follow that the aesthetic values we now perceive in the works of Shakespeare, or Beethoven, or George Eliot are unreal? That such artifacts are not *really* the

great works that we, or many of us, perceive them to be? That they don't really possess the formal and structural features that seem to give them, in each case, a unique and irreplaceable beauty and power?

Our suggestion is that the contingent origins of any particular aesthetic value, whenever and wherever that value first emerges in the complex and chaotic history of human artistic production, do not diminish its reality. Nothing guaranteed that the particular value in question would ever exist, and we have no grounds for supposing that the artworks that preceded its arrival were somehow striving to achieve it—perhaps in the way art historians used to think that the stylized depictions in medieval painting were straining toward the verisimilitude that finally blossomed in the Renaissance! But once it *does* arrive, the aesthetic value of an artifact that for the first time possesses that value has a reality that is not reducible to the circumstances of production or reception—a reality that would persist even if readers or viewers or listeners somehow lost the ability to perceive it. The value persists because it inheres in those features of the aesthetic object that create the standing possibility of a certain subjective response or range of responses to that object. The relation between the object's features and the responses it potentially elicits obtains whether or not the relation is instantiated in the actual experience of any particular viewer, reader, or hearer.<sup>6</sup>

The position we are presenting here—without the space on this occasion to elaborate or defend it—might be called a theory of *contingent aesthetic realism*. We hope that, even if a reader finds this combination of contingency and realism paradoxical, its motivation, at least, will be intuitively clear. Trusting that it is, we want to propose a similar approach to the case of moral values.

Laws and treaties routinely invoke universal moral principles. But there is no question, once again, that some of the most impressive historical and philosophical work in recent decades has uncovered the often surprisingly contingent origins of values that are now, if not universal, then at least widely shared. To return to an example mentioned above: The late historian Edmund Morgan brilliantly and persuasively analyzed the ways in which early American ideals of freedom and equality depended on the institution of slavery, which enabled whites of all classes to define themselves as a republican citizenry by projecting the characteristics traditionally associated with poverty and dependency onto the racially separate population of the enslaved (Morgan 1975). Are the values of freedom and equality somehow refuted by the discovery of their contingent and, in this case, even scandalous origins? Would that discovery dispose us to abandon them if (as does not seem out of the question at this historical moment) humanity at large were to discard them?<sup>7</sup>

Presumably not; and yet, the fact that we who now embrace them regard such values as expressing permanent moral truths does not permit us to suppose that their emergence was in any way necessary or inevitable. To



acknowledge the role of historical accident in the emergence of values one nevertheless holds is to subscribe, at least implicitly, to what we will call *contingent moral realism*.

#### CONTINGENCY AND CHRISTOLOGY

The foregoing reflections on art and morality suggest that recognizing the contingent origins of an axiological state of affairs—a symphony's being excellent, equality's being good—does not diminish its reality. Is there a parallel case to be made for the contingent reality of *theological* states of affairs—for instance, Jesus' being the Christ? We suggest there is and that understanding why has significant implications for Christology. In fact, it's hard to think of a more important correction of traditional Christology than the discovery—if we are right—that it was not necessary that Jesus become the Christ and, indeed, that no intention or act of God required that he do so, while at *the same time* affirming that Jesus really was and is the Christ. Our alternative to the traditional account can be called contingent Christological realism (CCR).

To see what CCR involves, it may be helpful to approach it by way of the recent work of the Oxford theologian Keith Ward. Ward is in many ways an ideal discussion partner, because his recent Christology emphasizes many of the same features that we will be developing here: Jesus' freedom, his mutual and participatory relation with God, and a real divine–human synergy (e.g., Ward 2015, 77). The similarities between our Christologies will make it possible to see the crucial difference more clearly than perhaps any other example could.

One of the bold and innovative elements of Ward's account is the way he interprets the Incarnation against the backdrop of the universe as a whole. In *Christ and the Cosmos*, his reflections take him beyond the terrestrial focus of traditional Christology:

The divine life . . . will be a vast multitude of persons, created, sustained, and fulfilled by the one divine and unlimited being who generates them, makes itself known to them *in forms like theirs*, liberates them from all that leads them away from their primal source, and guides them by an inward spiritual power towards the goal of a truly cosmic communion of love in which self-abandonment and self-realization have become one. (Ward 2015, 71, emphasis added)

He writes in the same context of “a communion of personal being of which Jesus was the human forerunner on this planet” (70). Ward later builds further on this thought: “Maybe, just as we should stop thinking that Jesus will literally rule the Earth one day and that all other religious beliefs will collapse except the Christian, so we should stop thinking that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is the one finally true identifying name of God for every inhabited planet in every galaxy and universe” (106). He

goes on to pluralize Christology even more: “Love is not confined to the Church—or, we may add, even to one species or one planet in the cosmos,” even if “God is manifested on the Planet Earth in the particular form of the fully human person of Jesus” (112, 116).

