

GOD'S INVOLVEMENT IN EVERYDAY LIFE

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The following are some preliminary observations regarding God's involvement in everyday human life. They are presented in outline form, and with little documentation. In order to facilitate discussion the argument is given in the form of propositions and brief commentaries.

1. PRESUPPOSITIONS

1.1 The central question in our discussion has to do with how God works in the everyday lives of humans - with a theology of human life on earth.

1.11 Generally speaking we can talk of three levels of human explanation. We need a theologically informed response to the questions raised on each of these levels.

EXPLANATION SYSTEM	KEY QUESTIONS TO BE ANSWERED
HIGH RELIGION: (FOCUS ON TRUTH) -> A Theology of Cosmic History	The ultimate origins, purpose, and destiny of the cosmos, the world, the society and the individual.
FOLK RELIGION: (FOCUS ON POWER) -> A Theology of Human History	The meaning of human life and the challenge of death. Human wellbeing and the threat of sickness, drought, barrenness, and other misfortunes. The need for guidance in the face of the uncertainties of the future.
SCIENCE & FOLK SC. (PROBLEM SOLVING) -> A Theology of Natural History	The nature of the empirical world and how we can use it to serve human life. The nature of human societies and human beings, and how we should develop them.

1.12 Because middle and lower level questions dominate the lives of most people, tribal religions focus on them, and folk religions emerge and coexist alongside high religions that seek ultimate explanations. In contrast to high religions that focus on questions of **truth**, folk religions seek **power** to fulfill human desires.

1.13 The focus of theology has rightly been placed on ultimate questions. There is a need, however, to develop a biblical theology that deals with the questions asked at the lower levels. In the past the answers given in the church have been: a) angels and saints (Roman Catholic); b) the providence of God the Father (Reformers); c) the presence of Christ (pietists); and the Holy Spirit (Pentecostal and Charismatics).

1.14 In missions we must deal with the middle level questions for these are the questions most people ask. But we must be aware that there is a great danger of syncretism in folk Christianity because of its tendency to focus on the self and on magical control.

1.2 On the world view level I reject the Cartesian dualism between spirit (Supernatural), and matter (Natural), and accept the Hebraic contingent dualism of God (Creator) and Creation.

GREEK:	SUPERNATURAL	HEBREW:	CREATOR
	NATURAL		CREATION

1.21 A world view provides people with their fundamental **givens**: with the cognitive, affective and evaluative assumptions that underlie the way they order and perceive reality.

1.22 The Hebraic world view of the New Testament provides us with world view assumptions related to theological truths that are **normative for a Christian world view**. In the Old Testament God is not only preparing a people, but also a world view through which he could adequately communicate the Gospel (this includes concepts of God, righteousness, sin, sacrifice, salvation, time and reality).

1.23 The Biblical world view rejects the sharp distinction between divine and natural actions - between the miraculous and the non-miraculous. All of creation is dependent upon the ongoing sustaining act of God. From the human perspective things may appear to be 'ordinary' or 'extraordinary', but this reflects our finite viewpoint.

1.24 For the Christian, science is seeking to understand the order God has placed in creation. Because most sciences construct synchronic models, they do not seek to explain unique events. Ultimately, we must understand reality in terms of diachronic models that deal with God's acts in the history of the world he has created.

1.3 The Bible rejects both a secular world view, and an animistic world view. It presents a third alternative.

1.31 A secular world view denies the existence of God, angelic and Satanic beings, and the spiritual dimension of human beings.

1.32 Animists see a world run by spirits and mana. There is no autonomous material world operating within a created order. Life must be lived by manipulating these by means of sacrifices, threats, sorcery and witchcraft, magic and 'medicines'.

1.33 In contrast to Babylonian and other surrounding religions, the Bible presents a world that is remarkably 'naturalistic' in its operation. God creates an orderly world that is independent from but contingent upon himself. The Bible admits the reality of the spirit world, but spirits do not dominate the way it presents the world and its history.

- 1.34 During the captivity the Jews adopted much of the Babylonian demonology which was brought back to Palestine in Kabala and the Talmud. This tradition does not reflect the Biblical view of the spirit world.
- 1.4 The Bible presents the conflict of good and evil as taking place on several levels.
- 1.41 Christ and the angels are in conflict with Satan and his followers. The victory has already been achieved at the cross, so we no longer need fear Satan and his hosts.
- 1.42 Humans in corporate rebellion organize nations, institutions and groups which are affected by human sin and so fall short of the Kingdom of God. More than seventy-five percent of the time the terms **archon**, **arche** (organizational powers, principalities), **exousia** (authority), **dynamis** (power), **kyriotes** (dominion), and **stoicheia** (cultic traditions) are used with reference to corporate human institutions (Rink 1984).
- 1.43 Humans as individual are in rebellion against God. The original sin was self-deification. Self-possession is still our greatest temptation - to try to become gods (Peck 19; Hunt and McMahon 1985).

2. PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

- 2.1 Healings, exorcisms, visions, prophecies and words of knowledge, resurrections, communication with spirits, transportation and other extra-ordinary phenomena are reported in most religions around the world.
- 2.11 In tribal religions these are the task of the shaman who is the master of ecstasy, combat with spirits, healing and divination, and of ancestors.
- 2.12 In folk Islam, folk Buddhism, and folk Hinduism these are performed by folk priests, specialists in spirits, magicians, diviners, medicine men, and witch doctors.
- 2.13 In high Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism they are associated with mystics (sufis, sanyasins, bikkus), with saints, with gurus and sadhus (who specialize in resurrections), and with ecstasies such as fakirs and dervishes. They are linked to certain temples and shrines (e.g. Tens of thousands go each year to Tirupathi to give offerings and have their head shaved in fulfillment of vows after they claim Venkateswara has healed them.
- 2.14 In folk Catholicism these are attributed to saints, and to the virgin Mary (e.g. thousands pray to the Virgin of Guadalupe, and more than fifteen thousand claim to be healed at Lourdes each year).

- 2.15 There is a revival of folk religion in North America reflected in such papers as the National Observer, the National Enquirer, the National Examiner and the Sun. It can be seen in children's cartoons on Saturday morning T.V., on movies dealing with science fiction, occult, exorcisms, and in rock music. It is reinforced by an emphasis on ecstatic experiences in modern culture.
- 2.16 These phenomena are central to the New Age Movement now spreading in the west. The New Age Movement stresses the divinity of human beings, and the power of the mind over nature.
- 2.2 There is no religious phenomenon unique to Christianity. Phenomena do not constitute a test of the work of God. They themselves must be tested to discern their cause.

3. ONTOLOGICAL ANALYSTS

- 3.1 We need to test phenomenological reports to determine their historical reality and their theological significance.
 - 3.11 To accept all phenomenological reports as ontological real leads to total relativism, and, ultimately, to nihilism. While recognizing the pluralism of phenomenological reports, we must move beyond phenomenology to ontology (Berger 1966).
 - 3.12 All phenomena must be tested by theology and science. Theology provides us with tests based on divine revelation. Science, as the offspring of Christian theology, provides us with methods for reality testing (cf. Peirce 1958; Schilling 19xx; Peck 19xx)
 - 3.13 Reality testing assumes that human knowledge is, in part, objective (Barbour's critical realist epistemology). While we may use instrumental epistemologies and pragmatism for everyday problem solving, they can not be used to test for truth.
 - 3.14 The Catholic church has developed a thorough method for testing for 'miracles'. We need to develop methods as well. As Tippett points out, in dealing with the spirit possession we must distinguish between a) fraudulent cases, b) psychosomatic cases, and c) genuine cases. He estimates that 95% of the cases seen in traditional societies belong to the first two.
- 3.2 We need to develop of theology of God's involvement in everyday human life.
 - 3.21 Such a theology must be rooted in the trinity.
 - 3.212 In the creation and providence of the Father. As Christians we must understand lack of healing as within God's providence - "for all things work for good to those who love Him." In prayer not only do we make our requests known to God, we also listen so as to bring these requests in line with God's purposes. God's providence is the encompassing frame within which human history (particularly that of Christians) must be understood.

3.213 In the presence of the Son who shows us the Father, and is our exemplar - our model for living that centers in the cross and servanthood.

3.214 In the power of the Spirit who shows us the Son, and provides us with power to live godly lives and to show the presence of God on earth in his people.

FATHER
Providence

- maintains creation
- superintends history

SON
Presence

- has won the victory on the cross
- is our exemplar in incarnation and servanthood

SPIRIT
Power

- enables us to have spiritual victory
- manifests through us the power of God as a testimony of the Kingdom of God on earth.

HUMAN HISTORY

3.22 Such a theology must affirm the ongoing work of God in human lives.

The central focus of this work is redemption and reconciliation. To that end God may reveal himself in extraordinary ways to people who are at points of crucial decision or need in their lives. We must affirm that God continues to work 'miracles' in today's world according to his own purposes. Moreover, we must pray earnestly for the sick, the oppressed, the poor and the lost.

3.23 Such a theology must deal with the whole work of God in creation.

It must give Biblical answers to all three levels of questions for which people seek answers (see 1.11 above). 1) We need a theology that answers the questions of ultimate origin, meaning and destiny of creation, of societies and of individuals. 2) We need a theology that deals with divine guidance, healing, provision, protection, justice and peace. 3) We need a theology of natural and social history and order that brings God back into the center of the material order.

We need also to look at a Biblical balance between ultimate and immediate concerns, and between various immediate concerns such as health, provision, justice, peace, and guidance.

3.24 Such a theology must have a biblical view of power

Paul makes it clear that God's saving power must be understood within the framework of the cross and suffering, and transformed lives, and not in a framework of easy success. Paul also speaks much of the power of human corporate institutions for evil.

