

## In Defence of “Incarnational Deism:” The Rejection of Providence and Teleology

It would not be too controversial to suggest that the idea that “God acts in the world in a variety of ways in order to realize his purposes” is central to Christian belief.<sup>1</sup> Oliver Quick writes that “[t]he most obviously distinctive characteristic of Hebrew theology is its belief in God’s guidance of history.”<sup>2</sup> Traditionally (at least), theologians have apologised for a God that “wishes not only for certain things to happen” but “also for them to happen in certain ways”<sup>3</sup> and that one of these (if not the chief of these) “things” is the creation of humanity, the crown of God’s creation. That is, they have apologised for a God who has a distinctive purpose and who providentially guides history.<sup>4</sup>

Theologians have also traditionally argued for divine atemporality and simplicity, that while God guides the history of God’s creation, God does not experience that guidance temporally. While theologians such as Augustine, Anselm, and Thomas Aquinas were quite content to hold these three doctrines

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<sup>1</sup> Vincent Brümmer, “Farrer, Wiles and the Causal Joint,” *Modern Theology* 8, no.1 (1992): 1.

<sup>2</sup> Oliver Quick, *Doctrines of The Creed* (London: Nisbet & Co., 1939), 69.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Davison, *Participation in God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 231.

<sup>4</sup> By providence is understood “the rule of God over the events that make up the course of both nature and history” or “the purpose of God unfolding itself in the development of the cosmos and of human history.” Langdon Gilkey, “The Concept of Providence in Contemporary Theology,” *The Journal of Religion* 43, no.3 (1963): 171. It is important to distinguish between “progress” (achieved through human effort) and “providence” (achieved through divine effort). Likewise, it is important to distinguish between “progress” and “telos” - there can be progress without any goal to orient that progress. See Michael Ruse, *Monad to Man* (Cambridge MA.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 21. This article does not necessarily deny progress, but it does deny providence and “telos.”

together (that is, atemporality, simplicity, and providence), modern philosophers have questioned whether such a conjunction can be coherently defended. Many of these philosophers and theologians, drawing much on the biblical picture of God, deem providence to be the more theologically valuable asset and so conclude that theology should reject atemporality and simplicity. This article will agree with the philosophical assessment that atemporality, simplicity and providence cannot be coherently held together, but will suggest instead that providence is the less theologically valuable asset and so can be discarded.

Traditionally, the rejection of providence has been labeled “deism,” the belief that “God creates the world and then goes on vacation.”<sup>5</sup> In this way, while a deist shares the theist’s belief “in a supernatural intelligence,” the “activities” of such a God are “confined to setting up the laws that govern the universe in the first place,” so that “[t]he deist God never intervenes, thereafter, and certainly has no specific interest in human affairs,” which makes deism a “watered-down theism.”<sup>6</sup> It is the “no specific interest in human affairs” that is the defining factor; God does not have any special interest and so refrains from acting any further. However, this article will question the presumption that providence is a proxy for any “ongoing interest” in creation; why is it that God has to do something in the world to have an “ongoing interest?” In other words, this article will both affirm the core of deism, that God *only* creates and does nothing further, but also deny the spirit of this idea. That is, this article will argue that God not acting “further” does not mean God does not have an “ongoing interest.” More specifically, this article will argue that the incarnation is this “ongoing interest,” and so will argue for what could be called “incarnational deism.”

Of course, deism means more than simply the absence of providence. At least to those who first professed it, deism also includes a rejection of revelation (including a rejection of biblical revelation) in favour of reason and a rejection of the incarnation. In this way, “incarnational deism” seems to be an oxymoron; if one accepts the validity of the incarnation then one cannot be a “true” deist, and *vice versa*. In this way, this article does not defend “deism.” While this article will continue to refer to “deism,” it is more concerned with showing that one can have a God who only “acts” once - who creates but does not then guide history providentially - but who still has an “ongoing” interest in creatures, especially and particularly in the incarnation, rather than with apologising for a sort of enlightenment deism. Thus, this article will draw mostly on theologians who

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<sup>5</sup> Ted Peters and Martinez Hewlett, *Evolution from Creation to New Creation* (Nashville TN: Abingdon, 2003), 160.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Black Swan, 2006), 39-40.

emphatically were not deists, using them to show that one can hold that an atemporal and simple God “acts” only “once,” but who can be said to both create *and* be incarnate.

Admittedly, as evidenced above, as the Bible and the Catechism proclaims,<sup>7</sup> providence is seen by many to be a non-negotiable tenet of the Christian faith. Yet, this article will argue that if this particular theology is rejected - i.e. that it is *denied* that God has *particular* desires and a *particular* way of achieving them - so that the theologian can affirm that God is content simply with *a* creation rather than a *particular* creation, and is more content with relationship with *any* creatures rather than ensuring *particular* sorts of creatures emerged (which God favours), a coherent theology can still be supported. For God to be the creator, and for God to have a relationship with creatures as creator, God does not need to providentially guide history; in fact, God does not need to have any concern *whatsoever* for the way that history unfolds.

In doing this, this article will argue that a correct understanding of divine atemporality and divine simplicity argue for a single divine act. It will then argue that this cannot be understood as an “act” but as a “relationship,” and that this liberates the theologian from a theory of divine activity, arguing that even the act of creation itself is understood as relationship rather than act. In the final section of the article, it will argue that this communion/relationship is manifested in Christ. Far from being a stumbling block for the deist, if deism is interpreted in terms of relationship rather than act, then Christ becomes the locus of God’s “eternal” relationship with creatures.

## Divine Atemporality: One “Instance” of Divine Acting

The atemporality of God is a keenly contested doctrine. Not only is it not agreed upon whether God is atemporal - with recent theologians tending to “strongly challenge” divine atemporality because they “seek a closer affinity between Creator and creature than the traditional account admits”<sup>8</sup> - but it is not agreed upon what is meant by atemporality. This article will take it as axiomatic that Katherin Rogers’ (among others) defence of atemporality as being a sort

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<sup>7</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 302-314.

<sup>8</sup> Eman McMullin, “Cosmic Purpose and the Contingency of Human Evolution,” *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 48, no.2 (2013): 354; see e.g. Keith Ward, *Rational Theology and the Creativity of God* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982); Oscar Cullman, *Christ and Time* (London: SCM, 1962); Robert J. Lucas, “The Temporality of God,” in *Quantum Cosmology and the Laws of Nature: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action*, eds., Robert Russell, Nancey Murphy and C. Isham (Vatican City: Vatican Observatory, 1993).

of “four-dimensionalism” (or even “five-dimensionalism”)<sup>9</sup> is more in line with classical doctrines of atemporality than “sempiternity” (i.e. a sort of “everlasting temporal existence,”<sup>10</sup> or omni-temporality),<sup>11</sup> “presentism,”<sup>12</sup> or eternity as “infinitely extended, pastless, futureless duration.”<sup>13</sup> For God, all spatiotemporal points are present together in an atemporal “instant,” just as all spatial points are present together in the temporal present,<sup>14</sup> like the centre of a sphere to its surface-area.<sup>15</sup> For God, there is no duration, succession, extension, temporal indices<sup>16</sup> etc. at all.<sup>17</sup> All spatio-temporal points are as one instant to God: “all time is equally existent.”<sup>18</sup>

While critics of divine atemporality will no doubt point to Scriptural authority,<sup>19</sup> it is not at all clear that the Bible is emphatic about the issue. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann point to passages such as Malachi 3:6 and James 1:17 that seem to argue for divine immutability, and by implication,

<sup>9</sup> Katherin Rogers, “Anselm on Eternity as the Fifth Dimension,” *The Saint Anselm Journal* 3, no.2 (2006): 7.

<sup>10</sup> Arjan Markus, “Divine Timelessness: A Coherent but Unfruitful Doctrine?,” *Sophia* 43, no.2 (2004): 30; see also, J.L. Tomkinson, “Divine Sempiternity and Atemporality,” *Religious Studies* 18, no.2 (1982): 177-189; Paul Helm, “Infinity and God’s Atemporality,” in *The Infinity of God: New Perspectives in Theology and Philosophy*, eds., Paul Benedikt, Paul Göcke and Christian Tapp (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019), 279.

<sup>11</sup> See for example, Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 1:274.

<sup>12</sup> Rogers, “Anselm on Eternity as the Fifth Dimension,” 5.

<sup>13</sup> Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, “Eternity,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 78, no.8 (1981): 435.

<sup>14</sup> Katherine Rogers, “Eternity has No Duration,” *Religious Studies* 30, no.1 (1994): 15.

<sup>15</sup> Rogers, “Anselm on Eternity as the Fifth Dimension,” 5; see also H. McCabe, “Eternity,” in *The Cambridge Companion to The Summa Theologiae*, eds., Philip McCosker and Denys Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 110.

<sup>16</sup> For example the difference between “a-series” and “b-series.” See H. Nelson, “Time(s), Eternity, and Duration,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 22, no.1/2 (1987): 14-15.

<sup>17</sup> See Nelson, “Time(s), Eternity, and Duration,” for a succinct and clear criticism of sempiternity (especially as espoused by Stump & Kretzmann) and a defence of non-duration atemporality.

<sup>18</sup> Rogers “Anselm on Eternity,” 2; importantly, this does not necessarily imply that an “a-series” theory of time cannot be accurate for creatures, that is, that time goes in and out of existence for creatures, but it is not so for God.

<sup>19</sup> For example, Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Unqualified Divine Temporality,” in Gregory Ganssle, *God and Time: Four Views* (Downers Grove IL.: InterVarsity, 2001); Nicholas Wolterstorff, “God Everlasting,” in *God and the Good*, eds., Clifton J. Orlebeke and Lewis B. Smedes (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975).

atemporality.<sup>20</sup> Psalm 90:4 and 2 Peter 3:8, while not strictly supporting atemporality, at least demonstrate that the Biblical witness is unclear. Alexander Garton has also argued that it is not clear that the biblical authors all held to the belief in a temporal God, suggesting that the classical view of atemporality can help clear up “temporal peculiarities” in John’s Gospel.<sup>21</sup> In any case, divine atemporality is accepted here on the basis that “time itself is a creature,”<sup>22</sup> that divine atemporality is instrumental in emphasising the ontological gulf and radical otherness or transcendence of God.