Ward draws the conclusion that the form in which God manifests God-self to any particular intelligent species will depend on the contingent features of that species and its unique history. Thus, he writes at the end of Part III,

[T]he Word of God could also unite many other finite forms to itself. If there are persons on other planets, we might even expect that this would be so. In other words, the cosmic Word, which is presumably unlimited in nature, can have many finite forms, of which Jesus may only be one. . . . Jesus will be known as just the human instance of a divine Logos which is expressed in myriad names and forms. (Ward 2015, 140f.)

Late in the book Ward brings to the surface the common assumption that runs through *Christ and the Cosmos*, namely, “the contingency of God’s specific creation and relation to created beings on this planet” (250). A Christian understanding of incarnation has to take this contingency into account: “if God’s creation of this universe is free, then God might have created other universes. *That makes the creation of this universe contingent, something God did not have to do.* . . . [It is true that] God did not have to create this universe, that humans did not have to sin, *and that God could have redeemed humans without becoming incarnate*” (251). Ward returns to the same point at the very end of the book:

I think it is important to see the Trinity in this expanded cosmic form now that we are aware for the first time in history of the vast extent of the universe and the possibility of many forms of life very different from our own in relation to which the same God that we worship must be present if God truly exists as creator of the cosmos. On this planet, too, there may be diverse forms of revelation as the infinite God is disclosed to and responded to by different peoples with different histories and cultures. (Ward 2015, 260f.)

Now note that the fact that the forms of revelation may vary across histories and cultures, whether on different planets or even just on this one, does not yet show that revelation in each case is contingent in the strong sense we have been developing in this essay. Even if designed for the contingent circumstances of a particular species or a particular culture, each form of revelation *could* still be predetermined by a God who knew in advance what the species or culture in question would need. Yet the more we acknowledge the potential diversity of both the conditions and the forms of revelation, the harder it is to sustain the intuition that the precise content of any form of revelation is divinely ordained.

From that point of view, Ward’s strong affirmation of contingency in the passages we have cited has implications that, interestingly, he stops

short of accepting. As we have seen, he asserts that a particular form of redemption is contingent on the specific history, culture, language, and mode of life on a particular planet. For Ward, that contingency extends not only across human history but also across a (possible) multitude of species on a multitude of planets. Indeed, whether or not one embraces Ward's multiplanetary speculation, it would seem that, if this contingency holds across planets, then it must hold also across multiple cultures on our planet. After all, at least in particular epochs peoples on this planet have been completely isolated from each other, inhabiting environments that are, as it were, worlds apart. In fact, there is no reason to suppose that communities living on opposite sides the same planet would be more or less different from each other than communities living on that planet and, say, one of its moons.

Ward clearly affirms that Jesus, a member of the species *Homo sapiens* in a particular culture at a particular moment on our particular planet, may not be the only form of God's self-revelation, and hence not the sole mediator of revelation or redemption.<sup>8</sup> The problem with his account, as we see it, does not lie with his view of the incarnation itself, that is, the unity of God and human in Jesus. The problem instead is that he does not permit contingency to play the same role in the life of Jesus that, in his account, it does in cosmic evolution.

Consider what is entailed by Ward's account of the Incarnation. The outcome is determined from Jesus' birth, if not before: "Jesus may be unique in being fully united to God from the first moment of his earthly existence and in living by the full and unimpeded power of the Spirit" (Ward 2015, 74). God's causal role is direct and unique in history: "The absolute moral purity and inspired wisdom of Jesus is realized by specific divine action, which makes the human subject an unimpeded medium of divine love and divine action" (Ward 2015, 74). In fact, this specific divine action persisted throughout the years of Jesus' life, for such a person "could only exist by an extraordinary and specific act of God, exercised continuously throughout a whole human life, to preserve the person from evil and fill a whole life with the spirit of wisdom and love" (75). It would be a "grace-perfected life": God did something in the case of this person that God did not do in the case of anyone else. Jesus' freedom was not usurped, Ward claims, and yet he was "incapable of falling into evil"; he was "created by God as an objective realization of the ideal goal of human persons" (78).

Again, the difficulty is not that in Jesus "there is the deepest possible unity"; it is the requirement that such unity be "original and indissoluble" (78). It is not the claim that there is perfect fusion of Father and Son, but the claim that there is "no risk in the divine love, and there is no possibility of imperfection in the human love" (117). Ward is right in the places where he affirms contingency, for example, that God might not have created a finite universe at all and might not have become incarnate in Jesus (134).<sup>9</sup>

But he does not take into account the full scope of the contingency that a participatory conception of divine action entails.

