Preface

Philip Clayton, contemporary philosopher and theologian of science, claims "theologians have so far paid scant attention to what it means to speak of a divine agent."[1] This does not mean that theologians have not tried to make sense of the notion of divine agency, but the notion of God as an agent who actually acts in the world has had a checkered career. It is a view of God (some would say a rather naïve one) that is clearly implied in the sacred scriptures of the Abrahamic religions: throughout their pages, God is depicted as a personal agent whose actions (ranging from the creation of the universe to its redemption and including many discrete actions in its history) are scattered throughout history and nature. But the notion of God as *someone* who actually acted *in the world* (as distinct from simply having brought the world into being) was subjected to severe criticism with the rise of modern science after the Enlightenment because there was no place in its explanations of happenings in the world for the "intrusions" of a divine supernatural agent in what was otherwise assumed to be a "closed" causal nexus of intramundane happenings. The death of the notion of God as an agent also came about at the hands of many theologians themselves, who could see no future for an idea that not only conflicted with the causal explanations of science but also threatened to obscure the profound and incomprehensible mystery that, for religious purposes, God was assumed to be. By eliminating the notion of God as a "real" agent (except in a metaphorical or poetic sense), theology could avoid being demoted to the level of psychological fantasy. The mystery of God, to which theologians held firm, could (it was almost universally assumed) only be compromised or sullied by making God capable of being understood as an agent in ways that are similar to how we understand ourselves as agents, despite the fact that, again as Clayton reminds us, "only by drawing on the conceptual resources of (human) agency will we be able to conceive what divine agency might be."[2] The fear of an anthropomorphism that would reduce God to the level of the human joined forces with the acceptance of a scientific reductionism that displaced God from the world: the result was to put the notion of God as agent into at least metaphysical limbo, if not purgatory.

1. Philip Clayton, *Adventures in the Spirit: God, World, Divine Action*, ed. Zachary Simpson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 204.

2. Ibid., 206.

For many theologians, what seems to have replaced a metaphysically grounded and robust conception of God as an agent are vague references to the "spiritual" or "transcendent" (sometimes confused with the "transcendental") dimension of life, to a God "beyond or without being," to a numinous religious experience as the non-rational apprehension of the divine mystery lying behind life, and so forth. Without denigrating the non-rational experiential and spiritual dimension of human life, I do not believe it is sufficient by itself to support a notion of God as a personal agent. Any attempt to resuscitate the notion of God as agent is seen by many theologians and philosophers of religion as a crude and unsophisticated return to an outmoded, metaphysically discredited, primitive anthropomorphic view of God that lacks the pizzazz of spiritual mystery and cannot satisfy the religious hunger for contact with something that completely transcends the limits of human thought. Despite the critical condition in which the notion of God as agent now finds itself, I want to return to and defend a metaphysically robust notion of God as agent that, I believe, alone can give specificity to the "spiritual" experience and be consistent with the scriptural witness to God found in the monotheistic religions.

Most theologians simply gave up trying to find a place for God's actions in a world whose explanation has now been entrusted entirely to a scientific reductionist understanding (reducing reality its basic constituent elements, e.g., atoms). In the face of the overwhelming evidence for evolution, for example, theologians have, for the most part, not even dared to suggest the metaphysical possibility of divine action in the world for fear of being called "creationists" or believers in "intelligent design." I will not explore here the metaphysical implications of "creationism" or whether or not God can have a hand in the evolutionary process, but I do believe that theologians need not abandon *every* notion of divine action in the world simply because it can be misused, misapplied, or understood as an interference into the causal order. Almost every attempt to preserve divine action ultimately devolves into some theologically distasteful notion of divine "interference" into or violation of the causal laws that are assumed to be the final and exhaustive explanation of all that takes place in the world. Any attempt to talk coherently of God as an agent whose acts influence the world directly is immediately ruled out of order because it smacks of "creationism" or a fundamentalist reading of the Bible in strictly literal terms. One dare not speak of God acting in the world if one wants to avoid being seen as anti-science or anti-reason.

