

Wherever the Christian gospel has been proclaimed there has been the assertion that God acts in history. The action may be the Exodus from Egypt, the return from exile, the birth of the Messiah or the resurrection of Christ, but all these events have their significance, so it is proclaimed, because they are among the mighty acts of God. Christian theologians have therefore had to wrestle with this concept. What is the relationship of God to the history of the world? Shall we speak of providence, or special providences, interventions, or what? The theologian, if he remains true to the tradition of the faith, cannot deny that there is some relationship between God and history and so it has remained a major theological concern. In a recent article in one *Baptist Quarterly*¹ Dr Paul Fiddes discussed critically a number of ways in which theologians have attempted to relate God and History. He presented a clear and attractive account of how he himself could express the relationship.

In this note I want not so much to comment directly on Fiddes' essay as to face a question which underlies it. The question is pressed not by the theologians but by those philosophers who are concerned about the meaning and logic of religious language. Any one cognizant of the British theological scene in the greater part of this century will know that the challenge from these philosophers has been radical and persistent. They have charged the theologians with making meaningless utterances. Typical of their challenge has been their question of the meaning of all this talk about God acting in the world. Some of them have forcibly argued that such language makes no logical sense at all and the theologian who persists in it simply has lost credibility. Among contemporary philosophers who have addressed themselves to this challenge is the Baptist scholar W. D. Hudson. This note draws heavily upon the comments made in his Whitley Lectures.²

Let me underline that what I am discussing is not whether in fact God does or does not act in the world but whether it makes sense to talk of him acting in the world. If it can be shown that for God to act in the world is a logical impossibility then we must (logically) affirm that God does not act in the world whatever the Bible or religious believers may say about him. On the other hand, if I can show that talk of God acting in the world is not logically self-contradictory or unintelligible then that is *all* that I have shown. I have not thereby demonstrated that God has or does act in the world. So I am not in the business of attempting to verify claims that Christians make. I only wish to enquire whether such claims make sense.

Why should they not make sense? One argument from some philosophers' is that on a normal use of language to speak of anyone as an agent necessarily implies that they have a body. All actions which we have observed have been performed by an agent possessed of a physical body. This is part of the mechanics of how actions are performed in the world. But the philosophers' claim is not just of practical causation but of

logic, i.e. that having a physical body is a necessary, if not sufficient, condition of being an agent. The Christian therefore must say either that God has a physical body or that he does not act because logically he cannot act in the world without a body.

There is an importance in noting that having a body is not a sufficient condition of an agent's action that must not be overlooked. The question 'What was X doing when he did Y?' cannot be fully answered just by reference to the bodily actions involved. What X was *doing* might be any number of things in the action Y. If Y is swinging an arm it might be throwing a ball, marching, directing traffic or much else. Simply to describe the body movement would not serve as a sufficient condition of saying that a particular action had occurred.

We know what action has occurred when we know what the agent *intended* to do. Sometimes we can deduce intention from observing the bodily movements. But those bodily movements may mislead us as to what the agent is doing. In the end the agent's answer to the question 'what are you doing?' has an authority which our deductions cannot have. We may be mistaken, but it is inconceivable that he should not know what he intends to do. His intention makes his action the action that it is, and this is logically distinct from bodily movement.

What then is involved in saying that bodily movement is a necessary condition of any action? It is that logically where there is an agent there is a body. No body, no agent. The philosophers are implying that traditional Christian doctrine asserts that God is Spirit and has no body, therefore he cannot act. To speak of him doing so makes no sense. Against this I shall argue that the statement 'God acts in the world' is intelligible. Fundamentally I shall challenge the assumed connection between being an agent and having a body. My argument will take the form of answers to two questions. (1) If God does not possess a body, can we conceive of him in the flux of spatio-temporal events in the world in the way he must be for us to say that he has acted, his action having made a difference to the world? (2) If God does not possess a body, how is he to be identified as an agent, a logical subject of the verb 'to act'? If these two questions can be answered positively then I believe I have shown that talk about God acting in the world is not necessarily unintelligible to us. I have not, of course, demonstrated that God has acted, only that there is logical 'space' for God to act. I shall take each question in turn.

(1) *How can God, if he has no body, intervene in the course of spatio-temporal events as an agent?*

Let me begin an answer by drawing attention to the distinction between any agent and his situation. "A question like 'Are you going to take that new job?' makes sense because we can conceive of someone 'standing back' and considering his situation almost as an observer. Indeed, to do this is often a wise approach in decision making. In such ways we appraise a situation before we form our intention.

