9. ON THE MEANING OF "ACT OF GOD"*

Gordon D. Kaufman

What we desperately need is a theological ontology that will put intelligible and credible meanings into our ana-
logical categories of divine deeds and of divine self-
manifestation through events. . . . Only an ontology of 
events specifying what God's relation to ordinary events 
is like, and thus what his relation to special events 
might be, could fill the now empty analogy of mighty 
acts, void since the denial of the miraculous.

Langdon Gilkey1

The concept "act of God" is central to the biblical un-
derstanding of God and his relation to the world. Repeatedly we are 
told of the great works performed by God in behalf of his people 
and in execution of his own purposes in history. From the "song of 
Moses," which celebrates the "glorious deeds" (Exod. 15:11) 
through which Yahweh secured the release of the Israelites from 
bondage in Egypt, to the letters of Paul, which proclaim God's 
great act delivering us "from the dominion of darkness" (Col. 1:13) 
and reconciling us with himself, we are confronted with a "God 
who acts."2 The "mighty acts" (Ps. 145:4), the "wondrous deeds" 
(Ps. 40:5), the "wonderful works" (Ps. 107:21) of God are the fund-
damental subject matter of biblical history, and the object of 
biblical faith is clearly the One who has acted repeatedly and with 
power in the past and may be expected to do so in the future.

I

However hallowed by Bible and by traditional faith, this no-
tion of a God who continuously performs deliberate acts in and 
upon his world, and in and through man's history, has become very 
problematical for most moderns. We have learned to conceive nature 
as an impersonal order or structure. The rising of the sun, the 
falling of the rain, the development of the solar system and the

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evolution of life, catastrophes like earthquakes or hurricanes as well as the wondrous adaptations and adjustments through which the myriad species of life sustain and support each other, terrifying plagues and diseases as well as powers of healing and restoration—all are grasped by us as natural events and processes. All are understood to proceed from natural causes and to lead to natural effects; in no case is it necessary to invoke the special action of God to account for such occurrences. Indeed, we have learned, especially in the last three or four hundred years, that it is precisely by excluding reference to such a transcendent agent that we gain genuine knowledge of the order that obtains in nature, are enabled to predict in certain respects the natural course of events, and thus gain a measure of control over it. The deliberate exclusion of reference to the action of God in the understanding of nature does not, of course, involve a claim that nature has become transparent to man, that there is no longer mystery in this world before which we must stand in awe. But it does mean that a particular kind of mystery is excluded: it is not to an inscrutable but personal will, apt in any moment to act in new and unpredictable ways, that such features of our world are to be referred, but simply to the mystery and obscurity of the cosmic process itself, whose infinite scope and impenetrable depths our limited minds cannot fathom.

It is precisely this question about the kind of mystery which nature manifests that is at issue in the modern theological discussion of miracle. The proponents of a doctrine of miracle as interruption of natural order claim that any view holding that such deliberate acts of God do not (or cannot) occur reduces or obscures the genuine mystery in our lives, hidden ultimately in God’s inscrutable will: for it involves the claim that the basic (and inviolable) order or structure of nature is in some real sense discernible by us. But those who deny the appropriateness of this view can claim that it is precisely the doctrine of miracle that refuses to face the mystery of existence, for it disposes too easily of the unusual or uncomprehended by referring them to that which is supposedly known and can be trusted, the will of a God who loves and redeems his creatures; thus, the proponents of a doctrine of miracle erode the genuine mystery of our existence, seeking to overcome their anxieties as personal beings in an impersonal world by the postulation of a purposive and personal God as its Creator and Lord. In this argument it is clearly the opponents of miracle who have won the day. Few any longer are disposed to explain the
occurrence of particular events by referring them directly to God's intervention in the natural order. Although many theologians still wish to say such occurrences are possible "in principle" (for "with God all things are possible," Matt. 19:26), it is clear that both their practical decisions and actions and their theological theories are controlled by the assumption of the fundamental autonomy of natural order. In view of the fact that this is completely inconsistent with the supposedly authoritative biblical conception of God as one who continuously acts in and upon nature as its Lord, it is little wonder that contemporary talk about God sounds hollow and abstract, and for many of us has become uncomfortable and difficult.

A frequently proposed way out of this dilemma is to concede that nature, as we experience it and have learned to describe it in science, is indeed autonomous and self-contained, but that God acts in man's history, revealing himself, covenanting with man, rescuing men from the various forms of bondage into which they have fallen. Though nature may be ruled by impersonal iron necessity, history is the realm of freedom and purpose in which values are cherished and ends are pursued: though teleological conceptions may well obstruct and even make impossible the work of the natural scientist, without such categories as purpose and act the historian could not even begin his work. Hence, if God is to be conceived as one who acts, it is in terms of our experience of history that we must understand him: he is one who acts through the events of history as history's Lord. Although in our understanding of nature we are instructed by modern secular science, in our interpretation of history we can be believers.

The shallowness of this proposal—though it has often been enunciated in the desperation of contemporary theology—should be immediately apparent. In the first place, no one conceives of or experiences "history in this kind of sharp isolation from "nature." All historical events take place within the context of natural process and order and involve the movements and reordering of physical bodies and material objects of many sorts. Moreover, many natural events—one needs think only of rainfall and drought, earthquake and disease, birth and death—have significant historical consequences. It is impossible to speak of history as though it were a realm of freedom and decision entirely separate from nature. Certainly the biblical perspective is not characterized by such nonsense. It is a measure of the desperation of contemporary theology and faith, in the face of the power of the modern scientific world view—a desperation already manifest in Kant's
metaphysical agnosticism\(^3\) to which such theological views are heavily indebted—that this way out was attempted at all. It will not do to speak of God as the agent who made it possible for the Israelites to escape from the Egyptians, if one regards it as simply a fortunate coincidence that a strong east wind was blowing at just the right time to dry up the sea of reeds. The biblical writer's view is coherent and compelling precisely because he is able to say that "the Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind" (Exod. 14:21); that is, it was because, and only because, God was Lord over nature, one who could bend natural events to his will, that he was able to be effective Lord over history.

