

## **Giving God a Helping Hand -- and All the Glory Too**

by Theodore Plantinga

My objective is to shed some light on how God acts in our world and thereby to engage in a bit of desecularization. By "secularization," I mean here the widespread belief that discourse about divine action is no longer meaningful, that people today can make no sense of statements to the effect that God is doing that or that in a concrete situation. I maintain that God can be said to act through at least *some* of the deeds of human beings, and that it does make sense, some of the time, at least, to recognize some human deeds as stemming from God as well as from people. Therefore I would further maintain that they are to be accepted as manifestations of his goodness. More specifically, I shall try to explain how some Christian believers -- not all, by any means -- think about these matters, and how their thinking translates into both action and reflection on that action in everyday life.

Of course I am not proposing to explain or elucidate *everything* that is claimed for God by believers nowadays -- only some of it, indeed, a relatively small part of it. Some Christian talk about divine action is too grandiose, in my judgment. There are people who try to outdo each other in their use of superlatives as they ascribe powers and accomplishments to God. It seems to me that an astute believer would do better to admit that much of what God accomplishes in our lives transcends both our thought and our language. Perhaps a dose of Maimonides (1135-1204), that great critic of God-talk, is in order.

If my remarks meet with some favor, it will not be because I have *proven* that God exists or that he acts; at most I may be able to convince some skeptics that certain believers in God's existence and action hold rationally defensible beliefs about what it is that God is doing nowadays -- with a helping hand from some of us. And thereby I will have shed some light on the rationality inherent in some theistic discourse that certain skeptics might otherwise be inclined to dismiss as woolly thinking.

Because my thesis has an earthly background, so to speak, and must inevitably be understood in terms drawn from earthly experience, I'll leave God out of the picture for a few moments as I talk about relationships between deeds performed by human beings. In the domain of the arts, for example, it is recognized that in some cases, "authorship" (broadly conceived) is a fiction. A painting by a great master in the Renaissance era might well have been finished off in his style by one or more of his assistants. Is the picture authentic? Is it really by the great master? It may be that no black-and-white answer to this question can be given. And so it is with some of the deeds of God.

Literature also affords us examples of muddy "authorship." Some literary works have a simple and straightforward composition history: a short story, let's say, was written and typed by one person only and is simply his work. (Please note that I am using "his" in the traditional indeterminate sense to cover both genders.) But many longer works of literature have received quite some creative input from editors, critics and friends -- to the point that the person to whom the work is attributed adds a note somewhere, indicating that the work would not have been possible without the excellent input of such-and-such people, who are then named and thanked.

In what I have said thus far, we find some of the elements that are needed in a Christian doctrine of revelation, in which we try to indicate that certain writings of human beings are to be regarded at the same time as the "Word of God." Now, God is able to speak or get his word out apart from the human beings who played a role in composing what we now call the Bible, but most Christians believe that he chose to accept a helping hand from human authors.

In non-fictional writings based on research, especially scientific papers, authorship may be complicated by additional factors, such as the realization that the underlying research and the development of the thesis based on the research involved the efforts of many people, some of whom had no hand in turning the results into a written document. Does one then name *all* of those people as "co-authors," or does one acknowledge and thank them in some other way? Some scientific papers have a great many listed authors. But there are also situations of collaboration in which *one* person takes the formal credit for what is produced. That person is then listed as the *sole* author.

By and large, human beings are hungry for the type of credit that authorship gives them. A small child announces with delight, "I did it!" Perhaps he jumps up and down in glee. But it may well be that some toy or mechanism supplied to the child made the accomplishment a mere triviality, and therefore not a reason for rejoicing -- at least, as far as adults are concerned. But the child is

too immature to realize this, and so he basks in the glory of his accomplishment.

More mature folks may do essentially the same thing. Whether we are baking a cake or producing something via a computer, we find that there are ready-made patterns, recipes and templates for us to use. Once we have accomplished what we set out to do, we may announce that *we* did it and pat ourselves on the back and wait to be applauded, but the credit, strictly speaking, should be shared with the producers of the pattern or recipe or template, even though they do not seem eager to claim much of the credit. (By the way, are there templates for writing philosophy papers?)