Importantly for present purposes, this has implications for divine activity, namely, that there is a single, atemporal, “instance” of divine acting. As Thomas Aquinas writes:

God’s activity can be considered either on the part of the doer or of the done. If on the part of the doer, there is only one activity in God...but considered on the side of what is done, there are indeed different activities.<sup>23</sup>

Pertinent to this study, this creates problems for certain understandings of divine activity that see God “unfolding” a plan or purpose. An example of such is *creatio continua*,<sup>24</sup> understood as a “continuing interaction [of God] with the created order.”<sup>25</sup> For example, John Haught, who links *creatio continua* with evolution, understands divine activity to build on the past to create a novel future.<sup>26</sup> For Haught, evolution shows “that we live in a still-unfinished

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<sup>20</sup> Stump and Kretzmann, “Eternity,” 429. Richard Holland, *God, Time, and the Incarnation* (Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012), 3 acknowledges that there is “[a] strong sense of immutability is logically connected to Boethius’s argument [for divine atemporality].” He also quotes Augustine in support.

<sup>21</sup> Alexander Garton, “‘Very Truly I Tell You, Before Abaham Was, I am:’ A Theological Treatise on the Concept of Time in John’s Gospel,” *Modern Theology* 35, no.4 (2019): 617-637.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Barron, *Exploring Catholic Theology* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 23; See Augustine *Confessions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 221f.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Selected Writings* (London: Penguin, 1998), 294-295; see also P. McCosker, “Grace,” in *The Cambridge Companion to The Summa Theologiae*, eds., Philip McCosker and Denys Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 208-216.

<sup>24</sup> See Delmas Lewis, “Timelessness and Divine Agency,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 21, no.3 (1987): 157.

<sup>25</sup> Craig Boyd and Aaron Cobb, “The Causality Distinction, Kenosis, and a Middle Way: Aquinas and Polkinghorne on Divine Action,” *Theology and Science* 7, no.4 (2009): 395-396.

<sup>26</sup> See Fabien Revol, “The Concept of Continuous Creation Part 1: History and Contemporary Use,” *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 55, no.1 (2020): 251-274.

universe.”<sup>27</sup> Likewise, it also creates problems for positions such as Philip Quinn, who sees *creatio continua* as a “repetition” of the *creatio ex nihilo* at every moment of time.<sup>28</sup> For Quinn, “if God’s bringing about of contingent existence is all the creation there is...and divine creation just is creation *ex nihilo*...then all creation is creation *ex nihilo*.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, “divine conservation just is continuous creation” – that is, *creatio ex nihilo* at every instant.<sup>30</sup> Along with criticisms that Quinn’s position leads to occasionalism, or that it is only “a series of simulacra”<sup>31</sup> that exists at each successive moment rather than the creature itself, it also appears to leave God subject to succession. *Contra* Quinn, it “does not follow from the world’s dependence on God at all times” that “God’s creative activity [should] therefore be understood to be performed at all times.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, in the first instance (Haught), God is subject to duration; in the second instance (Quinn), God is subject to succession. Neither are compatible with genuine atemporality. Rather, atemporality suggests a literal, single, duration-less, non-repeatable “instance/instant” of divine activity.<sup>33</sup> It is not a single instance located in the past (traditional deism), it is not a single instance composed of a number of different sub-acts (Haught),<sup>34</sup> nor is it a repetition of a single instance (Quinn). There

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<sup>27</sup> John Haught, *Making Sense of Evolution* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 105; see also Brandford McCall, “Kenosis and Emergence: A Theological Synthesis,” *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 45, no.1 (2010): 153.

<sup>28</sup> Revol, “The Concept of Continuous Creation Part 1: History and Contemporary Use,” 229.

<sup>29</sup> Philip Quinn, “Divine Conservation, Secondary Causes, and Occasionalism,” in *Divine and Human Action: Essays in the Metaphysics of Theism*, ed. Thomas Morris (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 71.

<sup>30</sup> See also, Timothy Miller, “On the Distinction between Creation and Conservation: A Partial Defence of Continuous Creation,” *Religious Studies* 45, no.4 (2009): 473.

<sup>31</sup> William Lane Craig, “Creation and Conservation Once More,” *Religious Studies* 34, no.2 (1998): 184.

<sup>32</sup> Robin Attfield, *Creation, Evolution and Meaning* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 77. The “move” from creation to conservation is not a repetition of the *creatio ex nihilo*, or a different divine act, but a change in the *extrinsic* relation of the creature to God’s eternal single act; creation and conservation are different ways of the creature relating to God’s act not a different way for God to act. See Matthew R. McWhorter, “Aquinas on God’s Relation to the World,” *New Blackfriars* 94, no.1049 (2013): 3-19.

<sup>33</sup> Although even this uses temporal language. “[T]o describe atemporality without duration as an instant” makes just the same confusions as to call atemporality “infinite duration,” both still apply temporal language to God. Nelson, “Time(s), Eternity, and Duration,” 12.

<sup>34</sup> See also, Maurice Wiles, *God’s Action in the World* (London: SCM, 1986); Gordon Kaufmann, “On the Meaning of ‘Act of God,’” in *God’s Activity in the World: The Contemporary Problem*, ed. Owen Thomas (Chico CA: Scholars, 1983).



is only one “instance” of divine acting.<sup>35</sup> It is not *creatio continua*; it is *creatio aeterna*.<sup>36</sup>

This has implications for providence: a single atemporal instance of divine acting does not permit God the “ability” to plan or respond to creation. Ernan McMullin writes that “[o]ur notions of teleology, of purpose, of plan, are conditioned by the temporality of our world, in which plans gradually unfold and processes regularly come to term,” so “a Creator who brings everything to be in a single action from which the entirety of temporal process issues, does not rely on the regularity of [that] process to know the future condition of the creature or to attain ends.” Thus, McMullin continues that, “[t]he notion of ‘purpose’ must itself be reinterpreted in such a case,” rejecting any “interval between decision and completion” for God.<sup>37</sup> Thaddeus Metz agrees that “creating a world according to a plan seems hard to understand as something that does not cover a span of time.”<sup>38</sup> If providence and teleology are about “guiding” history, then an atemporal God - who acts in a single atemporal instance - cannot exhibit providence.

## Divine Simplicity: One “Type” of Divine Act

While Ernan McMullin might be correct that divine atemporality rejects divine purpose, he still subscribes to “the Christian belief in a special destiny for humankind.”<sup>39</sup> Likewise, theologians like Christopher Knight argue that God can “respond” to the world because God’s single act includes within it a divine omniscient “foreknowledge” of, and so response to, all possible free acts

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<sup>35</sup> It may seem that the rejection of succession in divine activity leads to an affirmation that God brings the world complete into being in an instant; if God does not complete creation through time, then this must logically leave the opposite conclusion, that God brings the world into being complete, immediately. However, this completely misunderstands the point. The dichotomy of finished vs. unfinished as a paradigm through which to interpret the world and God’s relationship to it is completely false. See David Brown, *Incarnation and Neo-Darwinism: Evolution, Ontology, and Divine Activity* (Durham: Sacristy, 2019), 43. John Haught is incorrect to claim that creation is “unfinished,” not because he has made incorrect assumptions about the nature of evolution, nor because evolution is incorrect, but because he sees this as correlating with God’s act of creation, which this paper denies.

<sup>36</sup> See Revol, “The Concept of Continuous Creation Part 1: History and Contemporary Use,” 233.

<sup>37</sup> McMullin, “Cosmic Purpose and the Contingency of Human Evolution,” 356-357.

<sup>38</sup> Thaddeus Metz, “Could God’s Purpose be the Source of Life’s Meaning?,” *Religious Studies* 36, no.3 (2000): 309-310.

<sup>39</sup> McMullin, “Cosmic Purpose and the Contingency of Human Evolution,” 359.

of creatures, so the single divine act has “built-in” different ways of responding to different situations.<sup>40</sup> Put differently, for McMullin (and Knight), God’s act, while atemporal, is complex:<sup>41</sup> God does many “things” in that one atemporal instance, or does something *objectively* different in creating humanity than God does in creating other creatures. Yet, if divine simplicity is accepted, then (as with atemporality) this should also apply to divine activity.<sup>42</sup> As Junius Johnson writes of Bonaventure, “since the divine essence is simple, it is simple also in its actions... The divine creativity is an act that is one in itself, but many in its effects.”<sup>43</sup> Joshua Benson also writes of Bonaventure that while “[t]he objects that the divine truth expresses are many (either in actuality or possibility) and thus the things of the world are diverse...the expression or act by which these diverse objects are brought into reality is one.”<sup>44</sup> Or, as Stump and Kretzmann succinctly put it, while there are “various temporal effects” of God’s act, there is still only one “single eternal act identical with God, God’s action in the strict sense,”<sup>45</sup> that is, “such actions in the world are at least *prima facie* explicable as extrinsic accidental characteristics of the unique divine action.”<sup>46</sup> This is otherwise known as Aquinas’ rejection of a “real relation” between God and creatures, a necessary consequence of the analogy of being: creatures are analogous to God, but God is not analogous to creatures.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Christopher Knight, “Divine Activity: A Neo-Byzantine Model,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 58, no.3 (2005): 186; see also Lewis, “Timelessness and Divine Agency,” 144.

<sup>41</sup> “Complex,” “composite” and “multiple” are here taken to be synonyms. See Robert Burns, “The Divine Simplicity in St. Thomas,” *Religious Studies* 25, no.3 (1989): 273, so that a complex act is taken to mean that it is composed of multiple “sub-acts” and is intended to achieve multiple ends.

<sup>42</sup> For example “Simplicity pertains (as it must) both to the essence and energy of God.” See Marcus Pledsted, “St. Gregory Palamas on the Divine Simplicity,” *Modern Theology* 513, no.23 (2019): 508-521. Cyril of Alexandria, writes that God “sends forth countless energies of his Godness” - quoted in Barry D. Smith, *The Oneness and Simplicity of God* (Eugene OR: Pickwick, 2014), 54; see also Katherine Rogers, *Perfect Being Theology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 27.

<sup>43</sup> Junius Johnson, “The One and the Many in Bonaventure Exemplarity Explained,” *Religions* 7, no.144 (2016): 12 (although, the use of the plural “actions” is surely a mistake here; God’s activity cannot be simple if it is multiple).

<sup>44</sup> Joshua Benson, “Structure and Meaning in St. Bonaventure’s ‘*Quaestiones Disputatae de Scientia Christi*,’” *Franciscan Studies* 62 (2004): 74.

<sup>45</sup> Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, “Absolute Simplicity,” *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 2, no.4 (1985): 356.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 366.

<sup>47</sup> *STh* I, q. 13, a. 7; see also Davison, *Participation in God*, 29-30; Erich Przywara, *Analogia Entis* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 214-216; Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 271.