In the second place—even if the sharp bifurcation of nature and history could be made intelligible—referring acts of God to historical events really helps little to resolve the fundamental problem. For the modern experience of and interpretation of history, just as surely as the modern view of nature, is entirely in terms of intramundane powers and events. We may well agree that history is a realm in which decision and action, pursuit of ends and appreciation of value and meaning, have genuine reality and effectiveness: we may be prepared to argue that some measure of genuine freedom and creativity must be presupposed to account for the creation and cumulation of culture, teleologically modifying nature in such diverse ways. But this certainly does not incline many of us to speak of God’s free and creative activity in and through the historical process. Indeed, the orientation of the modern historian explicitly precludes such extraworldly reference: his task is to explain and interpret the movement of man’s history entirely by reference to the interaction of human wills, the development of human institutions and traditions, and the effects of natural events and processes, that is, exclusively in intramundane terms. Doubtless he may refer to historic decisions and to creative ideas and imaginative visions, but these are always the work of human political or military leader, artist or philosopher or dreamer. Never does he invoke a transcendent agent to explain what has occurred, and never does he suppose it necessary, or even intelligible, to refer to some injection into the human historical process from beyond in order to understand even the most radical historical reversals or the most creative beginnings: all are to be understood by reference to human powers and actions in the context of the natural world.

It is not out of some unbelieving perversity that the modern historian thus thinks and writes: rather, since this is the way we
in fact experience history, this is the only way in which it is intelligible to us. Nor is this an attempt to ignore or reduce the mystery of the historical movement in which we are immersed by disregarding its depths and obscurities; few would claim to understand "where history is going" or "the pattern of history." The mystery remains. But it is the mystery and obscurity of human creativity and willfulness, the mystery and incomprehensibility of cosmic process, not the mystery and inscrutability of the purposes and will of a personal and loving God who is moving the world toward a consummation known only to him.

Inasmuch as our modern experience and understanding of history is quite as secular as our experience and understanding of nature, the concept "act of God" can no more readily be interpreted by reference to historical events than to natural. But since the root metaphor that informs the Western notion of God and gives it its special character is that of a supreme Actor or Agent, it is little wonder that the notion of God has become empty for us, that "God is dead." An agent is experienced and known in and through his acts; since we no longer grasp events as genuinely acts of the transcendent God, the Agent himself has faded away for us into little more than a word inherited from our past. In this situation three alternatives confront us. The first, and probably most common, is to grant that "God is dead," that is, that life is to be understood in humanistic and naturalistic terms; if the word "God" is used at all, it will only be in perfunctory and conventional ways, not out of the awareness and conviction of a genuine transhuman agent. The second, followed, for example, by Paul Tillich, is decisively to reinterpret the notion of God in such a manner that the conception of agent is no longer implied; then the reality of God will be sought in other dimensions of experience than "acts." The third, which I shall attempt here, is to subject our ordinary notion of "act" to a reexamination to see whether it is possible to reinterpret the conception of "God's act(s)" in a sense to some extent continuous with ordinary usage but nevertheless theologically significant and philosophically intelligible.

If the conception of God's "act" can be developed as the fundamental metaphysical category for interpreting his relation to finite beings, the theological task is much facilitated. God himself can be viewed as Agent, one who has intentions and purposes that he realizes in and through creation: thus his creative, providential, and redemptive activity can be rendered intelligible in fairly straightforward terms, reasonably continuous with
biblical language. Such a defining image of God is not only ad-
vantageous when interpreting the heavily anthropomorphic terminology
about God’s love, mercy, justice, and wisdom; it also provides a
way to interpret his transcendence, thus preserving his radical
independence and aseity even while making possible an understanding
of his relation to the world. Furthermore, if it is possible to
understand God as an active being in this quasi-personal sense,
it is much easier to work out the complex metaphysical problems
having to do with his relation to other agents, men. Conversely,
if “act”-language is abandoned in theology, or is subordinated to
the language of being or cause or process, it becomes difficult to
regard much of the traditional terminology as anything more than
poetic metaphor or outright equivocation.

II

An act (as we ordinarily think of it) is something done or
performed, a deed: it is a particular and generally a specific
event brought about by an agent. Acts may be of shorter or longer
duration, and although an act always has a certain unity governed
by the end or objective that is being pursued, it need not be com-
pleted in a single unbroken stretch of time, but may be interrupted
and then resumed (as with the act of building a house or writing
a book). But in all cases a particular act has a certain unity and
specificity; it is some particular thing achieved, a definite deed
done. It is not mere activity, but activity bound together and
given a distinct order and structure by the intention of an agent
to realize a goal.

The goal seeking characteristic of an act must be distinguished
from the immanent teleology that Aristotle ascribed to living or-
organisms. The latter simply follow patterns built into their very
structure and handed on from generation to generation: thus the
acorn becomes an oak which again produces more acorns. In the
case of an act, this ruling pattern does not exist; instead, the
agent deliberately posits the end he intends to realize—and it
may be something quite new, which had not existed before or which
he had not done before. Thus, an act involves an element of crea-
tivity not characteristic of lower forms of life than man. The
cumulation of such (creative) acts produces the historical order,
culture, a new order of being superimposed on the process of life
and not to be simply identified with it. To understand the teleo-
logical movements of living organisms, which involve the repetition
of unfolding patterns long since established—the acorn simply
becoming another oak—it is necessary only to postulate that the same pattern somehow be transferred from generation to generation. The purposive movement of an act, however, inasmuch as it is no mere repetition of previous pattern but involves creative production of the new, cannot be understood in this way. In this case there must be an agent who performs the act, a reality in which is lodged the teleological intention to be realized through it. Such an agent must be capable both of formulating the intention to be realized in the future (he must have powers of imagining the presently nonexistent) and of working through time in such ordered fashion as to realize his goal. The successive moments of time here are bound together not by a preestablished pattern implanted in the organism but by the purposive activity of the agent. Thus, act and purpose should not be reduced to Aristotle’s notion of the teleology at work in all organisms: our proper model here is human purposive behavior.