In our eagerness to pad our résumé, we sometimes take credit for what might be regarded as the accomplishments of *others*. Now, organizations are more prone to this eagerness to accept a helping hand than individuals are, for organizations are able to affiliate with one another and, through such official connection, to take credit for one another's work. The college in which I teach is in the business of offering Christian education. Like all organizations, it has to justify its activities to its support community, and so, from time to time, it issues reports on its doings. Statistical summaries are offered. Comparisons with earlier years are made. Other such colleges do the same thing. The Christian press may sum up such reports in an article surveying a number of schools. A reader, impressed by all this Christian education activity, may add up the numbers provided by the various colleges, but this is where things get tricky. The total produced by such addition may be inflated, because the schools in the surveys have certain affiliations amongst themselves, through which *joint* programs and activities are undertaken. Those who are familiar with these inner workings may realize that one needs to distinguish between our "on-campus" students and our "off-campus" students. The latter may be physically on the campus of another college with which we have a joint program. We may include those students in our head count, but the other college probably counts them too, And so they may show up *twice* in a combined head count.

This may seem a small matter from a statistical point of view, but there is an issue at stake, namely, whether we may take credit for deeds performed elsewhere by others. For example, may we take credit for what we somehow facilitate or make possible? It seems clear that we do exactly that. While a combined head count should probably be accompanied by a small note making clear what I have just explained above, the notion that a combined head count out to be made public should not be fundamentally challenged. And why not? you may ask. Because so much of what happens here on earth involves

*combined agency*, or perhaps we could call it *combined credit and responsibility*. Army generals and military leaders take credit for the accomplishments of their subordinates -- or are given credit by historians. Even God gets involved in this sort of thing. It appears that he is not averse to accepting a helping hand.

It is part of much Christian thinking that God does a good deal of his work here on earth in and through people. I teach philosophy to students at Redeemer University College, but I would maintain that in a certain sense God teaches them in and through me. While such an understanding of divine activity on earth can apply to a great many fields of endeavor, we tend to emphasize it especially in certain fields to which we attribute a lot of significance. And teaching is one such field. Thus Stephen F. Bayne, Jr. writes an essay on Christian education which bears the intriguing title "God Is the Teacher." In his essay he demonstrates an insight into the problem that is my main focus in this presentation, for he tells an interesting story about a crusty New England farmer who, in solid New England style, chooses his words carefully. Apparently this farmer was conversing with a "rhapsodic lady" who said to him: "How wonderful it must be to be in partnership with God in clearing the ground and growing crops on your farm!" The farmer responded a little sourly, according to Bayne: "Yes, but you should have seen this farm when God had it alone." [NOTE 1]

We may chuckle at the farmer's response or find it a bit irreverent. Presumably we want to avoid that "sour note" in which God, it seems, is being reproached. Calvinists, especially, bend over backwards to give God all the glory, all the credit. God does it all. What was said during the Reformation era about salvation ("by grace alone") is then extended to *whatever happens in this life*. It's *all* God's doing! And if something *doesn't* get done -- especially something that very much needs doing -- perhaps that's due to God as well, or, more properly, it's his fault. And so God can also get the *blame* for what goes wrong.

If you are inclined to think and talk this way, you are probably an adherent of a first cause and second cause analysis of the relationship between God and the forces and agents here on earth. Such an analysis has a long and distinguished history in Christian circles. I will say no more about it here, except to add that I do not accept it.

Before I explore how we might be able to get God off the hook, so to speak, so that he does not wind up getting all the blame for the things that go wrong, I need to add some detail in terms of how this relationship between God's actions and our puny deeds is generally understood by people in my tradition -- at least,

by those who have studied enough philosophy to ask themselves certain interesting questions. Let me emphasize that not everyone in my tradition would go along with this analysis, although many would hold to it without being able to spell it out in philosophical terms.

