

William J. Abraham, *Divine Agency and Divine Action: Exploring and Evaluating the Debate*, Volume I. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. 231 pp. £65.00 (hbk).

William J. Abraham, *Divine Agency and Divine Action: Soundings in the Christian Tradition*, Volume II. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. 232 pp. £65.00 (hbk).

Joanna Leidenhag
University of St Andrews

Reading the first two volumes of William J. Abraham's four-part series, *Divine Agency and Divine Action* is like finding an oasis in a desert of impoverished divine action proposals. The first volume forces the weary traveller to look back upon the last fifty-years of divine action discourse as suffering from a kind of "mental cramp", an unusually acute cognitive strain and fatigue resulting from decades of creating pseudo-problems, ruling out respectable solutions, and trying to tackle 'the problem of divine action' in an abstract, unspecified way. Abraham's argues that this cramp has arisen because of the assumption "that there is a single concept of action that can be gleaned by focusing on cases of human action" by which we can understand divine action (vol. 1, 87). Abraham's proposal is that an open concept of action liberates the theology of divine action. The theologian is not left to "the crumbs that fall from the philosopher's table. Theologians have their own food, their own menus, and their own cutlery" (87). And so, volume two takes soundings from theologies own storehouse of divine action discourse, with mentors from St. Paul to Luis de Molina, in order to "heal us of our long love affair with very general talk about divine action" (vol. 2, 159).

Volume one has something like a sandwich structure. Chapters two-three and eight-eleven provide two series of obituaries for influential divine action proposals from prominent theologians across the last half century. The 'meat' of the book is found in chapters four-seven where relevant debates with analytic philosophy are surveyed and responded to. Readers interested in the analytic philosophy and theology relationship should read these chapters.

After a brief orientation, chapter two commences our guided tour through this graveyard of divine action proposals by exploring the construction of G.E. Wright, and subsequent demolition by Langdon Gilkey, of the Biblical Theology movement; the attempt in the 1960's to renew Protestantism by focusing on the 'mighty acts of God' in history. The choice of starting point is decisive. It is the twin error of constricting divine action to one single test case (here, the Exodus, later, creation *ex nihilo*) and equivocating on the verb 'to act', that has detached academic theology from the witness of the tradition it seeks to articulate.

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Chapter three takes up the demythologizing work of Schubert Ogden, influenced by Rudolf Bultmann and Charles Hartshorne (although there is no guilt by association). The problem is again twofold: first the collapse of divine action into the *meaning* of divine action for human beings, such that “[w]hat we are really talking about is ourselves rather than God” (vol. 1, 45), and second, the questionable definition of ‘action’ as a self-constitution, a decision about one’s inner being. At root, Abraham’s complaint is methodological; Ogden’s proposal is determined by philosophical assumptions made prior to reflection upon the actual discourse of divine action in the tradition, which may change the whole picture dramatically.

The second set of obituaries can be summarized in two pairs. Chapters eight and nine examine the notion of divine action proposed by Process theologian David Ray Griffin and Quantum physicists turned theologian Robert J. Russell. Whilst, Abrahams, Griffin and Russell all share a common enmity for double agency, Abraham concludes both Process and quantum accounts of divine action are, at best, “fool’s gold” (145, 155). At worse, Process theology is “a serious intellectual disease in search of a cure” (145) and scientific solutions to theological questions are characterized as “intellectual suicide” arising from “a massive failure of nerve on the part of the theologian”, who has abandoned her own epistemological and ontological resources (155). In these chapters Abraham reveals an important distaste for theologies that require too much specialist knowledge or language, and so cut themselves off from the testimony of the Christian tradition or ordinary believer. In particular, he offers a chilling account of the success of Process theology, particularly within his own tradition of Methodism, as offering nothing more than “the thrill of insider status complete with initiation into a special technical vocabulary, a set of interesting problems that cried out for attention, a congenial club mentality, and an esoteric sensibility” (142). Whilst the specifics of Abraham’s criticisms in these chapters are largely taken from other scholars, such attacks are rarely as comprehensively devastating.