Acts may be broken down into constituent acts (or subacts), each of which makes its necessary contribution to the larger act. Thus, my act of constructing a bench will include within it many subacts, hammering, sawing, measuring, and so forth. Each of these, involving as it does its own unification of activity toward a particular goal, can be considered an act in its own right. Fastening one board to another is a particular act, but so is driving in each of the nails used to secure that board; we may, if we choose, regard each blow on the head of a nail as itself a distinct act. But there is a limit below which acts may not be further analyzed into constituent acts. We would not, for example, regard the movement of the hammer through each separate inch of the path toward the head of the nail as a distinct act; such fractions of activity in which no end, not even a subordinate one, is attained, though essential constituents of the act of hitting the nail, are not themselves acts. To be regarded as an act, the movement must realize some posited objective, however slight or unimpressive, such as striking the nail. The same sort of rule governs the upper limit of the size and inclusiveness of an act as the lower: so long as the subacts are bound together into a single overall teleological unity, we may speak of them as one act. Thus, building a house is a particular act, but it may be viewed as part of the larger act (if done with this larger end in view) of establishing a village or even founding a nation. Moreover, several individuals, or even groups, can participate in the same act if their activity is ordered toward a common end (cf. an “act of Congress”). We would
be hesitant, however, about describing the complicated and long historical process of, for example, the rise of science as an act. This is not because of its complexity per se, but because the many constituent events of this development can hardly be conceived as ordered toward and controlled by some definite end posited by some particular individual or group: it is difficult to see this process as an act performed by an agent (even a collective agent). Although many acts doubtless contributed to this development, the peculiar kind of unity to which the term "act" points does not characterize the process as a whole.

An "act of God," now, in the literal meaning of the phrase, would be a deed performed by God, an event that did not simply "happen," but that was what it was because God did it. Certainly this is the picture of the "mighty acts of God" found in scripture. Here God does things just as do men: he enters into battle, he makes covenants with his people, he builds and destroys cities and nations, he cares for the poor and helpless and brings to judgment the wicked, he comforts the afflicted, he causes the sun to shine and the rain to fall, he brings plagues and destruction but also healing and well-being, he has created this very world in which we find ourselves, and he will yet create new heavens and a new earth. Each of these is a particular act done by God either simply on his own initiative to further his ends or in response to something done by men.

It may be supposed that the difficulty we moderns feel with such talk of God's acts arises simply and entirely from our unwillingness or inability to think in terms of supernatural causes of historical events. And thus, on the one hand, traditionalists may declaim in the name of faith against what they regard as modern unbelief, while, on the other, secularists will laugh at the naïveté of those who suppose God really does something. These contrary positions both arise from the common assumption that an act of God is to be thought of as a particular miraculous event that God directly causes, and as long as this conception is left undisturbed, the impasse cannot be resolved. In order to do so, it will be necessary both to analyze with more subtlety certain roots of the modern difficulties with the notion of God's acts and also to elaborate more fully some of the implications of the previous analysis of an act for the notion of God's act.
The modern difficulties here do not arise exclusively, as is often supposed, from our unwillingness to believe in some transcendent cause of events; they arise quite as much from our inability to conceive these events themselves, in view of the way in which we (necessarily?) conceive nature and history. In this paper I shall confine myself largely to the second problem, leaving questions about the mode of God's causal impingement on the world for treatment elsewhere. 10

According to the modern view, events are not conceived as individual atoms that are more or less independent of the natural and historical context or web within which they fall. All events are so interrelated and interconnected in many complex ways that to think or to describe any particular event always involves us in reference to those events which preceded it as necessary conditions for its occurring, to those events which surround it and thus specify it by both defining its boundaries or limits and providing the context within which it falls and the background against which it is perceived and known, and to those ever widening circles of events which it will condition and shape in a variety of ways. One of the greatest of Kant's achievements in the first Critique was his demonstration that we not only think in terms of such an interconnected and unified web of events, but that such a unified whole is a necessary condition for having experience at all; that is, it would not even be possible to experience totally isolated and unconnected particulars. The success of modern natural science in describing, predicting, and in some measure controlling events in the natural order is due precisely to the discovery of ways to discern and formulate fundamental structural regularities obtaining between events (laws of nature), but this growing success makes it increasingly difficult even to conceive what an event occurring somehow independently of this web might be.11 A similar development has occurred in historical work. The great achievement of modern history is its success in developing methods of analysis, criticism, and evaluation of the "sources" with which the historian works, methods that enable the historian to give a wholly satisfactory and convincing interpretation of the order and character of the events with which he is dealing without reference to anything beyond the historical process and its natural context. The presupposition of modern historical understanding (as of scientific knowledge) is that each new event emerges out of, and can and must be understood in relationship to, the historical context in which
it appears. Though the event may qualify and transform the future course of that history in significant ways, it never appears within the historical process as an inexplicable bolt from the blue. When a historian has to deal with remains so fragmentary that he is unable to propose a hypothesis about their proper place in the continuing movement of history, he never assumes this was because of some supernatural origin, to do so would imply a conception of breaks in the historical process that would vitiate even the possibility of knowledge of the past. His conclusion (rightly) is that we simply do not have sufficient evidence to say what happened here. But there is no question in his mind (or ours) that if we did have the requisite evidence, we would be able to understand in intrahistorical terms the events in question. Not only is secular history written in terms of such assumptions, the whole enterprise of modern biblical criticism and interpretation proceeds (quite properly) on the same basis. Without such assumptions about the continuity of the historical process, the analogy of preceding events and periods with our own (secular) experience, and the necessity of criticism of documents, it would not even be possible to think what a historical event is, as Ernst Troeltsch long ago clearly perceived.