Thus, if essence and existence are one in God and if (e.g.) goodness, justice and mercy are one in God, then it follows that creation, conservation, deification, salvation “are, in some way, aspects (distinct in reality but physically linked) of one and the same divine operation.”<sup>48</sup> This is a common observation and also linked to atemporality. Paul Haffner writes that there is “no essential difference” between God’s act of creation and God’s act of conservation *precisely* because “God is performing one act outside of time.”<sup>49</sup> If Aquinas is correct that “on the part of the doer, there is only one act in God”<sup>50</sup> then the distinction between creation, conservation and deification cannot be real for God: creation, conservation and deification are *identical* for God and they are differentiated *only* as “extrinsic accidental characteristics.” That is, God only performs one “type” of act in the one “instance” of acting; it is only the creature that calls this “creation” and that “deification” etc. In the same way that Thomas Aquinas argues that the pillar only moves because of the person’s movement in relation to it,<sup>51</sup> so the difference between creation, conservation, and deification is only real for the individual within history in relation to the divine act. In this regard, this study will argue that Philip Quinn was correct to “collapse” divine activity into one “type” of divine activity (although he was incorrect to see many “instances” of it).<sup>52</sup>

Again, divine simplicity is a keenly contested doctrine. Process theologians (again) would deny simplicity.<sup>53</sup> Alvin Plantinga also considers the doctrine to be incoherent.<sup>54</sup> Others offer various different versions of the idea,<sup>55</sup> such as distinguishing between simplicity and composition,<sup>56</sup> simplicity as apophatic

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<sup>48</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Human Energy* (London: Collins, 1969), 53.

<sup>49</sup> Paul Haffner, *Mystery of Creation* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1995), 91.

<sup>50</sup> See Aquinas, *Selected Writings*, 294-295.

<sup>51</sup> *STh* 1, q. 13, a. 7.

<sup>52</sup> Although Quinn explicitly claims that his theory does not preclude that “divine volition [can do] more than bringing about contingent existence and also brings about events in nature.” Quinn, “Divine Conservation, Secondary Causes, and Occasionalism,” 71, which this article rejects.

<sup>53</sup> Ward, *Rational Theology and the Creativity of God*.

<sup>54</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980).

<sup>55</sup> See Smith, *The Oneness and Simplicity of God*, 84-119.

<sup>56</sup> Burns, “The Divine Simplicity in St. Thomas.”

theology,<sup>57</sup> and simplicity as parsimonious.<sup>58</sup> A defence will not be offered here, taking it as axiomatic that (compelling arguments to the contrary noted) the classical understanding of the doctrine is sound. As with atemporality, this article assumes divine simplicity is necessary to uphold the ontological gulf and radical otherness or transcendence of God. However, what is important about this traditional doctrine of simplicity for present purposes is that it should be equally applicable to divine activity, and therefore has significant implications for providence.

To use Aquinas' mountain analogy, simplicity means that all spatiotemporal points are present to God in one "fifth-dimensional" instance, thus, what God "does" in that one instance, God does in all spatiotemporal points. This does not mean that each spatiotemporal point "experiences" what God does identically – that is, there is no real relation between God and creatures, so the "effect" is extrinsic to the "cause" – but it does mean that God's *intention* is identical. To this end, Philip McCosker writes that "the distinctions between different kinds of grace" are not between "different kinds of stuff...which do this or that," but, "[r]ather Thomas' distinctions are ways of highlighting the way God's constant gracious action appears to us in different contexts."<sup>59</sup> So that as "[l]ight appears differently as it illuminates different objects,"<sup>60</sup> so "[v]iewed from God's point of view the bestowal of grace is uniform, but viewed from the human perspective, with varying degrees of preparation and cooperation, the effects of grace differ."<sup>61</sup> This is important; on the side of God, divine activity is uniform (or "isotropic"), but on the side of creation, that uniform activity has many effects.

Thus, in the same way that divine simplicity means that God does not create *and* deify, so creation cannot be to create "this" *and* "that"; it is just to create. Creation and deification, and "this" and "that," are different *extrinsic* relations to that one simple act, not different divine acts. The difference between creation and deification, and between "this" and "that" is a difference in how they relate to God, not in how God relates to them. McCosker continues that grace is

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<sup>57</sup> Brian Davies, "A Modern Defence of Divine Simplicity," in *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide and Anthology*, ed. B. Davies (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000), 549-564; see also, Lawrence Dewan, "Saint Thomas, Alvin Plantinga, and the Divine Simplicity," *The Modern Schoolman* 66, no.2 (1989): 141-151; John Bishop and Ken Perszyk, "The Divine Attributes and Non-personal Conceptions of God," in *Topoi* 36 (2017): 611-612.

<sup>58</sup> Oliver Crisp, "A Parsimonious Model of Divine Simplicity," *Modern Theology* 35, no.3 (2019): 588-573.

<sup>59</sup> McCosker, "Grace," 210.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

like electricity, which powers various and diverse things (that is, one cause but many, distinct extrinsic effects);<sup>62</sup> the simplicity and singularity of grace does not prevent it from being that upon which all the various and diverse creatures depend for their being.

This implies that God does not *design* the world, understood as intending something different at different spatiotemporal points; rather, God “relates” objectively and identically to all creatures at all spatiotemporal points. Thus, Richard Dawkins is entirely correct to criticise “any God capable of designing a universe, carefully and foresightfully tuned to lead to our evolution” because that God “must be a supremely complex and improbable entity who needs an even bigger explanation than the one he is supposed to provide.”<sup>63</sup> Any suggestion that God designs a specific world or has specific ends for the world creates a distinction (however small) in the way that God relates to the world; God’s act objectively “does” something different “over there” to what it “does” “here.” Thus, one must choose between “an absolutely simple being and a creative intelligence.”<sup>64</sup> Indeed, Conor Cunningham claims orthodox Christianity has always distinguished between a creator God and a designer God, warning that “a designer deity would elicit atheism from a Christian, for any such deity would only be a big version of us.”<sup>65</sup> It is here then that the most important reason for why simplicity and atemporality are accepted; to accentuate as much as possible the difference between God and creatures, an infinite ontological gulf. To characterise God as a temporal, complex, purposive actor, is to characterise God as univocal with creatures. If God is another (albeit immaterial and, therefore, less limited) temporal, complex, purposive actor, then, as Paul Tillich recognises, God cannot be that upon which all creatures depend.<sup>66</sup>

Thaddeus Metz also questions “how could there be an absolutely simple being which has multiple ends, one for humans and one for animals?” So “even if human and animal purposes are components of a single plan for the universe, the fact of there being components would imply a lack of simplicity.”<sup>67</sup> If divine simplicity prohibits God from having a different plan for humans and creatures, then it equally prohibits God from having a different plan for different

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>63</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 176-178.

<sup>64</sup> See Burns, “The Divine Simplicity in St. Thomas,” 276.

<sup>65</sup> Conor Cunningham, *Darwin’s Pious Idea* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 151.

<sup>66</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 172.

<sup>67</sup> Metz, “Could God’s Purpose be the Source of Life’s Meaning?” 310; see also Burns, “The Divine Simplicity in St. Thomas,” 290.

humans. Taking that logic one step further, it also prohibits God from having a different plan for different spatiotemporal points in each and every human life. If all spatiotemporal points are equi-present or simultaneous *for* God in one atemporal (that is, immediate and durationless) instance, then what God does in that one, single atemporal instant is equally “present” or “efficacious,” uniform or “isotropic” for all and every creature in every spatiotemporal point. In the same way, if one gathers together numerous pieces of card into one “atemporal” pile and pushes a pin through the pile, then each piece of card will have an identical hole. The one “atemporal” act of pushing the pin cannot create different holes in different pieces of card.

The rejection of a real relation might seem to offer a different interpretation: that it is possible for the same “pin push” to create different “holes” because the pin does not have an intrinsic relation to those different “holes.” In this way, it is possible for God to “cause” different things at different spatiotemporal points, hence providence. However, this misses the point of the argument. It does not matter how differently the pin push (God’s single simple act) affects each piece of card (each spatiotemporal point in each creature’s life) - how different holes are produced by the same pin push - if there is no real relation, then those differences cannot be *intended* by God, otherwise God cannot genuinely have a simple will, as Metz appears to argue. God’s single act is to “push the pin,” what that pin does (that is, what different and diverse holes are made), is determined by the card’s relation to the pin, not the intention of the “pin pusher.”

That is, God cannot “use” the fact that there is no real relation to dictate how the extrinsic experience of the simple will is manifested. Precisely because the difference in the world is extrinsic, so it is not real for God and so providence, understood as “the purpose of God unfolding itself in the development of the cosmos and of human history,”<sup>68</sup> cannot be real for God either. Simplicity does not deny that there cannot be complexity or the appearance of “progress” or guidance in the world (the effect), but it does deny that there cannot be complexity in God (the cause). If providence is understood as God having multiple ends (that is, here something is different to there, or the movement of what God did in the past [creation] to what God will do in the future [deification]) then, even if God does one thing with the *intention* of causing multiple ends, this seems to violate a genuine simplicity (as it seems to imply that God objectively relates to one/some spatiotemporal points differently to others).<sup>69</sup> If there is no real relation, then any

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<sup>68</sup> Gilkey, “The Concept of Providence in Contemporary Theology,” 171.

<sup>69</sup> See Eleonore Stump, *The God of the Bible and the God of the Philosophers* (Milwaukee WI: Marquette University Press, 2016), 56f.

movement of history from one point to another is *extrinsic* to God, and if it is extrinsic to God, then it cannot be part of any “plan” that God may or may not have. In other words, if God prefers specific extrinsic effects of the single, simple, atemporal, and immutable divine cause (including the very fact of there being a universe at all), and determines that these preferred specific extrinsic effects are realised (either by “force” or by “lure”), then this seems to violate the *absence* of a real relation and implies that God objectively relates differently to specific extrinsic ends. Certainly, the absence of a real relation can explain how a single, simple cause can be the cause of various, multiple and diverse effects. But as soon as it is inferred that God can determine which extrinsic effects actually obtain at diverse spatiotemporal points, then this seems to violate the absence of a real relation to begin with. Precisely because there is an absence of a “real relation,” so the “same” single, simple act can produce a multitude and diversity of creatures and responses, but precisely because there is an absence of a “real relation,” so that diversity cannot be *willed* by God, because that would require God to relate differently to different spatiotemporal points and so violate the rejection of a “real relation” and divine simplicity.<sup>70</sup> God intends the same for every spatiotemporal point, but that intention is extrinsically experienced differently.