Almost every writer who has tried to reconcile the methodology of science with belief in God has felt the need to deny that God acts in nature. Quailing under the specter thrown up by anti-theists such as Richard Dawkins that

the God who operates as a *super*natural "cause" of events in nature is not scientifically credible, most theologians have tried to find a way around locating divine action *in* the workings of nature, in the unbroken chain of material cause and effect that, allegedly, explains all that happens in nature with nothing left over to be explained in some other way. It is significant that virtually no theologian or philosopher of religion who wants to retain credibility among his peers wants to undermine the universal consensus that God is not to be found as an "intelligent designer" who acts *within* the universe. Credibility might be retained if God is restricted to being the originator or ultimate explanation for the very existence of the universe, but not as a force within the universe once it has begun to exist. Fear of being linked to Creationism and Intelligent Design, associated by most militant anti-theists with a manipulating activist and interventionist deity whom they dismiss as having no explanatory power whatsoever inasmuch as the deity is not a cause alongside other causes, has essentially scared theologians away from any examined analysis of the premises behind the notion that causal law, restricted to finite and measurable causes and effects, is exhaustively explanatory of all that takes place in nature. As John Haught puts it in his *God After Darwin: A Theology of Evolution*, "recent efforts to confront the challenge of evolution by restating or revising arguments for 'intelligent design' are both apologetically ineffective and theologically inconsequential."[3] "The specter of divinity as potentate still hovers over ideas about the 'intelligent designer' whose existence is so tediously debated by creationists and evolutionary materialists."[4]

Nevertheless, Haught does concede that "any coherent faith or theology rightly demands that God be actively involved in the world. . ."[5] For Haught, this demand can be met by theology's provision of "an *ultimate* explanation of why evolutionary creativity occurs in the spontaneous and self-creative manner that it does."[6] He finds this explanation in a process philosophy/theology conception of God as self-emptying, suffering love who makes Godself vulnerable to what God has created as in some sense "autonomously creative." Such an explanation, or theological account of evolution, "in no way interferes with purely scientific explanations" of evolution.[7] If we are allowed to ask why nature is "permitted" to evolve in a spontaneous and self-creative way, theology can provide an answer (the "metaphysics of divine humility"), which is neither

3. John Haught, *God After Darwin: A Theology of Evolution* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2008), 45.
4. Ibid., 48.
5. Ibid., 52.
6. Ibid., 53.
7. Ibid.

materialism nor intelligent design theory, even though Haught insists that it is only in divine humility that "the fullest [divine] effectiveness resides."[8]

I do not intend to follow the details of Haught's explanation, but I do think he is right to want to retain both an explanation of divine action and a refusal to accept intelligent design or creationism as that explanation. Rather than going down the process and panentheistic theology path (which has a lot to recommend it and to which I will give more attention later in the book when discussing the work of Arthur Peacocke and Clayton), I want to go down the path that starts with the notion of the primordiality of action. For in the end, I believe that a robust notion of action is capable of sustaining a real place for scientific explanation of what occurs in the world when action is not taken into account, and of sustaining a notion of divine action that does not entail the dreaded notion of "causal interventionism" from "outside" nature (at least in its typical invocation), a notion that has spooked most of the discussion about how God acts. Only a fully fleshed out notion of action as a primordial category of explanation can preserve a place for divine action *within* and *upon* the world, without becoming an explanation that is a rival to and incompatible with a scientific explanation of worldly events. If human agent-initiated action *per se* is not a metaphysical absurdity, then divine action will not be either. But if the scientific worldview cannot accommodate even free action by conscious human agents alongside of (or, as I will argue, supervening upon and presiding over) causal happenings, then divine action will be thrown out as well. There is, I will argue, a capacious notion of action that includes but goes beyond the notion of merely caused events linked in an unbroken causal chain. Events within that chain will turn out to be best understood as happenings or occurrences in which there is a distinct absence of agent-initiated and agent-superintended actions taking place. Actions, on the other hand, will turn out to be happenings in which agents preside over, supervene upon, and deploy the mechanisms and causal elements of the non-agent dimension of reality in order to carry out their agent-initiated intentions. Their intentions and the acts that fulfill them supervene upon or "comprehend" the causal order without (normally) violating the principles that determine and explain it within its own borders. This is a form of a hierarchical understanding of how agents relate to the causal infrastructure that participates in the field of action presided over by the agent.