It should not be supposed that this modern conception of nature and history as a web of interrelated events that must be understood as a self-contained whole is a somewhat arbitrary move, that we could just as well, if we pleased, go back to earlier notions of a much looser weave in the nature of things such that occasionally events without finite cause might appear. The development toward the modern conception was a necessary and natural one fostered by an increasing awareness of the conditions of knowledge and experience, and the tremendous growth of modern scientific and historical knowledge is both its consequence and confirmation. Nor should it be supposed that the discovery of certain indeterminacies on the microatomic level opens the door once again to the older conception. I have not been arguing for a (quasi-mechanical) determinism of all events by their antecedents, but rather that the modern pursuit of knowledge presupposes the interrelation and interconnection of all events in an unbroken web. That there may be some measure of "play" or indeterminacy on the atomic level, and that there is genuine creativity and self-determination on the human level, I am quite prepared not only to admit but to argue. But this indeterminacy and this freedom occur within and are continuous with contexts such that statistical descriptions can always
be made and are usually quite precise, and (in the case of human actions) understanding in strictly human terms is demanded. My point is that it is precisely the gradually developing awareness of the interconnected web of events which has made possible the high-level description and understanding characteristic of modern science and history. Therefore, it is no longer possible for us to think (when we think clearly and consistently) of individual or particular events somehow by themselves: every event is defined as a focal point in a web that reaches in all directions beyond it indefinitely. It is never grasped (in our modern experience) as an independent substance that can exist and be thought by itself alone.

This being the case, we can see why we have great difficulty with the traditional notion of "act of God." This phrase seems to refer to events that have their source or cause directly or immediately in the divine will and action rather than in the context of preceding and coincident finite events: indeed, the finite nexus apparently need not be thought as conditioning the newly injected event in any significant way, though a chain of consequences within the finite order presumably ensues from it. Acts of God in this sense, seen from man's side, are absolute beginning points for chains of events that occur—not at the "beginning" of the world and history—but within ongoing natural and historical processes. It might be supposed this could be made intelligible by viewing the movement through time of nature and history under the metaphor, for example, of a flowing river, with new streams (acts of God) from time to time emptying into the onward flow, thus becoming part of the cumulating rush of waters; but here also, we must remember, such streams can always be traced by a recursive movement to their (finite) sources somewhere back in the hills, precisely what this notion of God's acts renders impossible. I want to emphasize that the problem we are considering does not arise in the first instance out of difficulties connected with conceiving a transcendent agent; it is rather the difficulty—even impossibility—of conceiving the finite event itself which is here supposed to be God's act. That is, the problem is not that such acts invoke a no longer believable mythology of some being beyond this world (however serious that problem may itself be); it is rather that what is said to happen in this world, in our experience, is not intelligible. An "event" without finite antecedents is no event at all and cannot be clearly conceived; "experience" with tears and breaks destroying its continuity and unity could not even be experienced. It is incorrect
to suppose, then, that all that is required here is a reformulation of our categories so as to make room for an occasional act of God; the problem is that certain logical preconditions of connection, continuity and unity must obtain if there is to be any experience at all (Kant), and precisely these conditions are contradicted by the notion of particular "acts of God" being performed from time to time in history and nature. Or, to put the matter in a somewhat different way: it is impossible to conceive such an act either as a natural event or as a historical event, as occurring either within nature or history: in short, it is impossible to conceive it as any kind of event (in the finite order) at all. Our experience is of a unified and orderly world; in such a world acts of God (in the traditional sense) are not merely improbable or difficult to believe: they are literally inconceivable. It is not a question of whether talk about such acts is true or false; it is, in the literal sense, meaningless; one cannot make the concept hang together consistently.

IV

Having noted certain difficulties for the modern consciousness with the notion that God performs particular more or less individual acts in history, let us return to the earlier analysis of act to see whether there are possibilities of reformulation. I will be able to present here only in brief outline a way to conceive God's act in analogy with human acts and yet consistently with the requirements of modern scientific and historical work; many important details, relating both to the (analogical) concept of God as Agent and his mode of affecting finite processes, remain to be worked out. However, if the proposed reconstruction is successful, the (analogical) concept of God's act can be utilized as the fundamental metaphysical category for interpreting his relation to finite reality, that is, as the form of all his diverse relations to the world, the schema that gives them intelligible unity. If we are going to understand the fullness and diversity of creation in its manifold relations to the one God, we must have a concept that is at once general enough to cover the infinite complexity and many-sidedness of those relations and still gives them a sufficiently unified form to be intelligible. I suggest that the notion of act, having the specificity of referring immediately to an agent and yet the generality of comprehending all the relations into which an agent can enter, can provide the basis for developing an analogical concept appropriate to perform this function.
Two points particularly must be recalled from the earlier dis-
cussion. First, comprehensive or complex acts may be analyzed or
broken down into constituent elements and sub-elements, some of
which are themselves simpler acts, some biological or physical pro-
cesses or motions: or, stated conversely, simple or particular acts
are often phases of overarching complex acts—we will call these
"master acts"—which unify and order various sorts of behavior and
otherwise disconnected stretches of time. Second, that which makes
an act an act is the deliberate ordering of behavior toward the
realization of a previously posited end. I want to argue now that
the customary interpretation of certain relatively restricted events
—the crossing of the Red Sea, the dispersing of the hosts of Sen-
acherib, the virgin birth or resurrection of Jesus—as particular
acts of God is too simple. For it overlooks the significance of
the relation of "simple acts" to "master acts."

It is the master act, rather than each simple act taken by
itself, that renders any given piece of activity intelligible.
Simple acts, being constituent phases of a complex act, are always
secondary and derivative, for they are not performed simply for the
sake of their own end but rather as a step toward the master end:
the nail is not hammered simply to get it into the board (that is
a subordinate objective) but in order to build the house. Doubtless
certain subordinate acts must be performed in order to complete
the complex act, but they have their purpose and gain their char-
acter from the latter, and we can be said to "understand" them only
when we see them in the light of the master end. Thus, we do not
find it particularly illuminating to say simply, "The carpenter is
driving nails," for that in itself is hardly meaningful activity:
rather, it is when we see that the carpenter is nailing together
boards in order to construct a house that we understand what he is
doing.