This does not mean that God *wills for simplicity* (there manifestly is not simplicity in the world), only that God’s *will is simple*, or, that God’s will is “basic” (that is, composed of no further sub-intentions).<sup>71</sup> As John of Damascus writes, “the divine irradiation and operation is one, simple, and undivided; and that, while it is apparently diversely manifested in divisible things, dispensing to all of them the components of their proper nature, it remains simple.”<sup>72</sup> It means that God does not have multiple *intentions* or *ends*, for instance for creation *and* for creation to be a certain way *and* for certain events to occur *and* for different events to occur to different creatures *and* for them to occur in a certain way etc. This is not a theological “sleight-of-hand” - arguing for many intentions but which are indivisible in God - it is that there is only one simple intention; to create. *Anything* and *everything* that happens in and/or to creatures is not the

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<sup>70</sup> All multiplicity and diversity in the world, including history and the “appearance” of its being guided is related to the divine energy/will as different ways of standing are related to the immovable pillar in Thomas Aquinas’ analogy.

<sup>71</sup> See Thomas Tracy, “Divine Action, Created Causes, and Human Freedom,” in Thomas Tracy, *The God Who Acts* (University Park PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 81; see also Wiles, *God’s Action in the World*; Kaufmann, “On the Meaning of ‘Act of God’”

<sup>72</sup> John of Damascus, *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* (New Delhi: Isha Books, 2013), 38.

*intention* of the act. The “tangled bank” of diversity that exists in the universe might be a “foreseen consequence,”<sup>73</sup> but this does not mean that God has that intention in “mind” when acting;<sup>74</sup> the “tangled bank” of diversity is an “extrinsic accidental characteristic.”

In this way, the simple act is not like planting a seed, in which God does one simple basic thing that leads to something much grander, or, *a la* Knight, in which God builds into the single act specific ways it will be experienced or manifested. Rather, the effect of the divine cause is an end in itself, and it is the only end of God’s acting: simply for there to be a creature (not for there to be a specific creature that does specific “things” or to which specific things happen), it is not the means for another (future) end.<sup>75</sup> As Paul Tillich writes, “[f]rom the point of view of the creator, the purpose of creation is the exercise of his creativity, which has no purpose beyond itself because the divine life is essentially creative” so that “God’s purpose is to have a communion of love with the world”<sup>76</sup> (although this neither makes the world necessary, nor God incomplete without it). Divine simplicity should be seen as denying that there is a specific end other than simply for there to be a creation. God neither directs the course of evolution through divine intervention, nor through “laws built into its structure...which has brought about the intended result, and thereby displayed the divine purpose.”<sup>77</sup>

To put this differently in the Platonic language familiar to medieval and scholastic theology, divine knowing and divine willing are identical:<sup>78</sup> God knows all because all imitate the divine idea; the divine idea, then, is “all” that God wills. God has one idea.<sup>79</sup> Yet this one idea is not a complex and united whole

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<sup>73</sup> Although, as Ernan McMullin rightly recognises, there are significant temporal problems with claiming that God has “foreknowledge.” McMullin, “Cosmic Purpose and the Contingency of Human Evolution,” 356-357.

<sup>74</sup> Brümmer, “Farrer, Wiles and the Causal Joint,” 9.

<sup>75</sup> In other words, something is designed in order to perform a specific task; e.g. a watch is designed to tell the time. However, one would hardly suggest that the watch was designed if the purpose for which it was designed was simply “to be a watch.” Likewise with the universe. The universe can only be designed if it has a specific purpose, but if that purpose is simply “to be a universe” then this does not satisfy the conditions of being designed.

<sup>76</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 263-364.

<sup>77</sup> I. Barbour quoted in T. Dobzhansky, “Teilhard de Chardin and the Orientation of Evolution: A Critical Essay,” *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 3, no.3 (1968): 252.

<sup>78</sup> See Johnson, “The One and the Many in Bonaventure Exemplarity Explained,” 12.

<sup>79</sup> See Cornelio Fabro (trans. B.M. Bonansea), “The Intensive Hermeneutics of Thomistic Philosophy: The Notion of Participation,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 27, no.3 (1974): 454; see also, Ward, *Rational Theology and the Creativity of God*, 54.



(for instance the whole single universe in all its “tangled bank” of diversity), it is literally one idea (revealed in Christ).<sup>80</sup> All creatures are simply different imitations of this one idea; “all created natures are just ways of imperfectly imitating God, and with the acknowledgement that imperfect imitation comes in degrees, generating an excellence hierarchy.”<sup>81</sup> The difference and diversity in the world, then, is not designed by God - who only wills for creatures, not *specific* creatures - but is a consequence of the fact that creatures imitate and, precisely *because* they imitate, are not identical with God and other creatures.<sup>82</sup> Thus, Andrew Davison writes that “[t]hese two aspects of creaturely difference (difference within creation and difference from God) are related. The difference of creation *from* its source requires the multiplicity of difference *within* creation itself.”<sup>83</sup> This means, Davison continues, that “[t]he inequality of creation to creator is the reason why the world is so riotously full of difference.”<sup>84</sup> Yet that difference is “simply” different (extrinsic) imitations of the one idea: Christ, through whom God bestows grace to the world. All that is being argued here is that, if simplicity is genuine, then God only desires that creatures imitate Christ, not that God desires for specific creatures to imitate Christ in specific ways in order to realise multiple specific ends.

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<sup>80</sup> Although theologians such as Augustine hold that a multitude of ideas does not contradict divine simplicity. See John Rosheger, “Augustine and Divine Simplicity,” *New Blackfriars* 77, no.901 (1996): 75. See also, Alessandro D. Conti, “Divine Ideas and Exemplar Causality in Auriol,” *Vivarium* 38, no.1 (2000): 99-116, who evidences that Aquinas held to a multitude of ideas and outlines Peter Auriol’s solution. See Andreas Speer, “The Certainty and Scope of Knowledge: Bonaventure’s Disputed Questions on the Knowledge of Christ,” *Medieval Philosophy & Theology* 3, no.48 (1993): 35-61

<sup>81</sup> Marilyn McCord Adams, *What Sort of Nature? Medieval Philosophy and the Systematics of Christology* (Milwaukee WI.: Marquette University Press, 1999), 29.

<sup>82</sup> Understanding all creatures to be different imitations of one idea, rather than seeing in God a multitude of ideas (i.e. relating differently to different species), may be more consonant with neo-Darwinism, which sees the similarity of each creature (as a result of shared heritage) as primary and any difference arbitrary. There is no longer thought to be qualitative differences in nature (i.e. different ideas) but only quantitative differences (i.e. different imitations of one idea).

<sup>83</sup> Davison, *Participation in God*, 53.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

## Divine Activity as Relationship

Thaddeus Metz, drawing on the same arguments outlined above, questions whether an atemporal and simple God could be purposive. He writes:

[T]o the extent that we can conceive of an immutable being beyond time, such a being appears unable to engage in goal-directed activity. Specifically, the problem is that activities are events, and events seem fundamentally to involve change and time.<sup>85</sup>

Arjan Markus makes much the same point, arguing that a “timeless being would allegedly be unable to act,” similarly because “act has a beginning and an end, and thus it has both temporal location and duration and, therefore, temporal extension...temporal order and succession.”<sup>86</sup> Nelson Pike also argues that a “timeless individual could not produce, create, or bring about an object, circumstance or state of affairs,”<sup>87</sup> for an identical reason: it would temporally locate God. If God is atemporal (and simple) then God cannot “act.”

Theologians respond differently to this problem. Most (such as J.R. Lucas and Delmas Lewis) see this as meaning that atemporality must be rejected.<sup>88</sup> Markus postulates what he calls “timeless causation” (which appears to be similar to McMullin & Knight, that is, that God does “many things” but all in one timeless instant),<sup>89</sup> as does Nelson.<sup>90</sup> However, Metz takes a different approach, claiming that “meaning cannot come by accomplishing a purpose [God] sets,” and instead, “relationship with God is essential for a meaningful life.”<sup>91</sup> In other words, it is not atemporality and simplicity that must be discarded, but how one understands God’s acting. William Stoeger similarly argues that:

Creation is not a temporal event, but a relationship - a relationship of ultimate dependence. Thus ‘cause’ as applied to God should be conceived not as a physical force or an interaction, as it is in physics, but rather in terms of a relationship.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Metz, “Could God’s Purpose be the Source of Life’s Meaning?,” 309; see also, William Lane Craig, “Timelessness, Creation, and God’s Real Relation to the World,” *Laval théologique et philosophique* 56, no.1 (2000): 93-112.

<sup>86</sup> Markus, “Divine Timelessness: A Coherent but Unfruitful Doctrine?,” 31.

<sup>87</sup> Nelson Pike, *God and Timelessness* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), 110; see also, Lewis, “Timelessness and Divine Agency,” 151-154.

<sup>88</sup> See Lucas, “The Temporality of God”; Lewis, “Timelessness and Divine Agency,” 158-159.

<sup>89</sup> Markus, “Divine Timelessness: A Coherent but Unfruitful Doctrine?,” 32-34.

<sup>90</sup> Nelson, “Time(s), Eternity, and Duration.”

<sup>91</sup> Metz, “Could God’s Purpose be the Source of Life’s Meaning?,” 306.

<sup>92</sup> William Stoeger, “God, Physics, and the Big Bang,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Science and Religion*, ed. Peter Harrison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 181.

Importantly, Stoeger links this to atemporality. There is no beginning to God creating and no ending; God eternally creates. Thomists would call this “participation” and, again, it points to an absence of a real relation: God does not do anything, because God is not the “kind of reality who can *literally do* anything at all,”<sup>93</sup> but creatures derive their being from and entirely depend upon God. God’s “relationship” with the universe is not as a “cause,” but as “communion” or “participation;” God does not do anything because “doing” implies temporality. Participation is an end in itself, not the means through which God realises specific ends. Thus, there is not one “instance” and one “type” of divine act, but one divine *relationship*.

Others share this approach. Antje Jackelén (drawing on Sergei Bulgakov)<sup>94</sup> similarly acknowledges that “theological responses are not limited to speaking about God in terms of overall causality” and, instead, “relationship has come to the fore as a more seminal category than cause.”<sup>95</sup> Likewise (albeit for very different reasons), Rudolph Bultmann also argued for a “demythologisation” of theology, in which God was seen not as a cause but as “personal encounter.”<sup>96</sup> Ruth Page also offers an exposition of God as relation rather than cause, which, significant for the purposes of this article, she does with the explicit intention of removing teleology from theology. Page argues that evolution and history are not divinely designed,<sup>97</sup> so that:

The picture involved in this doctrine of creation is not one of God setting up the initial conditions with the express design to produce complexity and human consciousness and intelligence, but rather one of God letting be whatever would and could emerge from that freedom, and enjoying *all* responses of *all* kinds as they have occurred from the beginning of time, with their various qualities, of which intelligence is only one<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Frank Kirkpatrick, *The Mystery and Agency of God* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress, 2014), 1; quite literally, there is no way to conceive of “God *acting* in the world” without acknowledging that “God is another *actor* in the world.”