Many people with a Calvinistic mindset maintain that it is their privilege to work under a "divine mandate," so to speak. This term may puzzle you; perhaps you find it too vague. But its vagueness is important to my presentation.

The thinking is roughly this: much of what such people accomplish in their day-to-day lives should be allowed to count as what God is doing in and through them. They are co-authors with God of their deeds and accomplishments -- maybe not every trivial act, but of some of the more significant ones, at least. To say that they are co-authors is not to claim that there is a fifty-fifty split between human input and divine input. Precisely because God and man are so utterly unlike one another, such quantitative claims are not appropriate.

While the assertion that God is the co-author of some of my deeds may sound arrogant, please consider whether there might not be a strain of humility built into it. When someone makes such a claim, he freely confesses that he does not quite understand how certain of his accomplishments came about. He remembers how he sweated over this and that, but he adds, "If God had not been with me and had not blessed my efforts, I know I would have failed."

It's the same sort of comment a husband might make about his accomplishments in partnership with his wife. He may say that he could never have done this or that without her and that he is baffled when he tries to figure out how certain important things came about. In the process he may minimize his own role as he praises his wife -- perhaps excessively -- but he does *not* withdraw his claim to co-authorship of his deeds. In the same way, the Calvinist believer who says he is working in partnership with God is inclined to retain some credit and responsibility for things that have come about in a manner that transcends his own understanding. As long as he is convinced that he is working under a divine mandate, doing the sort of thing that God calls and commands us to do, this claim seems warranted in his own eyes.

Does this analysis sound strange to you? Perhaps you are inclined to think in terms of much more specific commands that God gives to some human beings as he summons them to carry out his will. I do not deny that there are -- or have been -- such situations. There are cases to be found in the Bible, e.g. Jonah

being told to preach to Nineveh. But I don't propose to talk about them here. I maintain that a "mandate," which is less specific than a command, is the typical stimulus to action on the part of the Christian who thinks roughly as I do about these matters.

Do you need an earthly comparison to give my suggestion a bit of plausibility? Suppose you consider yourself to be working under an enigmatic king in the old days (not one of our contemporary constitutional monarchs who stay out of politics). Much of the exaggerated language of service that still colors Christian discourse goes back to the old days in which you were willing to do *anything* for the king or the crown. (I grant that some of this obsequiousness was more verbal than actual.) You would dedicate your deeds to him -- for example, claiming land in the new world. What you did, *the king* did. The land you claimed was *his*, and you undertook your perilous journeys for him and in his name.

Because the kings of those days had little desire to be managers in any modern sense, they left their subjects a good deal of leeway in terms of figuring out what might count as acceptable and welcome service. And so the idea was not so much that you spoke in the name of the king when you acted; rather, what you were aiming for -- humbly, or so you thought -- was to submit every accomplishment to him after the fact so that he might get the credit and the glory. You wanted nothing for yourself. He was everything, and you were less than nothing. In those days, people scaled great heights of eloquence in their self-abnegation, on occasion giving the lie to some noble sentiments they were struggling to express. (There is often a touch of arrogance concealed within humility.) John the Baptist spoke more simply: "He [Christ] must increase, but I must decrease." [John 3:30] Some Christian scholars like to quote II Corinthians 10:5, where we read: "We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle to the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ ...." One gets the impression that Christian scholarship is both modest and immodest at once.

I suggest that there was considerable wisdom in the conduct of those monarchs who were fairly restrained and non-specific about the mandate under which their humble and obedient servants worked. A greater degree of enthusiasm and satisfaction would result if the self-abnegating servant realized -- even though he might not admit it aloud -- that his sovereign left him considerable scope for personal decision-making and the undertaking of initiatives. The relatively poor communication technologies of those days also contributed to this feeling of independence on the part of the humble servants who had no other desire than to do what the sovereign wished -- or so they claimed.