If we are to understand properly the phrase "act of God," then,
we should use it first of all to designate the master act in which
God is engaged, not the particular and relatively limited events
that might first attract our attention. The latter must be regarded
as secondary and derivative, to be grasped and interpreted in the
light of God's master end, not in their own terms. This means for
a monotheistic theology that it is the whole course of history,
from its initiation in God's creative activity to its consummation
when God ultimately achieves his purposes, that should be conceived
as God's act in the primary sense. In the biblical documents God
is not portrayed as one who performs relatively disconnected and
unrelated acts that lead in no particular direction or toward no definite goal; he is one who planned "the end from the beginning" (Isa. 46:10), and his activity throughout history is ordered toward his ultimate goal, the final establishment of that "kingdom which has been destined for [his creatures] from the creation of the world" (Matt. 25:34 Goodspeed). Even the appearance of Jesus Christ far down the course of history "was destined before the foundation of the world" (1 Pet. 1:20), and what he brought into history is to be understood as but a foretaste of the final glorious consummation. The movement of history as portrayed in the Bible is no mere succession of events--not even a succession of "acts of God"--leading to no clear goal or end: from its beginning and throughout, it is given shape and direction by the ultimate objective that God is bringing to pass. Since, as we observed previously, activity proceeding from a single agent and ordered toward a single end, no matter how complex, is properly to be regarded as one act, this whole complicated and intricate teleological movement of all nature and history should be regarded as a single all-encompassing act of God, providing the context and meaning of all that occurs. It is, of course, an act that has not yet run its course, an act that will not be finished until the eschaton.

This conception of God's master act does not encounter the same difficulties with the modern presuppositions about the unity and structure of nature and history as did the notion of various relatively independent act-events. For here God's act is not a new event that suddenly and without adequate prior conditions rips inexplicably into the fabric of experience, a notion consistent neither with itself nor with the regularity and order that experience must have if it is to be cognizable. Rather, here God's act is viewed as the source of precisely that overarching order itself: it is God's master act that gives the world the structure it has and gives natural and historical processes their direction. Speaking of God's act in this sense in no way threatens the unity and order of the world as a whole.  

It is meaningful to regard the fundamental structures of nature and history as grounded in an act (of God), however, only if we are able to think of them as developing in time. An act is intrinsically temporal: it is the ordering of a succession of events toward an end. If we could not think of the universe as somehow developing in unidirectional fashion in and through temporal processes, it would be mere poetry to speak of God's act. For this reason, prior to the late nineteenth and early twentieth
centuries, while a static-structural view of nature prevailed, it was very difficult to think of nature as ordered by God's act in any further sense than being created (and sustained) by him. But a scientific revolution occurred in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: geologists began to see the earth not as a more or less static given, but as having a history through which it developed during many ages to its present form; biologists came to see life not merely as a structure of species, but as a unitary evolutionary process in continuous development from lower forms to highly complex ones; and astronomers even discovered that the supposedly eternally stable heavens actually manifested a continuously expanding movement through billions of years, seeming to go back to some primeval originating "explosion." In short, scientists came to think of nature, in all her levels and forms, as in historical process, as moving and developing and evolving in time. Thus, to conceive the whole cosmic movement as comprehended within a single "act" through which God is achieving some ultimate purpose is consistent with the modern understanding of nature as in process of evolutionary development.17

It will be objected immediately that science finds no evidence of teleological or purposed order in this movement, that the most one can observe is simply a kind of natural evolution. With this I will not quibble: I am not claiming that the cosmic process provides evidence for believing in a God active through it; I am claiming merely that the evolutionary picture of nature and life currently painted in our scientific knowledge is not inconsistent with such belief. The purpose that informs an act is an interior connection between the various phases of events known to the agent who is performing it, and it is seldom directly visible to external observers, especially to those who can see only a tiny fraction of the total act in question. If God is acting through the process of nature's development over billions of years to accomplish some ultimate objective, this would hardly be apparent in the observations of lowly men, with a life-span of a mere three score years and ten and careful scientific observations and records going back at most only a few hundred years. To use a geometrical figure: one could hardly expect man to discern the teleological curvature of the movement of world history as a whole when he has accessible to his direct inspection scarcely more than an infinitesimal arc of that curve. Such teleological activity by a cosmic agent could be known only if he should in some way choose to reveal it to his creatures.18
Thus, to conceive the entire movement of nature and history as the expression of one overarching act of God is consistent both with the meaning of the term "act" and with the modern understanding of the cosmos as in evolutionary development. True, no evidence has been offered here to sustain such a view of an ultimate teleology working in nature, and I do not propose in this paper to offer any. That would involve us in an examination of the psychological, historical, and logical grounds for belief in God, and it would require sketching out doctrines of God and of revelation. In short, it would lead far beyond the scope of the present inquiry.

We are concerned here with the very restricted objective of clarifying and reinterpretting the notion of God's act in such a way that it will be intelligible in the light of current scientific and historical assumptions about the interconnectedness of all events. Unless this can be done, all speech about God as "Lord" of the world, as providentially guiding history, as loving and merciful father of mankind, as active agent in any significant sense at all—speech that is essential for Christian and Jewish faith—is hollow and empty, whatever be one's grounds for believing in God. Both the present sort of analysis (dealing with God's relation to the world) and exploration of the wider question of the grounds for speaking of God at all will be required if the highly problematic status that all such talk presently has is to be overcome.

V

Having proposed an interpretation of "act of God" in its primary and widest meaning, as designating the overall movement of nature and history toward God's ultimate goal, I must return in conclusion to the more customary understanding of the phrase as referring to particular events in which God does something "unusual" or "special" in history. Is this ordinary meaning of the phrase to be ignored or dispensed with entirely? Is it not such particular acts in which faith believes and for which prayer cries rather than a cosmological overview? Have we not so transformed—and, some might say, "watered down"—the meaning of God's activity as to render it religiously irrelevant or empty?