Imagine that God indeed had determined from all eternity that a certain first-century carpenter would be the incarnation of God's self-revelation on Earth and would accomplish, through the particular events and acts of his life and the particular manner of his death, God's plan of redemption. To ensure that this plan would succeed, God either must have intervened or have been *ready* to intervene on countless occasions to prevent natural processes and human actions from thwarting the divine intent. Such actual or potential interventions would have had to precede the carpenter's birth, accompany him throughout his life, and continue through the emergence and preservation of the institutions that would convey his memory to subsequent generations. For instance, God must have been ready to prevent the destruction of Jerusalem from occurring before Jesus' birth; Jesus' succumbing to one of the childhood illnesses that killed a majority of his contemporaries; and extermination by Jewish or Roman authorities of the early Christian sects. In fact, if Jesus' suffering a violent death on the cross was a necessary part of his redemptive mission, God must have acted, or have been ready to act in rather dramatic ways, if last-minute circumstances stood in its way. In short, God must have been prepared to perform as many miraculous interventions as necessary, perhaps in the millions if things were going badly enough to require them.

Of course theologians through the centuries have been willing to grant exactly these implications of the notion that Jesus' identity was eternally predetermined and, indeed, that the events of his life were predicted by the prophets in some detail. We might join Keith Ward in embracing such implications were we not prevented from doing so by the contingent nature of divine-human participation that we were compelled to adopt for the reasons summarized above. For if God is ready to intervene in all the ways a non-contingent Christology entails, we have no way to explain why God does not intervene in the countless situations where doing so would reduce or eliminate innocent suffering or increase the odds of universal redemption. But if one does not embrace the implications of the traditional account; if one must therefore regard Jesus' becoming "one with the Father," and remaining unified in this way for the duration of his life and beyond, as, in the fullest sense, a contingent event or series of events that did not actually have to occur; then what happens to Christology itself?

#### CONTINGENT CHRISTOLOGICAL REALISM

So far, we have made a case for the contingency of Jesus' becoming and remaining the Christ. We call that event contingent because of its dependence on countless historical and biological processes that all could have gone another way, and that, on our account of divine agency, God

would not have compelled to one particular outcome. We now turn to the question of what kind of Christology is compatible with that degree of contingency—or, to put the question more positively, what does its irreducible contingency tell us about Jesus' identity and role? What, in other words, is the realist side of CCR?

Our answer begins with a return to the evolutionary picture we presented in our section on the contingency of creation. In that section, we followed the evolutionary process to the point where values first emerged and then expanded as organisms increased in complexity. In due course, organisms evolved to the point where they began to form ideas of a divine reality and to have experiences that, at least partly in response to the divine lure, they took to be experiences of encountering that reality.

At this point, we need to insert a new hypothesis: namely, that God decided to create a universe in which beings would evolve who would not only seek a loving relationship with God but would freely choose to will what God wills, in that way both responding to the divine lure and returning the divine love for the sake of which, on our view, God created this universe. For those of us whose wills constantly wander or "turn toward evil," a perfect fusion of human and divine wills is almost impossible to imagine; nor can we specify criteria for deciding when it may actually have occurred. But we can have reason to decide that a particular person has come far closer to a perfect fusion of wills and is therefore a much better reflection of the divine love than we are; and we can even come to believe, perhaps correctly, that a particular person has in fact achieved that perfection.

One of the fundamental Christian claims is that Jesus of Nazareth experienced a perfect fusion of divine and human wills, thereby becoming "the firstborn of all Creation" (Colossians 1:15).<sup>10</sup> One might think that a strong emphasis on contingency and a concern about forms of divine action that might make God responsible for suffering would make it impossible to affirm the perfect fusion of God and humanity in Jesus of Nazareth. It turns out, however, that the fusion posited by the traditional doctrine can be preserved without negating process and contingency. At some point, Jesus perfectly knew ("heard") the lure of God as it drew him to unity with God in ways appropriate to his language, culture, and moment in history. Through the participatory interaction of their two wills, God and Jesus together created a new realization of the divine love that was already implicit in the act of creation itself, transforming God's relationship with the world as well as humanity's relationship with God. And, although Jesus' will remained free to diverge from the influence of the divine lure, his will and the divine will at some point achieved an alignment so complete as to amount to a fusion of God and man—the incarnation of God.

To say that, in Jesus, human and divine wills were fused suggests that the two wills did not merely resonate like strings on a violin; they became so intertwined that at some point it was no longer possible for them to

diverge. At that point, the goal of creation was fully realized, as far as we know for the first and perhaps the only time in human history and possibly in the history of the created universe as a whole. And, that fusion of wills was what constituted Jesus' identity as the Christ, the Son of God, the perfect incarnation of the divine–human relationship.