Communication has improved greatly in our time, and so our superiors are able to be quite direct in terms of what they want us to do -- and when. But not all of them take advantage of the new technologies. God does not send us e-mail messages on a daily basis telling us what tasks to undertake on his behalf. While Christians may disagree somewhat about these matters, by and large they believe that God has laid his mandate before us in a writing or set of writings that we call his Word or his revelation. The book is "closed," so to speak. We do not get daily updates.

The revelation that we call God's "Word" needs quite some interpreting, and so there is a hefty enterprise among us known as Biblical hermeneutics. We want to serve God and do what he says, but we are not entirely sure of just what he did say. And so it turns out that working the soil in partnership with God, or teaching in such a way that others are moved to say that God is the teacher, is a little harder than it looks at first.

This reality, that is, the hermeneutical difficulty of the whole business, is all too easily obscured from view when we habitually give God all the credit and glory. Hence the distinction implicit in my title: "Giving God a helping hand -- and all the glory too." We need to distinguish the former from the latter. Indeed, I should probably put a question mark after the title, for my intention is to suggest that we should not be so quick to ask God to *endorse* what we have done in his name by accepting the "glory" for it. Rather, it needs to stand up to his scrutiny. Not everything we offer to God as done on his behalf will be accepted by him.

And if God should think twice before accepting the glory, maybe our fellow human beings should think twice before asserting that what I -- or some other Christian -- have done counts as what God has done. Is it humility on my part to ascribe my deeds to God? (Perhaps I maintain that I was a mere channel for divine agency.) Or is it arrogance? Some knowledge of Hegel's philosophy is helpful in trying to sort out this question.

Another analogy from earthly life can shed more light on the situation of the human actor who wishes to dedicate deeds to God. If you work for a board that meets every couple of months or so, you may, from time to time, find yourself running a bit beyond the mandate you were given at past meetings. I speak from experience: back in the 1970s, I worked for the board of an organization called the Ontario Christian College Association, which eventually established what we now call Redeemer University College. Originally I was called the "Director of College Development," and later the "Executive Director." Sometimes one works in the dark, so to speak, in that new challenges and

opportunities come up that were not foreseen in past meetings. What to do? When you are young and impetuous, you tend to presume that you have all the insight you need to do the right thing in terms of responding to the new opportunity. The board will just have to approve your actions after the fact, the next time it meets. And this is indeed what happens in many cases. The executive committee of a large board also works under some such pressures. And so it can be a regular feature of board meetings that the actions of the executive committee and perhaps also of the head of the staff get reviewed and then approved. And so it was sometimes necessary for my actions to be reviewed and approved in retrospect. Of course one must always reckon with the possibility that some of those actions will *not* get approved.

The difference between working for a board and working under a divine mandate is that God does not hold anything akin to board meetings, where an impetuous servant can get his headstrong deeds approved and perhaps pick up some guidance as to what to do if a similar challenge comes up in the future. Hence there is a certain loneliness and unsettledness in working for and under the God who gives us a rather general mandate by way of marching orders. However much a believer who operates in such circumstances may claim assurances, obtained through prayer, that he is in God's good graces, so to speak, he can never be entirely certain that his current actions are in line with divine wishes. And this is part of the reason why he should not be too quick to give God all the glory. Part of the "glory" may turn out to be blame.

Another complication in terms of the analysis I am trying to develop here is that often we are in "partnership" (think of the crusty new England farmer) not just with God, under whose mandate we consider ourselves to be working, but also with one or more other human beings. Common sense reveals many situations in which the "authorship" of a deed is somewhat murky because of the number of people involved in it. Admitting that this is the case does not, however, take away from the overall argument; all the admission does is to ask for a qualification, which I hereby offer.