To these questions two remarks may be addressed. (1) The question whether the phrase "act of God" can have any referential meaning at all is primarily intellectual or theoretical. In saying this I do not mean to ignore or disparage religious or existential aspects of this problem, for they are also there, but the principal difficulty here is that our understanding of the world, of
experience, of history, has become such that there seems no way to conceive or imagine cosmic purposive activity working in events. That is, it is the theory informing all our experience and thought that appears radically inconsistent with that older personalistic (or anthropomorphic) theory of the world, which everywhere informs the biblical literature and our most fundamental theological conceptions. Unless this problem of theory, of conceptualization, of the basic categories of experience can be resolved, we are condemned either to live in an intolerable tension between our religious language and life and the rest of experience—a tension always threatening to disintegrate and destroy both the self and its faith—or to give up Christian faith and talk as outmoded and no longer relevant to the actual structures of our lives and world. It is a problem in theory, then, that we must address here, and it should not be surprising if the treatment of that problem will be, in the first instance, theoretical. We must find some way to think about the world once again with the categories of act and purpose if we wish to continue using these categories to speak of God and his relations to men. I freely admit, therefore, that I am proposing here a rather theoretical understanding of the notion of God's act.

The principal point I have tried to emphasize in this paper is that it is no longer possible for us to view the events in nature and history as relatively independent occurrences, each to be perceived and interpreted more or less in its own terms; for us the world has become a unified whole such that particular events are always experienced and understood in terms of their structural connections with the rest of experience, as described and clarified by scientist and historian. The order or structure of the whole thus has a kind of precedence, with us, over any particular happening, and we are inclined to discount even our own immediate experience—for example, to regard it as hallucinatory—if it cannot be understood in terms of that underlying and omnipresent order. In the more loosely textured world of earlier generations particular "acts of God" could be experienced and accepted more or less in their own terms, no matter how extraordinary they might appear, for who could say what character a new event might have? In our tightly structured world it is necessary to find place for God's activity in the fundamental order of things before it is even possible to speak meaningfully of his acting in particular events, for the conception of the latter and the very criteria with the aid of which we perceive and interpret them is derivative from and dependent upon our understanding of the basic order. Hence, if we are to
speak of particular acts of God at all, we must first learn to speak of his act in and through the structure and movement of the whole. It is precisely a way of conceiving that act which is proposed in this paper.

(2) This proposal of theory, however, opens up once again a way to understand the notion of particular acts of God of more limited scope. These are not to be regarded (as in the traditional mythology) as more or less impulsive decisions in which God does something in history in quite unexpected and inexplicable fashion: they should be understood (quite consistently with the eschatological orientation of much biblical, and all New Testament, thought) as functions of and subordinate steps toward God's ultimate goal. The master act of God (which he has not yet completed) is the temporal movement of all nature and history toward the realization of his original intention in creation. This complex act comprises many events and processes of all sorts as its constituent phases and elements. Some of these, themselves teleologically ordered toward certain subordinate ends or goals which are necessary steps toward the master end, may quite properly be regarded as (subordinate) acts or subacts performed by God as he works out his purpose.

Assuming (on the basis of Christian claims) that God has revealed something of his purposes for man and the world, one finds it possible to discern, with the help of modern knowledge of nature and history, some of the stages (subacts) through which the created order has moved as God has gradually been performing his master act. The creation of the solar system, the emergence of life on earth, the evolution of higher forms of life and finally man--each of these (as well as many other natural processes and events) represents an indispensable step toward the realization of God's ultimate objectives for creation. Furthermore, the crucial phases of the actual movement of human history, and the emergence of Heils-geschichte within that history, can be regarded as further subordinate acts of God: the beginnings of agriculture and later of civilization, the development of increasingly complex and interdependent modes of social, political, and economic organization making possible differentiation and specialization in socio-cultural life, the emergence of primitive religious cultus and conceptions (especially in the Near East) providing a background against which faith in Yahweh could appear. Specific events of quite limited scope such as the remarkable escape of a few Hebrew tribes from Egyptian slavery, the creation of the Israelite kingdom under Saul and David, and the later exile and return of the inhabitants of Judah are acts
through which God moved human history and consciousness toward a fuller awareness of who he is and what his purposes for creation are. Within this sequence, the ministry and death of Jesus Christ can quite properly be understood as the supreme act through which God at once made himself known to man and began a radical transformation of man according to his ultimate purposes for man. Events in other cultural histories and the more recent events in Western history may all be seen in this way as governed or guided by the activity through which God is moving the whole of creation toward the eschaton, as subordinate acts within God’s master act. Thus, the whole course of history (including the history of nature and the evolution of life) can be apprehended once again as under God’s providential control.

This does not mean, of course, that every natural or historical event need be or should be regarded as a distinct subact of God: only those events which move the creation forward a further step toward the realization of God’s purposes could properly be so designated. There are many natural processes, for example, which, though originally set in motion by God’s creative activity, now function as fundamental rhythms or orders that support and sustain the more complex processes of the teleological movement, thus giving the world a certain constancy and structure. It would hardly be appropriate to regard the continuing steady functioning of such processes as new “acts of God”; they are, rather, the product of his earlier (creative) work, still sustained by him no doubt, but now serving as the (relatively completed) foundation on which he can build as yet unrealized superstructures. Furthermore, when certain finite processes evolved through the various stages of life to the level of conscious and free behavior, the purposive activity of finite agents began to appear within the historical process. Inasmuch as these acts in and of themselves, even though teleological in form, had (and have) their sources and goals within the finite order itself, they are not necessarily to be considered as direct subacts of God. Indeed, they could and often did (and do) go counter to God’s purposes and acts, as with man’s falling into cumulating patterns of sin. On the Christian view, perhaps only once in history—the march of Jesus to the cross—has there been a direct one-to-one correspondence and coincidence of human activity with divine. Only those natural and historical events which directly advance God’s ultimate purposes—those which are essential constituent phases or steps of God’s master act—may properly be regarded as (subordinate) acts of God within nature and history.
This understanding of God's subordinate acts does not in any way undermine or threaten the unified and structural character of experience, or the methods or conclusions of science and history. For between particular events and overarching structures and continuities, the same formal relationship obtains in the theological interpretation as in that of modern history or science: in all these cases the particular is seen in the context of, or as a phase of, a more comprehensive whole. Of course, the theological view posits a teleological movement in that whole which is not discernible to the naked scientific eye, but this eschatological goal in which faith believes does not itself disclose to faith the complex of particular historical steps through which God must move to achieve his end: man becomes aware of these only a posteriori, as creation gradually moves onward through its historical course and man learns to discern the several phases of that movement in his science and history. There is here, then, place both for the most rigorous application of scientific and historical methods to the analysis and interpretation of (past) experience and also for faith that the temporal movement of the whole, including the particular developments of our individual lives, is under God's providential care.

