



## The Most Painful Difficulty

“If the creation is the work of love, then its shape cannot be predetermined by the Creator, nor its triumph foreknown: it is the realization of vision, but of vision which is discovered only through its own realization.”<sup>1</sup> . . .

This understanding can afford us some help with what is for theology the most painful of its difficulties . . . the problem of evil.<sup>2</sup>

Mankind is the only creature that believes it was made in the image of God, realizes it is alienated from God, and assumes it is destined for reunion with God. Thus, mankind has always exhibited the “rebellious refusal of creaturely status, the desire ‘to be like God’ (Genesis 3.5).”<sup>3</sup>

This has led mankind to reflect on what it means to be God. It is commonly assumed that God is ultimate immediacy or “oneness” — that God exists alone, requires nothing else, and excludes everything else. Furthermore, it is believed that this divine Oneness is uncreated and that God will always exist as uncreated Being. His “oneness” is therefore self-existent — before, apart from and beyond all “otherness.”

However, within the concept of divine “oneness” there are differing views:

1. Some identify divine “oneness” as all-embracing, so that there is only one “one.” The universe and everything within this holistic whole is itself God.

2. Others see divine “oneness” as the universal or cosmic spirit from which everything has emerged, within which it consists, and to which everything will return in cosmic immediacy. Cosmic spirit is therefore the unifying “oneness.”

3. Orthodox Christianity and various other religions view divine “oneness” as the final and irreducible sameness of the divine essence, substance or *ousia*. Despite its “oneness,” this universal, uncreated essence is paradoxically seen as a distributive “oneness” — that is, it can be distributed to created beings as the

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“divine spark” of “soul,” “spirit,” “mind,” “consciousness,” “reason,” “idea,” “wisdom,” “word” or “law.” However, as the ancient Egyptians first proposed, these distributed emanations ultimately return to cosmic “oneness.”

Thus, for thousands of years, mankind has fiercely held the conviction that God is self-existent “oneness” and that, since man was originally made in this divine image, he is destined to participate with God in divine, self-existent “oneness.”

## The Problem

However, the principle of self-existence bears fearful consequences:

1. The first consequence of self-existence is narcissistic isolation. Self-existent “oneness” requires nothing and no one else. It is unreceptive, unresponsive, impassible and immovable, excluding everything and everyone else. To demand self-existence is to demand to be alone. Thus, in the presence of an “other,” the inevitable result of the self-existent principle is cosmic capriciousness, catastrophe and destruction, displayed within nature; systemic or structural predation, manifested by all life; and immorality (selfishness, deceit, hatred), common to all mankind.<sup>4</sup> Immorality springs from the implicit or explicit rejection of “otherness.” It originates in the delusion of self-existence. How can I achieve self-existent “oneness” if I am threatened by your presence? I must therefore be a predator and get rid of you! So all immorality involves predation. And all predation involves the principle of self-existence.

2. The second consequence of self-existence is death. Self-existent “oneness” is never satisfied until all its rivals are exterminated. A prime example of this was Nazi Germany under Adolf Hitler. The Holocaust and its nearly six million victims reflect the ghastly horror of delusional self-existent “oneness.”<sup>5</sup> Yet self-existence is not satisfied with the death of “otherness.” Ultimately, as Martin Buber observed, the age-long passion for self-existence invariably ends in the deactualization of the self.<sup>6</sup> Self-existence always leads to non-existence of the self. Self-existence is self-destructive. It is suicidal.

3. The third consequence of self-existence is delusional self-deification. Since self-existence is determined not to be regarded as ultimate evil, it redefines itself. It masquerades as ultimate goodness, freedom and fulfillment, claiming final

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divinization. This is the deceptive fantasy of imagined self-existence.

If mankind's fascination with self-existence results in inhuman bondage to immorality, death and delusional self-deification, why are we so obsessed with "oneness"? Very simply, we imagine that God himself is final "oneness" and that we were made for this "oneness." We therefore intend to be like this God and to become this God.

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## The Solution

Can we derive any benefit from mankind's age-long fantasy of self-existence? The answer to this question is now beginning to emerge. Truth can only be understood over against its opposite — error. Good can only be defined over against evil, life against death, freedom against bondage. Light can only be seen in the face of darkness. The positive can only be grasped in relation to the negative. Health can only be recognized in contrast to disease. Happiness and joy can only be understood in the face of pain and suffering. Thus, our history of imagined self-existence, with its inevitable fruit of evil, nonexistence, and bondage to delusional self-deification, has prepared us to understand the opposite — relational co-existence, with its fruit of goodness, life, and the freedom to become true human beings.