Although he uses it for a somewhat different end than I will, Haught argues for the utility of the notion of "hierarchy" in explaining the world. There are some dimensions of reality, he suggests, that are more comprehensive, more

8. Ibid., 97.

real, less derivative than others.[9] The lower levels of reality are "nested" within higher ones. Sometimes known as the "top-down" approach to understanding action, we will see this idea exemplified in such thinkers as Philip Clayton, Arthur Peacocke (who tend toward a panentheistic or process view of God's relation to the world), and in particular in the work of the late philosopher Edward Pols who, while sympathetic to Whiteheadian aims, departs in significant ways from his philosophy. I agree in principle with the top-down or nested approach but find the ultimate explanation of God's relation to the world better explained by the primordiality of the concept of action, not within a process view. Haught employs the concept of "information" to explain how a higher level of reality impacts upon the lower levels, but, however it is done, it "does not interrupt [read 'intervene into'] ordinary physical routines but instead makes use of them in its ordering activity."[10] Peacocke employs a similar concept when he notes that God's interaction with the world is analogous to an "input, a flow of information, rather than of energy."[11] The earlier reference to "make use of them" is perfectly consistent with an agent-based view since that is precisely (as Pols will argue) how the hierarchically higher agent carries out the agent's intentions through supervening actions. Actions deploy and utilize the causal infrastructure without either "violating" it or avoiding it entirely by superseding it through some kind of mysterious relation to it. Instead, they use it without being reduced to it.

If the primordiality of agency can be sustained, then we will have found a way around the conflicting assumptions that presently make the evolution/science versus the intelligent design debate virtually unresolvable. Actions that are initiated by "apex beings" acting from the "top down" in order to supervene upon the causal order rather than being causes that intervene into or interrupt the causal order from outside itself will prove to be immune from the anti-theist criticism that God cannot be a supernatural cause violating the causal laws of nature.

If talk of God's relationship with the world is to be retained, many think that it will have to do one of the following:

> 1. Declare God's nature and "actions" as ultimately and incorrigibly mysterious, known not through reason but through the non- or

9. Ibid., 69.

10. Ibid., 71.

11. Arthur Peacocke, "God's Interaction with the World," in *Chaos and Complexity: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action*, ed. Robert John Russell, Nancey Murphy, and Arthur Peacocke (Berkeley, CA: Vatican Observatory and The Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, 1997), 285.

trans-rational experiences of mysticism. This route leads, at best, to the metaphorical or symbolic use of the terms Agent and Person as applied to God;
2. Try to find a way to "fit" God's action into a world already understood exhaustively by causal law, without challenging the sweep, reductionism, and determinism of causal law explanation by reducing divine action to something that undergirds but does not interfere with the causal structures of the world. This route, I will argue, leads to metaphysical confusion and incoherence and leaves nothing for God to "do" in the world;
3. Develop a robust and metaphysically sound and primordial understanding of God as a real agent whose actions are neither reducible to causal law nor in conflict with it while preserving an appropriate kind of mystery both in God and in our conception of God that will satisfy the religious craving for divine mysteriousness.