It must be admitted that the doctrine of providence here entailed is more austere than the pietistic views often found in Christian circles. God's subordinate acts here are governed largely by his overarching purposes and ultimate objectives, not simply by the immediate needs or the prayerful pleas of his children. This is no God who "walks with me and talks with me" in close interpersonal communion, giving his full attention to my complaints, miraculously extracting me from difficulties into which I have gotten myself by invading nature and history with ad hoc rescue operations from on high. This is the Lord of heaven and earth, whose purposes we cannot fully fathom and whose ways are past finding out (Rom. 11:33). "It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers" (Isa. 40:22). His thoughts are not ours, and our ways are not his (Isa. 55:8). He has brought this world into being for his own reasons, he is moving it through a history in accordance with his own objectives, and he shall accomplish his purposes when the eschaton comes. Doubtless we men, both as species and individuals, have place within those purposes, and certain of his subacts are responsive to our acts; in this we can rejoice, finding meaning for our lives and comfort for our souls. But the place we have is his to determine and assign, not ours; at the very most our lives are but almost infinitesimal constituents in his
all-comprehending act, and his responsiveness to the particular-
ities of our activity must be understood as a function and phase
of his master act ordering all human and cosmic history. Though
faith grounded on the conviction that in Christ God has disclosed
his true will and nature may trust confidently until the end that
he will deal with us justly and with love, we should hardly expect
that he can or will bend his cosmic activity much to meet our pri-
ivate and peculiar needs or wishes. Indeed, it is precisely this
steadfastness in his own purposes that makes him the faithful God:
who could entrust himself to one who changed course with every turn
in the breeze?

Christian piety has too long been nurtured largely on those
psalms and other biblical materials which portray God as a kind of
genie who will extricate the faithful from the difficulties into
which they fall; it is this erratic and fickle God who cannot be
reconciled with the modern understanding of the order in nature and
history. Far better would it be to nourish our piety on the para-
digmatic Christian story: a man praying that this cup might pass
from him, but submitting his will to God’s, no matter what the con-
sequences; that prayer answered not with legions of angels to rescue
him but with lonely suffering on a cross, culminating in a cry of
despair before the moment of death—and then a resurrection of new
life, new faith, new hope, new love, in a new community born after
his death. The God who works in this fashion to turn the darkest
despairs and defeats into further steps toward the realization of
his beneficent ultimate objectives, without violently ripping into
the fabric of history or arbitrarily upsetting the momentum of its
powers, is one who can also be conceived as working within and
through the closely textured natural and historical processes Of
our modern experience: he is a God who acts, a living God, the
adequate object for a profound faith, and his action is not com-
pletely unintelligible to a mind instructed and informed by modern
science and history.

NOTES

2 See the well-known book of that title by G. Ernest Wright
3 It should be recalled here that according to his own testimony
in the first Critique Kant had "found it necessary to deny
knowledge, in order to make room for faith" (B xxx [Kemp Smith trans.] (New York: Macmillian, 1929); cf. B xxivff.).

There are, of course, many other contributing factors to contemporary unbelief, such as the experience of massive evil in our time. But the problems with which we are concerned in this paper have a certain logical, if not existential, priority over such difficulties.


When "act"-language is used in this way to interpret ultimate reality, freedom and creativity are given significant place on the metaphysical ground floor, in contrast with cosmologies that make either causal or teleological order (or some form of chance or indeterminism) fundamental. Thus, such a position can provide a metaphysical grounding for human freedom and creativity which is simply unavailable to other cosmological or theological positions.

The notion of an act is really much more complex than can here be described. (See A. R. White, "Introduction," in The Philosophy of Action [London: Oxford University Press, 1968], for an outline of this complexity. Other essays in this volume, as well as those cited in Chapter 8, note 8, should also be consulted.) I have attempted here only to point to dimensions that may help to clarify the notion of "act of God."

We can still sense something of this meaning even in the conventional or legal usage of the phrase to designate a terrible catastrophe—such as being struck by lightning or destroyed by storm—although such events are now understood to be due entirely to impersonal natural causes: their unexpectedness, man's powerlessness before them, their terrifying impact on human affairs may still evoke some sense of a powerful and inscrutable will working its way through the events of nature.

It may be observed here that though Aquinas worked out an elaborate doctrine of "second causes" which he held were the usual media of God's work, he maintained that God could and sometimes did work directly and immediately, and this possibility was regarded by him as theologically indispensible (Summa Theologica, I, Q 105), as indeed it is if one works with a theory of second causes like that of Thomas. But it is precisely this way of conceiving God's direct and immediate action in particular events that is no longer plausible or intelligible.

Though I would not be inclined simply to adopt A. N. Whitehead's or Charles Hartshorne's organismic models for rendering intelligible God's impingement on the world, certainly much is to be learned from their careful and detailed treatments of this matter. The principal difficulty with them, it seems to me, is that God's effective initiative and autonomous agency are rendered highly problematical, and I am concerned to keep these at the very center. (As suggested on pp. 158-159 below, I am now quite doubtful that it is logically consistent with the meaning of "God" to speculate on the means or modes of his direct impingement on the world.)