<sup>94</sup> For example, Sergius Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 37, 62.

<sup>95</sup> A. Jackelén, “A Critical View of ‘Theistic Evolution,’” *Theology and Science* 5, no.2 (2007):154.

<sup>96</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (London: SCM, 1960), 69. Michael Dodds, “Science, Causality, and God: Divine Action and Thomas Aquinas,” *Angelicum* 91, no.1 (2014): 25; see also, G.L. Murphy, “The Theology of the Cross and God’s Work in the World,” *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 33, no.2 (1998): 227.

<sup>97</sup> Ruth Page, *The Web of Creation* (London: SCM, 1996), 8.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

For Page, God is not interested in bringing into being a specific creation, God enjoys all responses, without constraining creation towards a favourite or preferred response. That “freedom” of God “letting be” is not God refraining from intervening in order for certain values to be cultivated and allowed to emerge;<sup>99</sup> it is simply nothing more than God being concerned with that which is present, not with anything that could emerge in the future.

This is the complete opposite of Teilhard de Chardin’s theology in which each individual creature that is not present at the end of evolution is excluded from relationship with God. For Teilhard, Christ assumes “the cosmos *insofar as* this [cosmos] is united to man,”<sup>100</sup> that is, God only has a relation with non-human animals insofar as non-human animals have evolved into humanity and so humanity is a “recapitulation” of others. Therefore, since evolution is not finished and “a more fully realized spirituality than our own is possible”<sup>101</sup> because “God awaits us when the evolutionary process is complete,”<sup>102</sup> so the individual creature has a relation to God only *insofar as* that creature is united to whatever creature is present at the end of evolution. Relationship with God is only ever teleologically directed: the creature is not an end in themselves, but *only* a means to something else.

If Teilhard is the quintessential “teleologist,” emphasising teleology to such an extent that the value of any creature (and so its relationship with God) is *only* in relation to its building the “Omega Point,” then this article, siding with Ruth Page, argues for the complete opposite: teleology is removed from theology to such an extent that each individual creature and each individual spatiotemporal moment of that individual creature’s life is an end *in themselves* and is not a means to another “more spiritual” creature or spatiotemporal moment whose relationship with God would be closer. God values each creature equally *as they are* not for *what they could become*.

### ***Relationship and Process Theology***

After arguing for a theory of divine activity in which God does not influence the history and evolution of the universe because God lets be and enjoys all responses of all kinds, Ruth Page seems to contradict herself by claiming that

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<sup>99</sup> For example Christopher Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008).

<sup>100</sup> Christopher Mooney, *Teilhard de Chardin and The Mystery of Christ* (London: Collins, 1966), 146 (*italics* added).

<sup>101</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Writings in the Time of War* (London: Collins, 1968), 97.

<sup>102</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Future of Man* (New York NY: Doubleday, 2004), 71.

God still has a divine influence,<sup>103</sup> so that “God undoubtedly has desires for how creation goes.”<sup>104</sup> This influence is not through “mighty acts” (such as God’s intervention recorded in the Bible), but through the relationship that God has with creatures, which has the power of “attraction, of drawing the attention and concern of the other without extinguishing that other’s freedom.”<sup>105</sup> In this way, even though Page criticises process theologians who “appear to restrict creation’s freedom,”<sup>106</sup> her God is closer to the process God than she admits.

Thus, Page seems to undermine the impact of her theology by quoting with approval the idea that “the first ping into being of the first hydrogen atom... cannot be enough for love,” just like looking at a new born baby, “you desire the thing or person you love to display more and more of what they are in the process of becoming.”<sup>107</sup> Yet, how can God “enjoy all responses of all kinds” if a hydrogen atom is not enough? For God to “prefer” whatever the atom could become, then temporal categories need to be applied to God. This article does not follow Page here.

John Haught (drawing on the theology of Jürgen Moltmann) does agree with Page. Haught recognises that “Gods creative and providential presence to the world” includes ‘letting the world be,’ rather than manipulatively controlling [it],<sup>108</sup> which must surely be correct. However, like Page, he seems to undermine this recognition by continuing that this approach “invites [the cosmos], rather than forcing it, to become increasingly and more intensely itself,”<sup>109</sup> so that there is still a future “climactic union” (hence his claim, already quoted above, that “we live in a still-unfinished universe”). For Haught, God’s letting the world be is simply a means by which God constructs something that is complete in the future. The future would thus be real for God (that is, divine acting has duration and succession), or God would relate differently to different spatiotemporal points (that is, divine act would be complex). In other words (temporality, simplicity, and mutability aside), process theology does not disagree that God has specific desires for the universe; it only disagrees on how God goes about “achieving” them, “luring” rather than “obliging.”

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<sup>103</sup> Page, *The Web of Creation*, 101.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>107</sup> S. Maitland quoted in Page, *The Web of Creation*, 58.

<sup>108</sup> John Haught, “Darwin and Contemporary Theology,” *Worldviews* 11, no.1 (2007): 53.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

The position argued in this article is not process theology. Process theology is too keen to see in “relationship” a temporal God who grows with creation, is affected by it, responds to it, and has a future goal which God persuades creatures to realise, precisely because (for process theologians) a genuine relationship requires response, affection, suffering, freedom etc. That is not the “sort” of God for which this article has apologised. Relationship is used here, not as a relationship between two conscious and purposive (re)actors, but as an opposite of purposeful acting, which in Thomist language is called “participation.” Providence and communion/participation are sharply distinguished.<sup>110</sup> God is neither purposeful nor acting, it is simply communion with creatures that is the single, atemporal, simple divine “act.”

Of course, those who argued for atemporality and simplicity also accepted that providence was possible. Thomas Aquinas has already been quoted as arguing for a God who “wishes not only for certain things to happen” but “also for them to happen in certain ways.”<sup>111</sup> Instead, this article has endorsed Paul Tillich’s theology, in which creation is simply “the exercise of [God’s] creativity, which has no purpose beyond itself.”<sup>112</sup> While Tillich allowed for what he called “directing creation,”<sup>113</sup> he did not understand this in the conventional, providential sense. For Tillich, providence is the “certainty that history...contributes to the ultimate fulfillment of creaturely existence,” but, he clarifies that “this fulfillment does not lie in an eventual time-and-space future.”<sup>114</sup> If creation is “the exercise of creativity” then providence “is the fulfillment of that creativity,” but neither are temporal categories: *creatio ex nihilo* is not “the title of a story” but is “the classical formula which expresses the *relation* between God and the world.”<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> This can be seen as part of the broader concern of what Brian Davies calls “theistic personalism,” which characterises a group of theologians (such as Alvin Plantinga and Richard Swinburne) who take God being a person as the most important claim and then define “person” univocally. Brian Davies, *An Introduction to The Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 9-14. This is central to Plantinga’s rejection of simplicity; God cannot be simple because a simple being could not be a “person” or “act” (Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?*, 47). This is contrary to what is offered here. As Paul Tillich has put it, it is “odd” to call God a person (Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 205). Anyone who rejects atemporality and simplicity on the basis that this conflicts with the idea of being a person is contrary to traditional theological categories.

<sup>111</sup> Davison, *Participation in God*, 231.

<sup>112</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 263-264.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 264

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 267

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 254 (*italics added*).



In this way, what is being offered here is not wholly a departure from traditional theology, but it is not completely traditional either. It apologises for a God who is concerned solely with communion with the creature as it is in the (atemporal/“fifth-dimensional”)<sup>116</sup> present, without reference to a past (what it was) or future (what it could be). Relationship is an end in itself, not a means to another end. If God is atemporal, then God cannot have a purpose for creation, as this implies that God experiences succession and that God acts with another, better future in mind. Likewise, if God is simple, then God cannot have a purpose for creation, as this implies that God does different things at, and/or relates differently to, different spatio-temporal points and so implies that God’s “activity” is not uniform or “isotropic.” Rather, God has a relationship with that creation. This does not mean that God creates *in order to* have a relationship - that there is a succession between creation and relationship - rather, the divine relationship *is* the one simple, atemporal act; the divine relationship with creatures *is* their being created/deified, so that “God’s creative action *just is* creation’s dependence on God for its existence.”<sup>117</sup> This God is surely close to the deist God - a God who only creates and nothing more - but, unlike the deist God, this does not leave a God who is disinterested in the world - providence should not be seen as a proxy for the ‘ongoing’ interest of an atemporal, simple, and immutable God.

In a similar way, one might also counter that this article has not given adequate attention to the distinction between theology and philosophy.<sup>118</sup> It might be *philosophically* difficult to hold together an atemporal and simple God on the one hand, and a God who acts providentially on the other, but *theologically*, it is faith in the God who is revealed in the Bible and, especially, in the incarnation that allows one to hold them together. It might not be philosophically coherent, but the role of faith makes them theologically coherent. As alluded to in the introduction, a critic might point out that biblical and catechetical adherence has greater theological value than philosophical coherence and so should trump attempts to downplay providence in favour of a timeless and simple God. This is a fair point. However, the point of this article has not been to reject the Bible and Catechism completely (indeed, it was suggested above in relation to divine atemporality, that the biblical witness on this issue might be seen as unclear at best), but to suggest that one does not need providence and have God “act providentially” in order to retain a theologically coherent God who cares for and

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<sup>116</sup> See Rogers, “Anselm on Eternity as the Fifth Dimension.”

<sup>117</sup> Bishop and Perszyk, “The Divine Attributes and Non-personal Conceptions of God,” 614.

<sup>118</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this criticism.

is interested in creatures and who is incarnate among them (see below for the incarnation). The point of this article is to show that one can apologise for a God who has much in common with the deist and retain an interested and incarnate God.

*Relationship as End: The Non-Teleology and 'Uniformity' of Divine Activity*

Above, it was argued that the diversity in the universe is not due to different *bestowals* of grace but different *receptions* of grace, such that each creature is a different imitation/participation of the one divine "idea" or act. That is, each creature is a different "extrinsic accidental characteristic" of the one simple act. This was nothing more than Philip McCosker's observation that "viewed from God's point of view the bestowal of grace is uniform."<sup>119</sup> If there is no difference in the way that God relates to each creature, then adult humans (for example) have no monopoly on relationship with God; each creature is an end in themselves. John C. Greene, in a letter to Theodosius Dobzhansky, puts the point perfectly. Asking whether God produced (through evolution) the modern horse from Eohippus, he asks

But why should we regard the modern horse as better than Eohippus? I would think that the two creatures were equally happy and equally valuable in God's sight. "Better" in evolutionary lingo is somewhat like 'better' in modern advertising - the indefinite comparative. Our product is "better." Better than what? Better for whom?<sup>120</sup>

Certainly not better for the creature - who dies before and cannot in any way benefit from any "progress" - and certainly not better for God - whose atemporality and simplicity forbids any distinction in value. It is not just that God relates to the traveller in exactly the same "way" at every point on the road (so God is not "closer" to the traveller at the end of their journey as God is when the traveller is at the beginning); God also relates to *every* traveller on that road in exactly the same "way" at every point on the road.<sup>121</sup> "[N]othing is nearer or further away from God by virtue of the constitution of its being...the most

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<sup>119</sup> McCosker, "Grace," 216.