However, I think we may also draw a distinction not merely between an agent and his situation but an agent and his body. For example, it makes sense for a grown man to ask himself 'shall I grow a beard?' As an agent, a person is not to be identified with his new job, or his beard, or anything else which constitutes his situation. From all this he, as an agent, is logically distinct. Where the agent is capable of forming some intention there is a gap, a dualism between mind and body. This distinction is important and means that it is always difficult, if not impossible, to draw a line between those parts of any situation which are the agent's body and those parts which are something other than his body.

But what does an agent need to have in order to act? Does he need a body? I have shown that the concept of agency is logically distinct from that of bodily movement. Because an agent is distinct from his situation, which includes his body, it is possible to conceive of an agent without a body.

However, an objection may come from all those people of good common sense, who do not indulge in too much logic chopping, who say that valid though my distinction between an agent and his body may be, where action in this world takes place it does involve bodily movement. Perhaps these two things cannot be equated but neither can they be totally separated. I agree. Where action takes place in this world, there empirically observable changes occur. Clearly there is some relation between them, but of what kind?

With human action intention and bodily movement often coincide. What is the case with God? I suggest that for God to act it is not necessary for him to have a body but it is necessary for certain spatio-temporal events to occur in the world. Traditionally Christians have claimed that some events are the work of God, his actions in history. Two conditions must be fulfilled for anyone to be an agent - viz., that the agent has an intention to act and the means of fulfilling that intention. I admit that God has no body, the usual vehicle through which we express our intentions. But it still makes sense to call someone an agent if he intended something and was able to cause or able to prompt that intention's fulfilment.

Consider the statement, 'Cromwell suppressed the Levellers'. This is an intelligible statement to those who know the meaning of the words used. However, it does not require for its sense that Cromwell himself suppressed each individual Leveller. It does not require that he be physically able to suppress anyone. The statement might be meaningful if Cromwell had the intention of suppressing the Levellers and could find co-operative comrades to work out that policy then he would rightly be said to be the chief agent in the suppression of the Levellers.

I submit that it is intelligible to speak of God acting in the world if (a) he has the intention to do so and (b) he has the means to fulfil that intention. Neither point necessarily requires that God has a body. It does require his ability to employ things and persons as his willing subjects. But this

fits well with the 'tone' of many biblical statements. For example, the Exodus is the action of God, but Moses the servant of God leads the people out of slavery. The return from Exile is the act of God, but Cyrus of Persia is an instrument in fulfilling God's intention. And in the New Testament there is the unique claim that the Word (intention?) of God became flesh in the Servant Messiah, the prophet from Nazareth. And, as philosophers have noted, if telekinesis is conceivable then the power to make spatio-temporally observable changes without bodily movement is not at all unintelligible.⁵ It is not my intention to say how God acts in the world. All I am arguing thus far is that it is not a necessary condition of God being spoken of as an agent that he have a body. But now to the second question.

(2) *If God does not possess a body, how is he to be identified as an agent, a logical subject of the verb 'to act'?*

In the case of human actions we usually identify the agent by his body. 'Who scored the try?' asks the late-comer at the rugby match. 'Our new scrum-half', says the coach raising his arm and pointing, 'He's the one with the red hair and bushy beard'. This mode of identification is not possible in the case of God. However, as part of our normal experience, we do sometimes speak of an agent acting without reference to his body at all, yet identifying the action as his by reason of its effects. We say, 'This must have been done by Smith, no one else would do it that way'.

Let us suppose that a house has been burgled in a rather sophisticated manner. The experienced detective called to the scene of the crime observes what has happened, and immediately sends his assistant to check on the whereabouts of Ivan Jemmy, the notorious cat burglar. To the detective all the signs are there that this is Ivan's work. Of course, the detective may be wrong, but he may also be right and he would point to the 'effects' as justification of his claim that Ivan did it or even simply masterminded it. The evidence would be circumstantial and therefore not amounting to proof. But for the experienced detective the identity of Ivan is inferred from what he has reason to believe is Ivan's work.