It is the third option that I want to explore in this study. Given the confusion produced by reducing complex arguments to sound bites: "religion versus science," "faith versus reason," causal law versus action, or anthropomorphism versus metaphysical mystery, it is impossible in this preface to summarize the results of the exploration I am undertaking without rehearsing in detail the argument itself. Simply, and perhaps misleadingly put, I want to argue that there is a metaphysics of action (reflecting an ontology of being) in which acts are real and distinct from, but not in basic conflict with, causal happenings. Actions do not conflict with causal forces but instead they "utilize" a causal infrastructure, over and through which agents are the primary bearers of action, and from which one can draw out a metaphysically sound notion of God as a primordial agent, who is neither completely ontologically transcendent of the world (metaphysical dualism), nor completely one with it (metaphysical monism).

Every scholar and every practitioner of religion would claim that whatever God is, God is at least mysterious, even the Supreme Mystery opaque at some deep level to rational comprehension. The mystery of God is an article of faith in virtually all religions. At the same time, however, for religious people the divine mystery is almost always attenuated or qualified by an equally important article of faith and that is that God can be known, at least to some extent, especially if God chooses to make the divine self known. If God were totally, absolutely, and exhaustively mysterious, then no concept of God could be developed, no relationship with God would be possible, and God would, for all practical purposes, be useless to the living of our lives. (To say that God is

absolutely mysterious is to say nothing about God, since a totally mysterious "something" is just that, totally mysterious. And about that which is totally mysterious nothing can be said because there would be no way to judge what is said as true, or false, or even meaningful.) In the theistic religions, God's mystery is always tempered or qualified to some degree by the actual worship practice of religious believers who pray to God; thank God; offer their lives to God, affirm creedal convictions about God, and are inspired by stories in their scripture that depict God as somehow deeply implicated in their lives and in the history and nature of the world. One both thanks God for what God has done, is doing, and is believed will do in the future while at the same time acknowledging that God is not *completely* subject to rational understanding. God is not a *product* of human thought and can, if God chooses, remain beyond total and exhaustive rational comprehension. But divine choice implies divine agency, which in turn presupposes that God's very mystery is inherent in the primordiality of God's being an agent. The mystery and the affirmation of God as agent go hand-in-hand in the actual lives of most theistic believers. The challenge is to make sense of both without eliminating one at the expense of the other.

There is something religiously right and appropriate about claiming some kind of mystery in the divine. The trick is to locate that mystery in the right place. I want to explore how the mystery of God is located in, preserved, and qualified by three distinct views of God. I will argue why one of them is more persuasive than the others in retaining both the divine mystery and the possibility of a personal agent-to-agent relationship with God. I will focus my exploration on the primordial or basic concept of agency: the capacity of any agent, including God, to act in and upon the world and upon the human agents whom God's action empowers and fulfills. Out of God's agency will emerge what, in my opinion, is the appropriate kind and location of religiously significant mystery.

Given the importance of having a developed and coherent understanding of God, I intend to establish the metaphysical power and primordiality as well as the religious significance of a view of God as a personal agent. In doing so, I will argue that this view retains a meaningful degree of the mystery required of a religiously acceptable concept of God. In order to make my case, I will show how the concept of God as personal agent meets the challenge posed by two more prominent and classically established views of God: the dualist and the monist.

There are, I believe, three logically distinct basic or metaphysical views of God: first, the dualist view of God as radically and wholly "Other," as

ontologically transcendent of everything other than Godself, a God beyond or without Being; second, the monist view of God as undifferentiated oneness, One without a second; and, third, the pluralist or agent view of God as the primordial and supreme personal agent existing as creator and sustainer of but also as *standing alongside* (in a sense to be defined further) other beings and agents within a common ontological space, a commonality of a field of agency that is required for relationality between personal agents. While not in itself an argument in defense of the notion of God as personal agent, I believe it is relevant that this is the view of God implicit in the monotheistic Abrahamic traditions. While the dualist and monist views quickly entice the mind into the apophatic mystery (the mystery beyond words) of God as beyond all human comprehension, the agent view appears on first glance as hopelessly anthropomorphic, naïve, and primitive. I intend to make the case, however, for the metaphysical power of this agent view of the divine even in the face of its more established and more intellectually sophisticated competitors and detractors.