<sup>120</sup> John C. Greene, and Michael Ruse, "On the Nature of the Evolutionary Process: The Correspondence between Theodosius Dobzhansky and John C. Greene," *Biology and Philosophy* 11 (1996): 460.

<sup>121</sup> That is, while there might be a distinction in how the Eohippus and the modern horse respectively relate to God, the rejection of a real relation means that there is no distinction in how God "relates" to them; the two creatures might respond to grace differently, but grace is given in its fullness (i.e. uniformly) to both creatures equally, and if God does not distinguish between

exalted archangel is, in metaphysical terms, no closer to God than a stone.”<sup>122</sup> As Tillich has already been quoted, the purpose of creation is simply the “exercise” of creativity, not the specific creation of a specific creature or specific state of affairs for any specific creature.

Basil Hume agrees that “as love emanates from God it cannot in itself change - increase or diminish,” so that “when you reflect that in [God] there is no change, no increase, no diminution, it follows that the totality of his love is concentrated on each one of us individually.” Yet, that “love” (read: grace/participation/communion) “is differentiated by us - to use simple terms - by the degree of our willingness to receive it.”<sup>123</sup> Such is an interpretation of Aquinas’ distinction already quoted on the divine act from the perspective of the “doer” and the “done”;<sup>124</sup> God (the doer) does not relate to any creature differently, but the creature (the done) relates to God differently. God relates to all creatures equally and uniformly in an atemporal and simple relationship; creatures, on the other hand, can and do respond to that relationship differently (like the movement of the pillar).

However, the “differences” in how creatures respond to God are delineated individually (subjectively) rather than by species (objectively); humanity is not inherently “better” at responding to God’s grace than other creatures: God does not favour the response of humanity over others. Thus:

A tree gives glory to God by being a tree. For in being what God means it to be it is obeying him. It ‘consents,’ so to speak, to his love. It is expressing an idea which is in God and which is not distinct from the essence of God, and therefore a tree imitates God by being a tree.<sup>125</sup>

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the two (or any) creatures then neither does God distinguish between different spatiotemporal points in each creature’s individual life.

<sup>122</sup> Andrew Louth, “The Cosmic Vision of Saint Maximos the Confessor,” *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being*, eds., Philip Clayton and Arthus Peacocke (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 191.

<sup>123</sup> Basil Hume, *Searching for God* (York: Ampleforth Abbey, 2002), 57.

<sup>124</sup> Aquinas, *Selected Writings*, 294-295; see also, Anna Williams, *The Ground of Union: Deification in Aquinas and Palamas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 86; William Stoeger, “Conceiving Divine Action in a Dynamic Universe,” in *Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action: Twenty Years of Challenge and Progress*, eds., Robert Russell, Nancy Murphy, and William Stoeger (Vatican City: Vatican Observatory Foundation, 2008), 231.

<sup>125</sup> Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (London: Burns & Oates, 1961), 30.

A tree imitates God differently, *not* inferiorly. Self-consciousness does not make humanity “better” at responding to God’s grace.<sup>126</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius writes that *all* creatures “yearn” for God,

[e]verything with mind and reason seeks to know [God], everything sentient yearns to perceive [God], everything lacking perception has a living and instinctive longing for [God], and everything lifeless and merely existent turns, in its own fashion, for a share of [God]<sup>127</sup>

Even those who are “merely existent” can seek God and “achieve” deification in their own way.<sup>128</sup>

The tree’s “response”<sup>129</sup> to God’s love, the tree’s imitation of God by being a tree, can be likened to the widow’s mite looked down upon by the “riches” of humanity but valued by God.<sup>130</sup> Likewise, any protestation that humanity’s self-conscious (or even *any* form of conscious) “response” to God’s love is inherently more valuable is likened to the labourer who works all day and is paid the same wage as those who only worked one hour.<sup>131</sup> God pays all the same wage: God’s

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<sup>126</sup> See Holmes Rolston III, “Kenosis and Nature,” in *The Work of Life: Creation as Kenosis*, ed. John Polkinghorne (Cambridge: MA: Eerdmans, 2001), 62. There is also a connection here with Karl Rahner’s idea of “anonymous Christians.” For Rahner “man always and inevitably has to do with God in his intellectual and spiritual existence, whether he reflects upon it or not, and whether he freely accepts it or not.” Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York NY: Crossroad, 1978), 69 - meaning that an orientation towards God is the very ontological make-up of humanity. Precisely because humanity depends on God for its very existence. Ibid., 77-88 - so it cannot ever be in a position, whether accepted or not, whether acknowledged or not, in which its life is not directed towards God. Thus, “anyone who, although far from any revelation explicitly formulated in words, accepts his existence in patient silence (or, better, in faith, hope and love), accepts it as the mystery which lies hidden in the mystery of eternal love and which bears life in the womb of death, is saying ‘yes’ to Christ even if he does not know it.” Ibid., 228. There is no reason why this should not include all creatures.

<sup>127</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works* (Mahwah NJ: Paulist, 1987), DN 4.4.

<sup>128</sup> Thus, even though there is a hierarchy, it does not mean that one who is further up the hierarchy is “better,” rather, “divization occurs in the hierarchy not by moving up the hierarchy... but rather existing in one’s hierarchic rank...in a divinely ordained and divinely communicative way in relation to others.” Ashley Purpura, *God, Hierarchy, and Power: Orthodox Theologies of Authority from Byzantium* (New York NY: Fordham University Press, 2018), 29-30.

<sup>129</sup> To say that a tree can respond to God (whatever that means) is not an appeal to pansychism in any respect. Rather, it is the complete “stripping” of value from consciousness. Humans are conscious - self-conscious - but this does not make them better or more valuable - and so the beneficiaries of a different divine act or objective more grace or divine love - than any other creature.

<sup>130</sup> Lk 21:1-4 (NRSV).

<sup>131</sup> Matt 20:9-12 (NRSV).

act is uniform, the same for all creatures. Relationship with the creature is the simple “end” of God’s act, not a means to a different, “better” (future) end.

*Contra* Quinn, that creatures depend on God *at all instants* for their being does not mean that God is *doing* something distinct and discrete (albeit identical) *at all instants*. There is one instance of “doing” divine acting, but this one eternal instance is not temporally located, indeed, it is relationship, not act. Likewise, *contra* McMullin, there cannot be multiple causes/intentions; God’s “desire” or “destiny” for humanity is not only identical to any and every other creature, but is also identical at each and every spatiotemporal moment for each and every creature. What God wills and does for quarks, God wills and does for humans. God’s relationship with - and “desire” for - all creatures is uniform and “isotropic;” there is just one, simple will and relationship, yet creatures respond to that relationship differently. This does not deny that there is multiplicity and progress in the world, but it denies that this is objectively willed and realised by God: it denies providence.

## The Rejection of Teleology and Divine Activity

A God who is concerned only with relationship with creatures *as they are* (atemporally) and not with creatures *as they could be in the future* is a God who is not a “cause.”<sup>132</sup> When this is taken into consideration, it questions why theologians seek to bend over backwards in order to find ways in which God can interact (intervene/interfere/influence etc.) with the universe. All that achieves is to make God a cause among other causes.<sup>133</sup> If there is no divine purpose or providence, then the theologian no longer needs to look for indeterminacy in the causal nexus in order to “hide” divine influence,<sup>134</sup> nor emphasise divine immanence to see the world’s processes as divine activity and so find non-interventionist ways to have divine influence,<sup>135</sup> nor emphasise the “bigger picture” to see “long-term” guidance in “short-term” random chance,<sup>136</sup> nor does

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<sup>132</sup> See Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 196-198; Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, 36-37, 62.

<sup>133</sup> Gerard Verschuuren, *Aquinas and Modern Science* (Kettering, OH: Angelico, 2016), 169.

<sup>134</sup> For example, John Polkinghorne, *Reason and Reality* (London: SPCK, 1991); William Pollard, *Chance and Providence* (London: Faber & Faber, 1958).

<sup>135</sup> For example, Christopher Knight, *The God of Nature: Incarnation and Contemporary Science* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress, 2007); Philip Clayton, *God and Contemporary Science* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997).

<sup>136</sup> For example, Arthus Peacocke, *Paths from Science Towards God* (Oxford: OneWorld, 2001); Theodosius Dobzhansky, *Biology of Ultimate Concern* (London: Rapp and Whiting, 1969).

the theologian need to offer an explanation of how creatures retain their freedom as causes when creatures depend on God for their causality.<sup>137</sup>

Thus, Sarah Lane Ritchie, who criticises panentheistic explanations of divine activity, writes that “if God...has specific purposes to be enacted in the natural world, then at some point the divine will must meet physical processes,”<sup>138</sup> and so, regardless of the indeterminacy, immanence or non-intervention of divine activity, “[a]t some point, the transcendent, immaterial God would have to actually interact with the brutal, physical mechanisms explicated by contemporary science.”<sup>139</sup> However, one *only* needs to explain how God could “interact with the brutal, physical mechanism” of the material world *if* one argues that God has “specific purposes to be enacted in the natural world.” It is not a case of choosing between interventionist vs. non-interventionist, or transcendent vs. immanent, or searching for ways of accounting for divine activity that are not univocal,<sup>140</sup> because the whole paradigm misunderstands what divine activity should be: it should *not* be an influence over the outcome of events or the course of history (providence), but a relationship of communion with the creature. Then, the theologian no longer needs to explain how “God must add something to or change the direction of the natural, or secondary, causal processes of the world” because it no longer accepts “a God who makes things happen in the physical universe that would not have happened without divine action.”<sup>141</sup> There is no certain course of events that God wishes to realise because God lets “whatever would and could emerge...enjoying *all* responses of *all* kinds.”<sup>142</sup>

Much like for deism, then, God has no interest in the *course* of history; to call God “irrelevant to the physical universe”<sup>143</sup> is entirely correct, because God is not concerned with the outcome of history but with relationship; God relates to creatures.<sup>144</sup> This is not because God is “reduced” to an impotent, irrelevant

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<sup>137</sup> For example, *STh* I, q. 19, a. 8.