Can we extend this notion to God? In the case of Ivan, it is always logically possible that someone could have observed him in the act of burglary and thereby relate his identity to his bodily movements. It is also logically possible that Ivan can be identified without references to his actions as a burglar. Neither of these possibilities are open to us in the case of God. But let us further imagine that 'Ivan' is a fictitious name given by the police to a burglar they have reason to believe has committed a number of crimes all of a similar nature. It may or may not be the case that Ivan exists. It may or may not be the case that he has done all that the police believe he has done. But my point is that it makes sense for the police to talk about 'Ivan'. They know what they are talking about when they talk of 'Ivan', he is identified by his actions.

Now, since it is the question of identity only that we are concerned with here it seems to me quite conceivable that from observing certain events in the world, and bringing to them the question of who acted in this way, we could claim to have gone some way to identifying God. We have not tried to prove the existence of God from these events. We need not close our minds to the possibility of being totally mistaken. But there seems to me no reason why we should not speak of certain events in the world by which we identify God. The fact that God does not have spatio-temporal location is nothing to the point. The question is only whether we can make sense of using certain spatio-temporal events as a means of identifying someone who is the cause of these events. This seems to me to be quite legitimate practice in the case both of Ivan and God. Proving that it was Ivan or God or Beelzebub is another matter and is not my concern here. But it does make sense to say that this is X's action although X has not been observed performing it, all the more since X and the bodily movements involved in the action are logically distinct. *'It would not be entirely unintelligible to attribute something which goes on in the world to an agent even though no one could identify anything in the world as his hand. If this is intelligible then we can make sense of the notion of a bodiless agent and so of the belief that God acts in the world and meets with men'.⁶*

This conclusion again fits well with the Biblical tradition which asserts that God is known in some way by his actions in history and his 'speaking' with the prophets. In the biblical context God is 'identified' by the Israelites by reason of his encounters with special people and his mighty acts. Thus if an Israelite was asked who God was he might reply by talking about the One who called Moses, who acted against Pharaoh, who led the people out of Egypt, who gave them the gift of land etc. It is by constant reference back to the Exodus that Israel was reminded of who God was and is. In the same way in the New Testament a Christian might 'identify' God with reference to the spatio-temporal event of Jesus. God is the 'God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ'. In this connection I particularly warm to Paul Fiddes' references to God's action being *persuasive* rather than mechanical or coercive, regarding with utter seriousness our personhood in his purpose. The Process Theologians' concept of God 'luring on' the elements of the created order to their fulfilment is again not without interest.

The philosophers with whom I have been concerned have argued that there is a necessary connection between being an agent and having a body. I have asserted that there is a distinction between being an agent with an intention to act and having the means of fulfilling that intention and thereby acting. Being a human agent implies having a body not because being an agent implies having a body but because being human does. It may be difficult to say what being a bodiless agent means. But that is not the same as saying that it is logically inconceivable that a conscious being who has no body acts in the world and relates to humankind.

NOTES

- 1 P. Fiddes, "God and History", *Baptist Quarterly*, Vol. XXX (April 1983), p.74.
- 2 W. D. Hudson, *A Philosophical Approach to Religion*, London, 1974, p.155 ff.
- 3 For example, Kai Neilson, *Contemporary Critiques of Religion*, London, 1971.
- 4 c.f. S. N. Hampshire, *Thought and Action*, London, 1960.
- 5 Both R. Swinburne, *The Concept of Miracle*, London, 1970, and B. Mitchell, *The Justification of Religious Belief*, London, 1973, refer to telekinesis.
- 6 W. D. Hudson, *op.cit.*, p.176.

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'GRAVEYARD UPKEEP'

Churchyards and chapel burial grounds often provide valuable homes for wildlife and their gravestone inscriptions contain a wealth of historical information. They can, however, pose considerable problems for those who are responsible for their maintenance and upkeep.

This pamphlet provides practical guidance and recommendations on how to cope with the maintenance of graveyards without destroying their character and value for wildlife and historical research.

It does not provide a 'blueprint' as local circumstances will determine the most appropriate solution for the maintenance of a particular graveyard. It does, however, stress the importance of careful planning and consultation, and highlights the issues which should be taken into account. A list of useful publications and organisations who can provide advice is included to assist in the planning process.

'Graveyard Upkeep' is available from The Director, The Prince of Wales' Committee, Sixth Floor, Empire House, Mount Stuart Square, Cardiff CF1 6DN. Send a stamped addressed envelope, 8½" x 4½", and 30p for each copy.

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SUMMER SCHOOL 1985

The Baptist Historical Society will hold a Summer School at Bradford University, 11th - 14th July 1985.

Saturday, 13th July, will be a special day on Yorkshire Baptist life.