If you relish the sense that you are doing God's work, that you are one of his agents here on earth, even though you are not under his specific direction, then you are better off working largely on your own, as opposed to becoming part of some vast organization or phalanx of do-gooders. I am not presupposing that God cannot -- or does not -- accomplish his purposes on earth through large groups and organizations; my point is rather that one would have less sense of performing one's deeds under a divine mandate and then offering them to God in the manner of a medieval knight if one were part of a large organization. And perhaps it is the prevalence of the organizational mode of action in our

world that leaves various people inclined to make life in our time look too much like an unbroken landscape of secularity.

In other words, there is more than one reason why it is pleasurable to work largely on your own. Not only do you get more satisfaction from the work you do as being authentically your own accomplishment; you can become deeply convinced that you are working on God's behalf and doing what he wants done -- provided, of course, that you start out with certain beliefs about divine mandates.

Here's another complication when it comes to agency: we need to distinguish between doing something in a simple physical sense and taking responsibility for what has been done regardless of our own physical involvement. The notion of "speech acts" comes to mind here. When we examine cases in which physical involvement is limited or negligible, we get more insight into what the relationship might be between our deeds, on the one hand, and what God wants done, on the other.

Think about the plight of a person with disabilities. It might conceivably be argued that if a person has extensive mental and physical disabilities, he really can't do anything -- literally speaking. But our society recoils from such an analysis and encourages us to think that such a person can still act, even if some help, whether supplied by sophisticated technologies or trusted human assistants, is needed to make the action concrete. The point is that the deed eventually performed counts as a deed of the disabled person, whose sense of self is bolstered thereby.

Things become more complicated still when the person helping the disabled person stands in a significant legal relationship to that person, perhaps because he holds a power of attorney in which he is named as, in effect, a substitute decision-maker of some sort. I have considerable personal experience in this area. Difficult questions then arise. Who is doing the deciding? Who takes the responsibility for the eventual decision and action? And is it possible that our warm-hearted desire to say that it was the disabled person who did this or that is a well-meant fiction that leaves the disabled person open to manipulation?

The "attorney" in such a case must divine the will (perhaps the *past* will, as well as the *present* one) of the disabled person whom he is seeking to assist. He also has some authority of his own, and so he is not entirely bound by perceived wishes. And if he is a Christian of the sort I am discussing in this presentation, he presumably thinks of himself as working under a divine mandate that applies to his delicate situation. All in all, he is involved in what

we might call a hermeneutics of application -- one that could conceivably lead to actions taken in bad faith, since the responsibility can be shunted over to the disabled person being helped, or perhaps to divine mandates or commandments that might, for example, be thought to forbid what the situation clearly seems to demand.

Up to this point my presentation might seem to be a defense of much contemporary Christian practice. Now, I switch to a critical mode to complete the brief analysis. Perhaps the familiar sentence "God is on our side" can serve to introduce the criticism I wish to add. In pondering this famous sentence that causes many people to tremble, we need to ask whether the believer who does God's work in the spirit described above is entitled to say, as he goes about his work, "God is on our side -- or, more specifically, on *my* side."

My answer to this question is not unequivocal, but on the whole I must say no. In terms of the analysis I am presenting, the believer must normally content himself with saying, "I believe I am working under a divine mandate and that I am acting in good faith." But his "*I believe*" indicates that he is aware that he may be out of step with God and his wishes. Thus the believer who accepts the analysis I am here recommending needs to include in his self-understanding something of the humility that Abraham Lincoln expressed in the concluding words of his second inaugural address as President of the United States: "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us ...." Lincoln then went on for a few more lines to talk about binding up the nation's wounds and working for a lasting peace between the warring states, but he did so in the awareness that to try to do the right as one sees it is not the very same thing as doing exactly what God wants. That spirit of *cognitive humility*, which is what endears Lincoln to so many of us, is also needed by the believer who works under a divine mandate.