Chapters ten focuses on the neo-Thomism of Herbert McCabe and chapter eleven on the grammar of non-competitive transcendence of Kathryn Tanner. Both interlocutors are nervous about regarding God as a ‘being’ or ‘agent’ in any straight-forward way, such that (as will Process and quantum proposals) theologians must translate ordinary Christian speech into proper theological discourse. Abraham aptly sources the nervousness to a preoccupation with the question, ‘why is there something rather than nothing?’, and the resulting doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. Whilst important, the *ex nihilo* formula is a bizarre ground for a theory of predication; creation is but one divine act and the grammar for other divine actions may be different were they to be properly individuated, which they are not by the neo-Thomist. The radical ontological difference posited between God and creation entails that we should, in all seriousness, adopt a radical agnosticism and stop speaking about God. Indeed, Abraham seems to wish that neo-Thomist would simply follow through on this point.

The ‘meat’ of this first volume is the survey in chapters four-seven of relevant debates in analytic philosophy of religion. We start with the critical stance of early analytic philosophers, Anthony Flew, P.F. Strawson, and Terence Penelhum, which assumes that we have a clear and closed concept of (human) action, that cannot coherently be applied to God. Abraham suggests that I.M. Crombie points us in a better direction, since he argued that to speak of God as ‘spirit’ and apply action predicates to God is to deploy a *deliberate* category mistake, or in theological-speech “deploying the rhetoric of paradox” (66) as a disarming

assertion of power. Chapter five continues the story of the relational breakdown between philosophy and theology, as discussions on the epistemological justification of religion took centre stage, and philosophy of religion/philosophical theology became a spectator sport for “bloodless ghosts” (83). Abraham, alongside contemporary analytic theology, is deeply dissatisfied with this “wholly artificial” notion of a “bare theism isolated for inspection” (84). Indeed, Abraham goes as far as to say that “it may well be that our understanding of divine action may depend on our own engagement with divine reality” in both personal and cooperate religious practice (85). Yet, rather than simply terminating the conversation with analytic philosophy, chapter six encourages theologians to “spend more time in Athens before going home to Jerusalem” (94).

Lingering in Athens, Abraham provides the core argument of this first volume. Abraham (with the help of Morris Weitz) spells out what is meant by an ‘open concept’ of action where there are sufficient, but no necessary conditions, for what constitutes an action. It is precisely because we cannot spell out a definitive set of properties or criteria that exhaustively define the concept of action, that to say “God acted” is to say almost nothing. This hypothesis is tested through appreciative criticism of later analytic philosopher, William P. Alston, whose work, Abraham claims, “underscores my claim that even the most carefully constructed closed concept of intentional divine action yields little value in debates about divine action” (127). Abraham wants to know what God did or is doing and this is to get into “theology proper” (104).

Theologians may still search for a closed concept at the end of the rainbow, but this Irishman assures us there no such pot of gold exists. Through a survey of the “radical specificity” (vol. 2, 14) of divine activities that show up in the tradition from Paul to Luis de Molina, volume two argues that all the theological gold we need is already in the bank, awaiting the kind of serious critical engagement that our mental cramp has thus far prevented us from undertaking. Abraham enjoins theologians to “not loose their nerve” (a phrase that echoes throughout these volumes), but to do serious intellectual work in narrating and unpacking the particular, even peculiar, actions that the living God does.

After cataloguing the divine action predicates in the Pauline texts, chapter two is interested in the early Christian doctrine of Scripture. One assumes that Abraham’s primary concern is to crack-open evangelical discussions regarding the authority of Scripture. Abraham attempts this, first, by noting how far the flexibility of the early church fathers on the doctrine of inspiration differs from the all-or-nothing doctrines of Scripture employed today to bully believers out of their faith (39), second, by critiquing the idea of double authorship, and, third, by insisting on a distinction between divine speaking/authoring and divine inspiring. When it comes to divine inspiration, we can hold to a range of specific actions that either God or human agents may do in the production and interpretation of Scripture.