<sup>138</sup> S. L. Ritchie, “Dancing around the Causal Joint: Challenging the Theological Turn in Divine Action Theories,” *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 52, no.2 (2017): 370.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 377.

<sup>140</sup> See Dodds, “Science, Causality, and God: Divine Action and Thomas Aquinas.”

<sup>141</sup> Richard Grigg, “Religion, Science, and Evolution: Paul Tillich’s Fourth Way,” *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 38, no.4 (2003): 944.

<sup>142</sup> Page, *The Web of Creation*, 80 (*italics added*).

<sup>143</sup> Grigg, “Religion, Science, and Evolution: Paul Tillich’s Fourth Way,” 953.

<sup>144</sup> This article has remained silent on the question of theodicy. It is reasonable to question why a God who was unconcerned with the future and only concerned with communion with the creature did not prevent the suffering of the individual. After all, many theologians (such as Christopher Southgate), argue that it is precisely a concern for the future that best explains why



or impersonal God (*a la* “traditional” deism), but because God’s potency, relevance and personhood<sup>145</sup> are just simply not connected with providential guidance of the world *in any way*, not because of a “decision” to “kenotically” respect creaturely freedom but because an atemporal and simple God could not relate to the world in any other way.<sup>146</sup> To put this differently, if *creatio ex nihilo* is not “some putative first moment in the past” but is “primarily about derivation of all things from God,”<sup>147</sup> then divine activity cannot be about “some putative subsequent moment in the future” either; God is not concerned with “any putative moment.” Here, the (supposedly) offensive remark is not “in the past” - as if *creatio ex nihilo* rejects deism in favour of *creatio continua* - but “moment;” that is, the supposition that divine activity is coincident with any particular moment, whether past, present or future. As Tillich comments, *creatio ex nihilo* is not “the title of a story” but is “the classical formula which expresses the *relation* between God and the world.”<sup>148</sup>

It is this fact that led Thomas Aquinas to affirm that the universe can be created *and* eternal (infinite temporal duration).<sup>149</sup> That is, to be created is not to have a beginning (or an end), but to be in a dependent relationship with God.<sup>150</sup> If creative action is not about beginnings or origins, then it is not about “endings” either, or the “movement” (that is, providence) from one to the other; it is about “ontological relationship...with no reference to temporality.”<sup>151</sup> Creation is about

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God does not intervene to prevent evil *now*. I think that the problem is (slightly) alleviated by the suggestion that the theologian should not expect God to intervene because this misconstrues what divine activity is. Yet, I recognise that this does not satisfy everyone, and accept that criticism.

<sup>145</sup> It is not certain that God is a person (at least in the modern sense of the term). Following Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (London: Burns and Oates, 1970) and Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 205, there is a tension here; the modern philosophical idea of a person (as is used in everyday language) is not what is meant by the fourth century Greek idea of *hypostasis* (indeed, God is not *a* person but *three* hypostases). Thus, to claim that God is a conscious and purposive actor because that is what human persons are, is to treat God and creatures as univocal and to turn the idea of person into a more fundamental category in which both God and creatures are placed.

<sup>146</sup> See John Polkinghorne, “Kenotic Creation and Divine Action,” in *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, ed. John Polkinghorne (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2001).

<sup>147</sup> Davison, *Participation in God*, 26.

<sup>148</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 254 (*italics added*).

<sup>149</sup> See Gilson, *Medieval Essays*, 170.

<sup>150</sup> Gaven Kerr, “A Thomistic Metaphysics of Creation,” *Religious Studies* 48 (2012): 340.

<sup>151</sup> Steven Baldner and William Carroll trans. *Aquinas on Creation* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1997), 16.

“divine power,” not a “theory of origins”;<sup>152</sup> it is “a *present-tense doctrine*, one less about an initial act of God than about the ongoing dependence of [creatures]... on their creator.”<sup>153</sup> As David Bentley Hart writes:

[T]he question of creation has never simply concerned some event that may have happened “back then,” at the beginning of time, or some change between distinct physical states...but has always concerned the *eternal relation* between logical possibility and logical necessity, the contingent and the absolute, the conditioned and the unconditioned.<sup>154</sup>

Stoeger, Jackelén, and Bultmann have already been quoted in support of this. Creation and “all” divine activity should be about a single and simple relationship, not origins and providence.

Again, this appears to apologise for a God that has much in common with the deist God, but, unlike the deist God, what is presented here is not about the temporal limits of divine activity (that is, God only acts in the past), neither should it be construed as a doctrine about divine impotence or disinterest in the world, although this is traditionally how the doctrine has been understood in the past.<sup>155</sup> Rather, the point here is about the *content* of the divine activity. That is, providence should not be a proxy for God’s “ongoing interest” in the world, rather, God’s interest in the world is only in terms of relationship, which for creatures is dependence on God for their being (imitation and participation) and for God it is nothing more than “the exercise of his creativity, which has no purpose beyond itself because the divine life is essentially creative”<sup>156</sup> as Tillich has already been quoted.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Alejandro Garcia-Rivera, *The Garden of God: A Theological Cosmology* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress, 2009), 11.

<sup>153</sup> Clayton, *God and Contemporary Science*, 24.

<sup>154</sup> David B. Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (London: Yale University Press, 2013), 304 (*italics* added).

<sup>155</sup> See *ibid.*, 61-62.

<sup>156</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 263-264.

<sup>157</sup> It is interesting to note that John Polkinghorne suggests that “[t]he mystic’s God, who is simply the sustaining ground of all being, is not far from the deist’s God, whose action is the single creatory fiat by which the world’s process is sustained” arguing that where one is an immanent detached deity (importantly panentheism would be an immanent attached deity, since it argues that God is “causally involved,” hence the problems with it that Ritchie notes), the other is a transcendent detached deity, and “neither is the personally purposive God of the Judeo-Christian tradition.” John Polkinghorne, *Science and Providence* (London: SPCK, 1989), 36. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 262, also acknowledges that many have noticed that there is no essentially no difference between the pantheist and the deist. Yet, on the other hand, whereas Maurice Wiles, *God’s Action in the World*, 2, claims that deism is “widely regarded as no different

## Deism, God’s Relation to the World, and the Incarnation

The question of deism, then, has been reframed, not as a choice between a “detached and impotent God”<sup>158</sup> or an attached and powerful God, but a question of what one understands an attached and powerful God to “do.” As John Polkinghorne puts it, if a God with power but no love is a “deistic bystander, watching the play of history unfold without any influence upon its course,”<sup>159</sup> then all this does is understand God’s love *purely* and *exclusively* in terms of power and providence, rather than communion; for Polkinghorne, a God who does not act is a God who does not love. To put it differently, if one assumes that *in order for* God to be attached and have a “continuing interest in the world” then God *has* to be providential, then one is always going to find problems with deism.

However, as this article has argued, when God’s relationship with creatures is atemporal, simple and so, unconcerned with a particular future (or past) that may or may not happen (or have happened), or when God’s relationship with creatures is an end in itself and not a means to another end, then deism becomes attractive again, not because it “reduces” God to sort of demiurge who “was merely part of a larger reality that included both himself and his handiwork,”<sup>160</sup> but because the whole idea of divine activity has been recast. It is possible for God to still be in relationship with creatures and to be interested in the lives of those creatures, without a specific future goal being crucial for understanding that interest. For example, one can still be interested in watching a game of snooker purely for the love of the game, without needing a winner or desiring a specific player to win. God is “essentially irrelevant to the *actual physical workings* of that universe”<sup>161</sup> (e.g. does not want a specific player to win), but this in no way implies that God is ‘absent’ (e.g. not interested in the game purely for the love of it).<sup>162</sup>

However, some theologians have questioned whether such a transcendent God can genuinely have a relationship with creatures. Keith Ward acknowledges this “crucial difficulty” with “the relation of God, the necessary, eternal, perfect and

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from atheism” Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 39-40, claims that “pantheism is sexed-up atheism. Deism is watered-down theism.” This article argues for a transcendent God, so affirms deism, but it is important to note the similarities here.

<sup>158</sup> Nicholas Saunders, *Divine Action & Modern Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 100.

<sup>159</sup> Polkinghorne, “Kenotic Creation and Divine Action,” 91.

<sup>160</sup> Hart, *The Experience of God: Being*, 61-62.

<sup>161</sup> Grigg, “Religion, Science, and Evolution: Paul Tillich’s Fourth Way,” 953 (*italics* added).

<sup>162</sup> Although, admittedly, this analogy breaks down as games of snooker are inherently temporal.

immutable being, to a universe of contingent, and even free, beings"<sup>163</sup> and appeals to process theology as a solution. For Ward, if God is not complex and temporal then "it is extremely difficult to see how such a God can be related to the world at all."<sup>164</sup> Frances Young also notes that this was a problem for Greek philosophy, whose "Parmenidian" God was "utterly transcendent" so that God was "irrelevant to the problem of which he [sic] had originally been the solution."<sup>165</sup> The more one emphasises the dissimilarities and ontological gulf between God and the world, the more it becomes problematic to claim that God has communion with creatures.

Perhaps more problematic for the *Christian* theologian is the obvious and understandable criticism that the incarnation is incompatible with deism. David Brown writes that the deist "while committed to belief in God, rejects Jesus Christ and his doctrines" so that "if there is to be a proper incarnation, God the Son cannot stand aloof from the created order but must become interrelated with it."<sup>166</sup> Thus, "any incarnational claim in the strict sense of the term must involve an interventionist God,"<sup>167</sup> that is, a non-deist God. Gerald O'Collins also writes that "[t]he logic of deism excluded the possibility of any such special sub-acts of God...[e.g.] an incarnation,"<sup>168</sup> as does Chris Isham, who writes that "the God of Christianity is not only 'the ground of Being.' He [sic] is also Incarnate."<sup>169</sup>

Thus, the deist God might be more attractive to a theology that emphasises atemporality, simplicity and uniformity of relationship, but in doing so two further problems remain: (a) God becomes so transcendent to make relationship impossible, and (b) the incarnation is no longer possible. However, this article will argue that the latter can be a solution to the former: the incarnation solves the problem of God's transcendence. As Frances Young continues, while "[t]he impassable, transcendent one, beyond being, was intellectually adequate and mystically inspiring" it "could not elicit the faith and devotion of most ordinary mortals," yet "[t]he doctrines of the Logos and the Spirit made it possible to believe

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<sup>163</sup> Ward, *Rational Theology and the Creativity of God*, 2.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 81; Robert Burns, "The Divine Simplicity in St. Thomas," *Religious Studies* 25, no.3 (1989): 292, takes a similar position. So also Polkinghorne, "Kenotic Creation and Divine Action," 103.