For example, is it even possible, any more, to think clearly what is meant by the "virgin birth"? It might be supposed that
this idea is clear enough: it involves conception without the activity of a male partner. But how are we to think of such conception? Are we to suppose that at some point a male sperm appeared within Mary's womb, there fertilizing an egg? If so, how are we to think of this? Were the requisite number of atoms and molecules created instantaneously and out of nothing within Mary's body and somehow infused with life? How is it possible to conceive this in view of the assumptions (indispensable to science) about the conservation of mass-energy, and of the slow evolution of life? If we do not suppose a male sperm was somehow created in Mary's womb, do we think of this conception as without benefit of fertilization at all? Or did the egg fertilize itself? I am far from contending that any or all of these questions can be or need be answered: my point is that the way we have come to think of conception and birth under the tutelage of modern biology makes it inevitable that such questions will arise. For we cannot clearly think (though we can, perhaps, imagine) what an event without prior finite causes and conditions would be (and in many cases, as in conception, we know much about what these essential conditions are), and so, no matter at what point in the process of conception and birth we begin, we inevitably and necessarily inquire about the antecedent conditions. The very definition or concept of event implies for us such connection with indispensable antecedent (finite) conditions, and it is no longer possible for us to think an "event" as simply supernaturally caused. That is, for us all chains of events, such as the growth of the boy Jesus, presuppose preceding chains of events, and these in turn presuppose other chains: and this continuous recursive movement may not be halted simply arbitrarily. The question, then, is whether it is even possible to conceive clearly the idea of a supernaturally caused event, or (what is the same thing) the occurrence of a finite event without adequate finite causes, or whether such notion is not quite as self-contradictory as the notion of a square-circle. Cf. Schleiermacher: "every absolute miracle would destroy the whole system of nature... Since... that which would have happened by reason of the totality of finite causes in accordance with the natural order does not happen, an effect has been hindered from happening, and certainly not through the influence of other normally counteracting finite causes given in the natural order, but in spite of the fact that all active causes are combining to produce that very effect. Everything, therefore, which had ever contributed to this will, to a certain degree, be annihilated, and instead of introducing a single supernatural power into the system of nature as we intended, we must completely abrogate the conception of nature" (The Christian Faith [Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1928], §47, 2).

12 A good recent analysis that shows clearly why this must be the case, as well as how theologians and biblical historians have often sought to evade the full implications of this matter, will be found in Van A. Harvey, The Historian and the Believer (New York: Macmillan, 1966).


14 It is, of course, A. N. Whitehead who has worked out most fully both the necessity of conceiving events in this way and also the full cosmological implications of such a conception. (See, e.g., Science and the Modern World [New York: Macmillan, 1925], esp. Chap. 7; and the doctrine of "actual occasions" in Process and Reality [New York: Macmillan, 1929].) One may learn much from
Whitehead's ontological and cosmological analysis and construction even though one does not wish to commit oneself to his theology.

For some suggestion of my way of treating some, though by no means all of the problems connected with conceiving God as Agent, see my two papers on personalistic conception of divine transcendence ("Two Models of Transcendence," and "Transcendence without Mythology") [and also Chapters 7 and 8 of the present volume]. Much remains to be done, however, especially on the problem of conceiving God as effecting his purposes within and for history. Resolution of this issue will depend in part on the success with which one is able to conceive how a human agent effects purposes, and then drawing out the analogy to interpret the divine activity. [See addition to note 10, above.]

John Macmurray even argues that the "only way" in which we can conceive the world as a unified whole is by thinking it as "one action" (The Self as Agent [London: Faber and Faber, 1957], p. 204). For if the overarching unity of the world were conceived simply in terms, for example, of the category process, it would be "a world in which nothing is ever done: in which everything simply happens; a world, then, in which everything is matter of fact and nothing is ever intended. We should have to assert, in that case, that there are no actions: that what seem such are really events" (p. 219). That is, the concept of process cannot comprise the unity of the entire world because it cannot contain our own actions as part of that overall unity.

It is not consistent, of course, with the assumption that nature is not grounded in anything beyond herself, but that is a different point from the one I am making in this paper, one deserving full discussion in its own right, though it cannot be pursued here.

I cannot here go into the complicated question of whether God has revealed himself, and, if so, how this is to be understood. [See Chapter 7, below.] Suffice it to recall that precisely this is the Christian claim: the knowledge of God and of his purposive activity in and for the world is not attained primarily through observation of nature but rather through his self-disclosure. "For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph. 1:9-10).

[A much fuller treatment of this history of God's activity will be found in my Systematic Theology (New York: Scribner's, 1968), Pts. II and III. Further elaboration of certain features of it also appears in the present volume, Chapters 7 and 8.]

It will be evident from this description that God's act must be conceived under only one image of activity, such as the carpenter making a table or the farmer cultivating a field or the parent educating his child. Within the schema of God's act we are including: first, his creation and maintenance of the material orders of nature, and also his ordering them in such a way that life can emerge from them; second, his creation of life and his ordering it through an evolutionary process in which higher and more complex forms gradually emerge from lower and simpler forms, ultimately producing self-conscious life; and third, his creation of the culture-producing being, man, his guidance of man's
historical development so as to make possible the emergence of a genuinely free and responsible being, and his dealing with free (and sinful) man in such a way as to redeem him from his self-imposed bondage and enable him to become what had been originally intended. Obviously the forms of "act" appropriate to all the diverse forms of finite being here represented--ranging from bare matter to free spirits--and appropriate to the objectives God is seeking to accomplish with each will be quite various, and it would be a gross error in our theological construction if we attempted to assimilate them all to one form of (human) act, for example, that of man the maker. It is essential that we develop our analogies from the full range of human activities if we are going to render God's relation to his world intelligible by means of the basic schema, act.

22 [It might be objected by some that this interpretation of God's act as including subacts actually performed by human agents requires us to think in terms of two agents for the same act, and this is at least paradoxical and quite possibly unintelligible (see Michael McLain, "On Theological Models," Harvard Theological Review, 62: 183 [1969]). I would point out, however, that whatever the difficulties confronting full philosophical conception of such a notion, it is clearly in accord with our ordinary speech about actions and deeds. For example, when we say, "Hitler killed six million Jews" (or "Christopher Wren built St. Paul's Cathedral" or "Columbus discovered America"), we do not mean he personally performed every murder; indeed, he may not have pulled the trigger on a single person. Nevertheless, we regard a large measure of the responsibility for this horrendous crime as his, and we clearly think of it as his deed, however much the acts and responsibility of other agents of lower rank were also involved.]