Abraham distils from Athanasius’ Christology and attack on ancient polytheism four important maxims: (a) some “acts are appropriate to divine agency”, others are inappropriate (43); (b) “actions make manifest the identity and nature of the agent who performs them” (44); (c) human agents partially mirror divine agency “and this allows them to discern God within” (50); and lastly, (d) “one explains the actions of an agent by displaying the reasons of rationale”, not causes (52). Abraham emphasises that these are not philosophical principles imposed from without, but are the deep structure that emerges in

Athanasius's careful and rigorous reflection upon what God was doing in the life of Saint Anthony and, even more, in the person of Jesus Christ.

Building upon these four maxims, Abraham turns from Christology to pneumatology in the Cappadocian Fathers. Again, Abraham's forefronts the sheer variety and specificity of the actions predicated to the Holy Spirit by Basil the Great and his contemporaries. Since it is these actions that make manifest the identity and nature of the agent, Abraham's critiques less than agential depictions of the Holy Spirit, referring specifically to Killian McDonnell. Abraham also uses this action and experiential account of the Holy Spirit in the Cappadocian Fathers as an opportunity to remind contemporary analytic theologians that "a conservative doctrine of Scripture plus a precisionist vision of analytic philosophy" is not enough for theology (78).

The heart of this volume is chapter five, "Divine and Human Action in Salvation in Augustine", where the leitmotif of nature and grace, comes to the fore. Abraham makes two interesting moves to change the angle on this highly-charged theological deadlock, between the sufficiency of saving grace and the freedom of human will. The first move, made through engagement with Cyril of Jerusalem, is to remind the reader that for much of Christianity history there were not two agents of concern in matters of salvation, but four: God, the individual human, the church, and demons. The second move is now a familiar, "we need to take our time" within the specifics and resist "the temptation to jump immediately to the great and grand themes of grace, nature, will, desire, freedom, predestination, and the like" that lurk in the wings (81).

As for the material interpretation of Augustine, scholars will find much to ponder and disagree with. Whilst in the Pelagian controversy, the human contribution appears squeezed out at various points, Abraham argues that the best way to interpret Augustine remains a co-operative account of divine assistance. This is for two reasons. First, the language of assistance employed by Augustine presupposes two agents who contribute very differently and to different degrees. Second, Abraham argues that the important phrase, 'God is the cause of our salvation' should not be interpreted to mean that divine action alone provides the sufficient and necessary conditions for salvation, but as a way of using causal discourse to pick out the most significant causal condition for the phenomena (95). The latter, he argues, is sufficient for guarding against the problems of God owing humanity salvation or further reward, or that salvation is achieved by human merit.

The next two chapters offer another Christology-pneumatology pairing but turn our gaze eastward to Maximus the Confessor and Symeon the New Theologian. From Maximus, Abraham takes important insights regarding how Christ's singularity of action may be constituted by both a divine and human nature, that is by two minds. Symeon the New Theologian situates divine action discourse within the charisma and structures of the church. Here, Abraham interprets Symeon's writings, not merely as a corrective but, as a radical critique of the account of divine action operative within theologies of episcopal succession and strong ecclesial authority. However, Abraham also cautions against crowning this Byzantine monk the champion for more recent trends within ecclesiology. Most importantly to my mind, Abraham uses Symeon to remind theologians that the little phrase 'in the power of the Holy Spirit' may slip off the tongue easily, but it should not be a "labour-saving device that evades the rigorous work of thinking through how we can best identify the presence and action of the Holy Spirit in our midst" (137). Even with such phrases in hand, serious

questions remain as to how and when human agents provide access to divine forgiveness and to the life of the Church.