And yet, real as it was and is, that perfect fusion, and therefore that perfect expression of the divine love, might not have occurred in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. It might have occurred earlier, or later, or might not have occurred at all; and because the actions of God and human responses to those actions are interdependent, God could not have predicted which of the three would be the case. Once the fusion occurred, however, it became a permanent and constituent feature of the divine lure itself. The Spirit of God became the Spirit of Christ, and the Spirit of Christ became available to “all flesh,” luring all subsequent agents toward the experience that God had known for the first time in Jesus.

Contingency did not cease, however, with the emergence of the Spirit of Christ, that is, with the event traditionally known as Jesus' resurrection. The communities that arose in response to the ministry and memory of Jesus and to the lure of the Spirit could have died out, and the memory of Jesus itself could have been lost. Or the memory of Jesus could have become so corrupted that it lost all connection to reality; indeed, some would argue that precisely that has happened at various times in the history of the religion that ostensibly arose in response to his teachings. But none of that would have altered the fact that the fusion occurred and brought about the existence of a new spiritual reality.

The future is subject, of course, to the same degree of contingency. All human memory of Jesus may yet be lost, whether through gradual attrition over thousands of years or more quickly through the devastation wrought by a nuclear holocaust, ecological collapse, or the rise of a global totalitarianism. But even events such as those would not alter the reality that, in Jesus, a perfect fusion of divine and human wills occurred, and that Spirit of Christ will continue to lure us toward the hoped-for future fulfillment in which that fusion becomes a reality for “all flesh.”

## NOTES

1. See Wildman's essay (2003, 3), quoted in Clayton and Knapp (2011, 45). Wildman's argument would later be published in modified form in Wildman (2004) and, later, Wildman (2008).

2. See Clayton and Knapp (2011, 62–66). The argument is developed in greater detail in “The Participatory Theory of Divine Action” in Walters et al. (2014, 165–78).

3. David Ray Griffin (e.g., Griffin 2014) famously defends Alfred North Whitehead's view that God is necessarily always accompanied by a cosmos of some sort. Griffin's former doctoral student, Thomas Jay Oord, strongly defends this position in his *The Uncontrolling Love of God* (2015), though Oord diverges from Griffin at other points. See the debate between this view and *creatio ex nihilo* in Oord's collection, *Theologies of Creation: Creatio ex Nihilo and its New Rivals* (2014).

4. The work Coldiron cites (Smith 1988) provides an energetic, wide-ranging, and influential critique of efforts to ground aesthetic and, in particular, literary evaluation in teleological claims or accounts of what is universal or natural.

5. On the complexities involved in the invention of the classical style, see *The Classical Style: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven* (Rosen 1997). For a succinct and lucid account of the rise of the European tonal system and a critique of the role of teleological or naturalizing accounts of that process, see Brian Hyer's "Tonality" (Hyer 2001), Sections 4 and 5.

6. Note that this same principle applies to natural objects and events, for example, a sunset that instantiates a particular mixture of forms and colors.

7. See Richard Rorty (1989), esp. "The Contingency of a Liberal Community" in Part I. Rorty argues that moral relativism does not follow from the fact that many of our deepest values are contingent on external factors.

8. For example, on planets where intelligent beings do not reproduce by two and only two sexes, the language of Father and Son would not be an effective form of divine self-revelation. Who reveals, how it is revealed, and how redemption works may diverge radically.

9. It's interesting that in the end Ward's distinctive doctrine of the Trinity embraces contingency primarily because of an epistemic limitation. Strongly opposed to what has been called "Rahner's Rule," Ward works to undercut inferences from the divine mode of revelation back to the eternal nature of God. It's true that God-as-revealed is trinitarian—that we know God in three forms—and yet, Ward argues, we *cannot* know that the inference backwards to God as an eternal Trinity of three persons is true: "God has revealed the divine in Jesus. Given that this is true, God really is threefold. This is how God truly and properly appears to us. All we need to remember is that we cannot conclude from this that God, even apart from such revelation, really is just as God has appeared in Jesus. All we are entitled to say is that God is such that God authentically reveals the divine in Jesus in a threefold way" (132). Ward ascribes an important role to Karl Barth in this book in part because Barth's theology helps him to deny the validity of what he considers to be an unjustified speculative inference from threeness in revelation to threeness in the immanent nature of God.

10. Note that this firstness is difficult to assert, and perhaps cannot be asserted at all, if one takes seriously Ward's notion of multiple saviors on multiple planets. In any case, we are not supposing that a perfect fusion of divine and human will is the only way in which God's purpose in bringing about the existence of finite beings might be or perhaps has been achieved. Setting aside Wardian speculations about other planets, the religions of this planet offer various accounts of the highest form of relationship between human beings and the ultimate reality, and it is not our purpose here to compare the relative merits of the claims they make or the practices they inspire.

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