Goodness and love are not self-existent. They are incompatible with the singularity of isolated "oneness." They cannot exist alone. Goodness and love only exist in the presence of relationship. They only exist with the plurality of relational "otherness." There is no love without someone to love. There is no goodness without the gift of goodness to others. Love and goodness demand what Martin Buber recognized as the "I-thou" relationship. And there is no "I" without an "other," no "you" without a "me."<sup>7</sup>

Then what do we mean when we say that God is love? We mean that God did not remain self-existent. We mean that God is not isolated "oneness." We mean that God does not exist alone. We mean that God is not God apart from relationship. We therefore mean that, from the very "beginning," God determined to abandon self-existence for relational co-existence. Furthermore, since love can only exist in relationship to an "other," the only way that the One God could express his love and achieve relationality was through Creation. Thus, in the "beginning" God determined to create a relational universe. It is well known by science that relationality is the foundation of the physical universe, the biological universe and the human

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universe. Time exists only in relationship to space. Matter exists only in relationship to energy. Life exists only in relationship to matter and energy, form and substance. Moreover, from the “beginning” God recognized that it was not good for man to exist alone (Genesis 2:18). Man does not exist without woman, nor woman without man. Likewise, it is time for us to recognize that God’s foundational purpose has been to enter into human relationship with the “other” of mankind and for the “other” of mankind to enter into human relationship with God (Ephesians 1:3-12). Humanity does not exist without God, and God will not exist without humanity.

The plurality of human individuality cannot exist in the singularity of “oneness.” It can only exist in relationship. And relationality — with its goal of reciprocal human relationship and consequent freedom from narcissistic evil, death and self-delusion — is the most fundamental truth of the universe, of all history, of all reality.

For thousands of years God has tried to educate us mortals to his loving purpose. He has permitted our imagined self-existence to run its course so that its fruit of death, masquerading delusions and all other evil might be discerned and finally rejected by humanity. Meanwhile, God instituted law as a hopeful means of restraining predation. Then he moved toward further relationality with mankind through covenantal agreement.

The purpose of covenant, in the Hebrew Bible . . . , was never simply that the creator wanted to have Israel as a special people, irrespective of the fate of the rest of the world. The purpose of the covenant was that, through this means, the Creator himself would address and save his entire world.<sup>8</sup>

Sadly, the world long ago renounced covenantal relationship and insisted on the delusion of self-existence. But then, in the fullness of time (Galatians 4:4), God manifested his love by adopting full relationality himself. God the Creator adopted the creature. God — Jehovah, YHWH — manifested himself as the man Jesus Christ.

Everything he [Paul] said about Jesus was, for him, a way of talking about God.<sup>9</sup>

Paul has now written a poem . . . [and] the central character is YHWH *now recognized* in the human face of Jesus.<sup>10</sup>

Paul saw the human Jesus as the revelation of the one God. It mattered to him that this human being Jesus *remained* human, now that he was enthroned as the Lord of the world.<sup>11</sup>

The Spirit [risen Lord] is not a being other than the one true God; to speak of God acting through his Spirit is to speak of God himself acting.<sup>12</sup>

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The one God, the creator, had now been made known in and as Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified and risen Messiah, the Lord of the world.<sup>13</sup>

In his own manhood God recapitulated or retraced the entire history of Creation. Throughout his earthly existence Jesus, the human manifestation of God, developed relationality with nature, with life, with all mankind. Finally, at Calvary, he cried, “It is finished!” (John 19:30). Jesus thus pronounced the end of the old history — the end of death, non-existence, narcissistic evil, and the delusion of self-existent deity. By his triumphal death Jesus reconciled the world unto himself (Romans 5:10; 2 Corinthians 5:18, 19).

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“Reconciliation” or “atonement” has profound meaning for us today. The Greek word for these terms is *katallage*. *Katallage* means “a becoming other.”<sup>14</sup> God is not self-existent Being for himself. He is Becoming. He is for the “other.” That is why God is good. That is why God is love. Love is fulfilled in reaching out in atonement and reconciliation — in “becoming other.”

## Conclusion

1. In the Christ event we have already arrived at the apocalypse — the end of (the old) history:

Jews and early Christians . . . used “end-of-the-world” language to invest major and cataclysmic events within history with their . . . belief that history was going to reach, or perhaps that it had just reached, its great climax, its turning point . . . sometimes referred to as “apocalyptic” . . .<sup>15</sup>

The Christ event was the end of delusional self-existence. Two thousand years later we are just beginning to realize the significance of that beginning (protological) and ending (eschatological) event.

2. By abandoning self-existence for relational co-existence, God has declared his own relationality. His existence is not grounded in the singularity of “oneness” but in a plurality, which embraces “otherness.” Now, at the end of the age, there is a dawning awareness that God has reconciled the world to himself by “becoming other.” God is irrevocably related to Creation, and Creation is irrevocably related to the Creator. God has assumed our earthly nature. He has recapitulated the history of that nature as the Adamic man. And in his resurrection God manifested full Adamic humanity.

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3. The Christ event is therefore the definitive disclosure of love and the definitive disclosure of evil. It is the definitive disclosure of a common past,

grounded in self-existence with its inevitable consequence of evil in the presence of an “other.” It also is the definitive disclosure of a common future, grounded in human co-existence and its consummate love.

4. In divine love God longs to redemptively and creatively move us from predatory animality to Adamic manhood (male and female). He longs to exalt us to full resurrectional humanity at his imminent appearing (1 John 3:2).

The Human Creator and the human creature have already been reconciled through Jesus Christ. The future has already been disclosed. Soon we shall be relationally united — everyone for and with the “other” — for an eternity of fellowship, loving commitment and creative enterprise. Soon “the most painful difficulty” will be seen as a most enduring “surety.”

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## References

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