I will do so primarily by mining the work of three much neglected contemporary philosophers of action or agency: Raymond Tallis, Edward Pols, and John Macmurray.[12] I will also explore, though somewhat less copiously, the work of process-oriented panentheists Arthur Peacocke and Philip Clayton who also develop a concept of divine agency on a somewhat different model. Through a creative synthesis of their work, I will show that the primary and basic sense of power in reality is the power of agency (not causality, which is a subset of agency), a power that can only be exercised by an agent.

Developing these three philosophers' conceptions of the agent, the act, and agency, I will then challenge the overriding and dominant assumption that casts its shadow over all talk of God's actions in the world. That assumption, which I will argue is ultimately unjustified, is that God's actions in the world must "fit into" the causal structure of the world, that a "causal joint" must be found for God's action in the world in order to avoid what is usually taken to be unacceptable divine "interference," "intrusion," or "intervention" into the causal structures of the world. This assumption presumes the ontological or primordial primacy of causality to which action must conform or fit into. This is such a pervasive assumption that it will take a kind of philosophical shock treatment to think differently about action in relation to causality. I will therefore offer an initially audacious and radically different understanding of

12. These three thinkers, from all that I can tell, do not reference each other (Macmurray died in 1976 and Pols in 2005) so my integration of their work has not and might not ever have received the approbation of any of them.

action drawn primarily from Pols's notion of action as an agent's *deployment* of the causal infrastructure over which the agent presides and through which the agent exercises supervening power, attempting to realize certain intentions through actions that pervade and utilize that infrastructure. When the agent acts, from a position at the apex of the causal structures, the agent's act both pervades and unifies the elements of that causal infrastructure, bending them toward the enactment or realization of the agent's purpose. In this view, acts don't *fit into* a pre-existing causal order: instead they *preside over*, *supervene upon*, and *utilize* the causal order *through which* they transmit the intention of the agent who originates them and through which they *express*, realize, or manifest, his or her intentions. This notion of action allows us to set aside the plethora of attempts that have dominated most of the contemporary discussion of divine action and that have been constrained to try to fit God's action into a pre-existing causal structure that, ever since Kant, has been seen as opaque and closed to free action, both divine and human. To my knowledge, contemporary philosophers trying to find a way to fit God's action into the world have almost completely overlooked or vastly underappreciated this argument. By failing to treat the power of this argument seriously, they are left with basically unsatisfactory notions of divine action as "interfering with" or "intervening in" the causal order, thus leaving divine action a fundamental mystery (ironically without noticing that this also leaves human action a fundamental mystery). This, I will argue, is not the mystery of God that is religiously compelling. I will argue that the mystery of God should be found elsewhere: not in *whether* God can act or whether God's acts are subject to metaphysical comprehension, but rather in *why* God in the depths of God's personhood and freedom *chooses* to act, and to act as God does, and what our responses to God's actions ought to be.[13]

I will conclude by showing how the notion of a divine personal agent retains all the mystery necessary for a worshipful and religious significant response to that reality we call God because we believe we have been encountered and challenged by divine actions that call us into relationship with their author. This is the deepest and most religiously significant mystery of all:

13. I have tried to avoid using any gendered pronouns for God. While I believe that God is a personal agent, this belief does not, in my opinion, commit me to affirming that God has a specific gender. To avoid the problem of gendered pronouns, I have chosen to use "Godself" for God even if the price for doing so is, given centuries-long tradition of using the masculine pronoun for God, a small bit of syntactic awkwardness. I have not, of course, changed the gendered pronouns for God in the works by other authors that I cite from time to time.

the mystery of personal relationships and their most important and mysterious characteristic—love.