To bring further clarity here, I need to make a distinction which some Christians may be reluctant to make, namely, between the *will of God* and what I have been calling a *divine mandate*. A Christian who is inclined to maintain that God is definitely on his side thinks of himself as doing the will of God, as bringing about just what God wants. One implication, of course, is that anyone at cross-purposes with him is *opposing* the will of God, and thus may be a candidate for "demonization," as some people like to say nowadays. In most cases such a Christian should instead regard himself as working out a divine mandate, as doing the right to the extent that God gives him the ability to see the right. And this self-understanding would be open to the prospect that his opponent is also working under a divine mandate and sincerely trying to do the

right as God has allowed him to understand it. In that case neither can claim simply that he has God on his side.

Perhaps another political analogy is in order. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt was well known for running a fairly loose operation in the White House. Thus his aides often did not know exactly what their boss wanted. As he talked with them, he might leave the impression that he favored this or that, but he was not terribly specific about it, and so he left his underlings plenty of room to improvise and use their own ingenuity. Of course there were conflicts in such a White House, and in the case of some of those conflicts, both parties would claim to have the boss on their side. Conflicts of this sort also manifest themselves in relations between Christians, or sometimes between Christians and persons of faith rooted in other traditions. While I do not mean to say that one may *never* have strong convictions or pound on the table when embroiled in such a conflict, I would want to temper such impulses with the realization that the God whom Christians profess to serve often plays the role of the distant and somewhat inscrutable monarch who does not always make his intent clear when he stimulates his servants to action.

The recognition that our opponents in a struggle may also be trying honestly to bring about what God wants ought to temper our enthusiasm somewhat and make us more inclined to respect them in a deep sense as would-be servants of God. It may be that through discussion and reasoned appeals to divine revelation, some of the differences can be overcome, but when this does not prove possible, we should still hang on to that respect, which is the same attitude of generosity toward our fellow human beings that we need to make a democratic and pluralistic society possible.

Finally, a few words about that business of "glory." When a student in my class turns in a test paper without his name on it, I may ask him, in jest, whether he is one those Calvinists who insist on giving God all the glory. And if the test has earned a poor mark, I may go on to reproach him in Old Testament terms about needing to offer God a choice animal as a sacrifice, not a crippled one or one with a blemish. (The Passover lamb, for example, was to be without blemish: see Exodus 12:5.) Of course no sacrifice is ever adequate to God's majesty, and the final sacrifice, the one that ends all sacrifices in terms of a Christian understanding of these matters, is entirely without blemish or sin. Such a sacrifice would be beyond any one of us.

A little kidding about deep Biblical matters can make a valuable point, and the point we need to understand is that the tendency to ascribe glory to God for *our* deeds is all too often a subtle effort to obtain divine sanction for those same

deeds, thereby elevating them beyond any human appraisal or criticism. I understand the impulse; I am guilty of it myself. But it is something we must overcome, remembering, in the words of Scripture, that "The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything ...." [Acts 17:24-25]

God, then, does not *need* the glory which we may seek to heap upon him by claiming to do just what he wants when we undertake certain actions in his name. What I am pleading for, then, is a certain hermeneutical reticence on the part of Christians, a reticence that will leave them claiming a little less on God's behalf as they seek to serve him. If they follow this counsel, I believe there will be fewer occasion for strong disagreements among believers.

But even more important in terms of my objective in this presentation is to show, in an ordinary way that does not require philosophical or theological sophistication on the part of anyone who may be listening, how God can be said to be active in today's world. In good measure, I am trying to flesh out part of what is presupposed when Jesus says, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me." [Matthew 25:40]

Does God meet the needs of the poor and destitute today? Yes -- in the way foreshadowed in Matthew 25:40. But he does not meet *all* such needs. Sadly, the poor go hungry and thirsty -- sometimes to the point of death. I know not why. Therein lies a challenge -- to work under a divine mandate as we seek to improve the life-circumstances of our fellow human beings, but without *equating* our deeds and failures with what God is pleased to do. And so I propose to give God a helping hand, and I invite you to join me. As for the glory that may flow from our deeds, let others judge to whom it is due. **[END]**

## NOTES

[NOTE 1]

See "God Is the Teacher," in *The Christian Idea of Education*, ed. Edmund Fuller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), p. 255.