We remain with ecclesiology but return to the medieval West with Thomas Aquinas (chapter 8) and Teresa of Avila (chapter 9). As with Symeon, Abraham takes seriously both the personal intoxication with the divine presence and the rigorous faithfulness to the daily liturgical practices of the monastic life of these saints. Thomists will want both to defend their hero from Abraham's judgement that, in the end, Thomas gives us a Eucharist theology of "multiple fresh incarnations of the Son of God in the Eucharist" (154) and pick up the half-dozen rhetorical questions that Abraham's leaves open to Thomists to respond to. For Abraham, again, the most important point is neither a sacramental nor general account of divine casuistry, nor precise metaphysics, but a faithful description of the particular, specific, nameable action predicate applied to God in Eucharistic theology.

Teresa of Avila receives the most favourable treatment by Abraham for expanding "our horizon on what God can and does do in the Christian life" (171). Abraham reacts strongly against reducing, pathologizing, or marginalizing the "spook" factor of Teresa's experiences – and here is it Rowan Williams who suffers Abraham's ire. William's allegiance to double agency shows its dark underbelly, for if divine action and human action cannot be prised apart then divine speech can never be anything by the projection of one's own needs and consciousness. Contrary to this, Abraham argues that Teresa shows both mature epistemological reflection and distinguishes between the consolations that are mediated by natural phenomena and spiritual delights that are unmediated and supernatural. Abraham does not even shy away from Teresa's account of negative, painful experiences given to her by God.

If you thought that was brave, then chapter ten's discussion of John Calvin and predestination requires both a heart and mind of steel. Although Abraham discloses his "moral and theological repulsion" with the material proposal of Calvin's doctrine of predestination, "the project itself is entirely legitimate" (189). Calvin is presented as conscientious pastor and courageous theologian whose rigour must be matched if we are to avoid the generic platitudes of love and grace or the utopian vacuum of human self-deception. Abraham's now familiar plea for the reality of non-determined human actions that respond to the divine initiative, that lies at the heart of Abraham's disagreement with Calvin, finds a final ally in Luis de Molina and the notion of concurrence. Grace and nature, again, threaten to overwhelm the field of divine action and turn it into a swamp of generalities.

How out-of-place the language of 'intervention' feels after walking with the tradition, and in the epilogue, Abraham's provides some commentary on the modern developments concerning the theology of divine action that lead to the mental cramp critiqued in volume one. This story is not solely one of bad intellectual training but also of real struggles in the life of faith. If theologians are to do their job in serving both church and academy, then "It is not enough to offer defeaters for methodological and ontological naturalism; philosophers can now readily supply these in abundance. We need to enter into a critical engagement with the tradition and see where that takes us" (221).

I've not hidden the fact that I am an admirer of these volumes, but that is not say that I think everything here should be agreed with. The ecclesiological chapters and review of Calvinism in volume two reveal Abraham's Methodist-Arminianism, and the critiques of double agency are perhaps too scattered given the power that this theory holds in much

Christian thought. Whilst historical figures are dealt with fairly and contextually, narrating such a diversity of complex debates so quickly necessarily carries costs to the depth of engagement that can be achieved, and the risk that a surprising number of these historical figures end up agreeing with Abraham's own theology. Although, as far as this goes, Abraham is less guilty than most. Analytic theologians who favour closed concepts, fans of Kathryn Tanner or scientific solutions to divine action, Thomists and Calvinists will all surely want to defend their darlings, and I sincerely hope they do. This is a book worth disagreeing with. These volumes are erudite, sincere, generous, critical, and most of all brave. The reader is never overloaded with unnecessary information or dense prose; the chapters are short and littered with amusing metaphors in an eminently readable style. I recommend these volumes to all students, researchers, pastors, and educated non-specialists. If nothing else, Abrahams has put divine action debates back in the realm of theological theology where it belongs.