<sup>165</sup> Frances Young, "A Cloud of Witnesses," in *The Myth of God Incarnate*, ed. John Hick (London: SCM, 1977), 24-25.

<sup>166</sup> David Brown, *The Divine Trinity* (London: Duckworth, 1985), 14.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 4-5.

<sup>168</sup> Gerald O'Collins, *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 217.

<sup>169</sup> Christopher Isham, "Creation of the Universe as a Quantum Process," in *Physics, Philosophy, and Theology* (Vatican City: Vatican Observatory, 1988), 405.

in a God who is both transcendent and immanent, however paradoxical that might seem to be.”<sup>170</sup> Creation (and so all divine activity) is not about the construction of something specific, but simply exercising creativity, or, creation “concern[s] the eternal relation between logical possibility and logical necessity, the contingent and the absolute, the conditioned and the unconditioned.”<sup>171</sup> That relation is “the eternal relation of God to man which is manifest in the Christ.”<sup>172</sup> In other words, here is an “incarnational deism;” a deism whose “single act” is not the Big Bang, but the incarnation.

### *Incarnational Deism*

Helen Oppenheimer uses the phrase “incarnational deism” to describe a “two-act” theology.<sup>173</sup> She notes that the creed does not demand that the Christian believe in providence, which makes deism a valid interpretation of the creed. An “incarnational deism” for Oppenheimer, then, is a deism of two acts (as Isham implied above) - the “initial” act of creation plus the incarnation. Ultimately, Oppenheimer opines that the Incarnational Deist “may eventually lead into a cul-de-sac,”<sup>174</sup> because the Incarnational Deist “will soon find that he cannot do any kind of justice to what the biblical writers themselves say about Christ.”<sup>175</sup> One might add that (from the perspective of this article), a “two-act” deism would appear to contravene divine simplicity.

However, while Oppenheimer is surely correct that the biblical (and catechetical) picture of God hardly allows for a deist interpretation, even if the creed does, one might build on Oppenheimer’s observation to provide a solution. While the creed does not demand that the Christian believe in providence - allowing a deist interpretation - both the creed and the Bible *do* demand that the Christian believes that Christ is he “by whom all things were made.” In other words, both the Bible and the creed demand that God does not just create, God creates in and through Christ. If the creed allows for deism, it also suggests that (or at least allows that) creation and incarnation are one act not two acts.

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<sup>170</sup> Young, “A Cloud of Witnesses,” 41-42.

<sup>171</sup> Hart, *The Experience of God*, 304; see Ward, *Rational Theology and the Creativity of God*; Young, “A Cloud of Witnesses.”

<sup>172</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (London: SCM, 1957), 2:96.

<sup>173</sup> Helen Oppenheimer, *Christian Faith for Handing on* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2014), 85.

<sup>174</sup> Helen Oppenheimer, *Incarnation and Immanence* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973), 57.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

In other words, the relationship that creatures have with God through the incarnation is how they are created. Differently, if creation is not an event in the past (or a “story”), but is the name of a relationship, then the theologian does not need to look for an instance of indeterminacy or “irreducible complexity” or any such event where divine *activity* can be found (and which many theologians - including traditional deists - who confuse “creation” with “beginning”<sup>176</sup> find in the Big Bang); the theologian needs to look for an “event” where divine *relationship* is most apparent: this is precisely what the incarnation offers. Christ is Emmanuel – “God with us” - or, as Torstein Theodor Tollefsen writes, “the historical incarnation is God’s eternal purpose...motivated by the divine will to communion.”<sup>177</sup> If all divine activity is simply communion (that is, God does not create *for* communion, communion *is* creation), or, more accurately, if there is no divine activity but only creaturely dependence on God (which does not require God to “do” anything), then God’s communion with creatures is Christ, hence, Christ is that “through whom all things were made.” If creation is relationship and “God is never without his [sic] Logos, the divine Wisdom, in and through whom the world is created, ordered, and sustained”<sup>178</sup> then Christ is *the* “eternal relation of God to man.”<sup>179</sup>

The incarnation does not need the theologian to posit two divine acts, the second of which shows God’s “continuing” interest in the first. The incarnation is not another act *in addition* to the one act of creation; the incarnation *is* the one divine act/relationship with the world, which is both “the exercise of [God’s] creativity, which has no purpose beyond itself,”<sup>180</sup> and that which “*just is* creation’s dependence on God for its existence.”<sup>181</sup> Thus, the claim that God is incarnate *in addition to* being the “ground of being” is unnecessary; the incarnation - the mediation between the “infinitely” transcendent God and the material universe - is *how* God is the “ground of being.” Christ is the relation between God and creatures; if “no one comes to [that is, has a relation with] the Father except through [Christ]”<sup>182</sup> and Christ is “the actual mediator between God and man and man and

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<sup>176</sup> See Kerr, “A Thomistic Metaphysics of Creation.”

<sup>177</sup> Torstein Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation in Late Antique and Early Christian Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 148. The implication being that without Christ God is “not with us,” and if God is “not with us” then the ontological relationship on which all creatures depend for their being and existence. See Baldner and Carroll trans. *Aquinas on Creation*, 16; Davison, *Participation in God*, 26, is not present.

<sup>178</sup> Hart, *The Experience of God*, 235.

<sup>179</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 2:96.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, 263-264.

<sup>181</sup> Bishop and Perszyk, “The Divine Attributes and Non-personal Conceptions of God,” 614.

<sup>182</sup> Jn 14:6.



God in all things,”<sup>183</sup> so that “the gap between heaven and earth is only bridged definitively in the figure of Christ,”<sup>184</sup> then the Father comes to [that is, has a relation with] no one, except through Christ.<sup>185</sup> Yet, God does not create *in order to* have relationship; relationship *is* creation, and creation is in Christ. God does not create in order to have relationship in Christ; the relationship in Christ *is* creation; it is the only thing that God does - all multiplicity and diversity in creation (including the appearance of providence – that is, that God desires for this to happen rather than that) is extrinsic to that relationship of Christ, it depends on how creatures respond to (imitate) Christ, not on anything objective that God does.

Of course, for many, the incarnation is a significant stumbling-block for divine atemporality and consider the very fact of the incarnation as alone sufficient evidence for the refutation of atemporality.<sup>186</sup> Those who see the incarnation as a stumbling-block might also question how God was related to creatures “before” the incarnation happened. However, not all accept this and counter that it is perfectly coherent to hold a genuine incarnation and divine atemporality. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, for example, write that “the second person eternally has two natures; and at some temporal instants...the human nature of the second person has been temporally actual.”<sup>187</sup> Thus, “God is not now living in a time after the Incarnation, whereas once he [sic] lived in a time before it. One says the same, after all, about the act of creation, viz. that it entails no change in God.”<sup>188</sup> Brian

<sup>183</sup> Thomas Torrance, *Space, Time, and Incarnation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 52.

<sup>184</sup> Rupert Shortt, *God Is No Thing* (London: Hurst & Company, 2016), 77.

<sup>185</sup> For Christ to be the solution to how God is so transcendent so as not to be able to have a real relation to the world presupposes the doctrine of *communicatio idiomatum*; God can be said to die and suffer through Christ so God can be said to be in a relation with the world through Christ.

<sup>186</sup> For example, Thomas Senor, “Incarnation and Timelessness,” *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 7, no.2 (1990): 149-164; Emily Paul, “Incarnation, Divine Timelessness, and Modality,” *TheoLogica: An International Journal for Philosophy of Religion and Philosophical Theology* 31, no.1 (2019): 88-112; Wolterstorff “Unqualified Divine Temporality”; Holland, *God, Time, and the Incarnation*.

<sup>187</sup> Stump and Kretzmann, “Eternity,” 453; see also, Paul Helm, “Divine Timeless Eternity,” in *God and Time: Four Views*, ed. Greg Ganssle (Downers Grove IL.: IVP Academic, 2001); K. Blount, “On the Incarnation of a Timeless God,” in *God and Time: Essays on the Divine Nature*, eds., Gregory Ganssle and David Woodruff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 236-48; Garton, “‘Very Truly I tell you, Before Abraham was, I am.’”; B. Leftow, “A Timeless God Incarnate,” in *The Incarnation*, eds., Davies, Stephen T. Kendall and Daniel O’Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002)

<sup>188</sup> S. Theron, “Creation *stricto sensu*,” *New Blackfriars* 89, no.1020 (2008): 209; see also, Helm, “Infinity and God’s Atemporality,” 54; I.M. Ielciu, “Doctrinal Aspects in Evagrius Ponticus,” *Revista Teologică* 99, no.1 (2017):25.

Leftow's "scuba gear" analogy is illustrative. That the Son is "in time" does not mean that the Son experiences temporal succession or duration.<sup>189</sup> While there is not space to consider all the issues, there is significant support for the claim that the incarnation can be coherently held together with divine atemporality.<sup>190</sup> The person of Jesus Christ is the relationship between time and eternity. Thus, one might say that Christ (the hypostatic union) is the "causal joint," not because Christ is how God interacts with and providentially guides the universe, but because in Christ is the eternal relationship between God and creatures.<sup>191</sup>

Drawing on the single, atemporal and simple *relationship* that is the "single act" of deism, what this article has argued for can be put simply in the words of Thomas Merton: God's love "pervade[s] all things as the light and the heat of the sun pervade our atmosphere. But just as the rays of the sun do not set fire to anything by themselves, so God does not touch our souls with the fire of supernatural knowledge and experience without Christ."<sup>192</sup> If "as love emanates from God it cannot in itself change" and that "when you reflect that in [God] there is no change, no increase, no diminution, it follows that the totality of his love is concentrated on each one of us individually,"<sup>193</sup> then Christ is that emanation of love.

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<sup>189</sup> Leftow, "A Timeless God Incarnate," 292. Incidentally, the "scuba" analogy works equally well with simplicity - i.e. the complexity of Jesus' will and actions does not mean that the Son must experience that complexity - and immutability - i.e. the changes that Jesus goes through does not mean that the son must experience change.

<sup>190</sup> Although, importantly, some claim that Leftow's defence is incoherent. See for example, R.T. Mullins, *The End of The Timeless God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 159.

<sup>191</sup> One will need to point to a theory like Karl Rahner's "anonymous Christians" (see above), in order to account for how those who do not have an explicit, conscious relationship with Christ can still be created and depend on God through Christ. All creatures depend on God through Christ, whether they are aware of it or not.

<sup>192</sup> Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 106.

<sup>193</sup> Hume, *Searching for God*, 57.