- 3.25 Such a theology must provide us with the criteria for discerning what is of God from what is not of God. Because no phenomena are uniquely Christian, we need other criteria for testing all phenomena.
- 3.3 In dealing with the involvement of God, angels and demons in everyday life we must guard against error for it is on this level that much of the syncretism has occurred in Christianity.
- 3.31 The danger of confusing phenomenology and ontology.
Phenomenology is rooted in an instrumentalist epistemology that denies our ability to know truth. It's test is pragmatism - does it work. The danger is to confuse pragmatic answers with truth. At the phenomenological level we must take what every person and every culture says as 'true'.
- 3.32 The danger of self-idolatry and a self-centered narcissism.
Folk religion is preoccupied by the self. Self-possession is a greater danger in the western church than demon possession. Our culture stresses personal wellbeing and self-fulfillment at any price. The Gospel calls us to see the world as God sees it - to look at the big picture of human oppression, suffering, poverty, and damnation rather than at our own little worlds.
- 3.33 The danger of a new Christian magic.
In magic the ultimate reality is supernatural power. If we know how to control that power, we can coerce God or manipulate the world to achieve our own ends. Magic is the antithesis of worship that centers around relationships and submission to God.
- 3.34 The danger of instituting a new secularism.
So long as we make a sharp distinction between natural and supernatural, and see God as working essentially through miracles, and science through natural law, we will foster the spread of modern secularism. As miracles become routine, they lose their force or are become the domain of science. We are left with a God-of-the-gaps.
- 3.35 The danger of making signs and wonders normative, and ends in themselves.
Signs and wonders point beyond themselves to lessons God wants to teach us. God gives them to us in order to teach us something. Moreover, most learning occurs through suffering and hardships, not through comfort and ease. In routinizing miracles, they become ends in themselves.
- 3.36 The danger of putting experience over revelation.
We need to develop a theology that interprets and judges our experience. Experience does not determine our theology, but informs it.
- 3.37 The danger of generating a false sense of guilt and failure among those who are not healed. It is easy to rejoice with those who are healed, but those who God chooses not to heal need the support of the Christian community most.

3.38 The danger of a false theology of sickness and death. Death is and sickness are not the triumph of evil that we must resist at all costs. They have been defeated. A Godly death with Christian peace in the face of cancer or death is a greater testimony to God's glory than fighting against death to the bitter end.

3.39 The danger of trivializing the gospel. We need to look at the suffering, injustice, poverty and evil in the world in all its dreadful scale, and not see the gospel as simply meeting my minor needs today.

3.3,10 The danger of a distorted view of the Kingdom of God The Kingdom of God begins with obedience to the King and discipleship, not on what the Kingdom has to offer us. To seek its blessings without emphasising first obedience is to distort the Biblical view of the Kingdom.

4. MISSIOLOGICAL APPLICATIONS

4.1 Personal wellbeing, guidance and success are central to the religious concerns of most people. The Gospel must address these needs, but it must lead people beyond them to the central concerns of the Gospel.

4.11 We must address these felt needs, or people often will not listen to the Gospel.

4.12 A major danger in most traditional societies is that Christianity be seen as a stronger magic than what the people already have. When others come even stronger magic the people turn away from Christianity. God is not just a more powerful magic. He calls into question the underlying assumptions of folk religion that focuses on the self, the present, and the pragmatic solution.

4.14 My understanding of Scripture, and observation in mission settings is that 'signs and wonders' are given largely for unbelievers so that they may believe. This is different from making it normative in the church.

4.13 If we see the essence of the Gospel as meeting everyday human needs, we fall into the trap of the liberals with their social gospel divorced from the message of salvation.

4.2 We dare not accept the beliefs or world views of human cultures as paradigmatic for the Christian church.

4.21 To do so is to confuse phenomenology and ontology, which leads to total relativism.

4.2 To do so is to open the door to syncretism, or to turning Christianity into a civil religion justifying the cultural status quo.

4.3 We must distinguish between the theological positions of new believers as individuals, and the church as the custodian of faith.

- 4.31 We must begin with people where they are in their understanding of reality. We must also recognize the spiritual immaturity of new believers, and accept in them practices we would not expect in mature believers. Signs and wonders may play an important part in their lives as evidences of the presence of God. So to may demons. The central message of the Gospel around the world has been freedom from the fear of the spirit world.
- 4.32 We must help them to grow in their understanding of the central message of the Gospel. We must avoid institutionalizing their immaturity. In Scriptures, God led his people from a faith rooted in him as a greater God than the gods of the nations around them, to a realization that those gods are in fact no gods.
- 4.33 Church leaders and the church as a hermeneutical community is responsible for teaching and modeling mature Christian faith and practice. Their faith in God should be rooted in a close walk with God and in the Scriptures.
- 4.34 While the church exists in different cultures, it remains one. Therefore churches in different lands are responsible for helping each other towards truth and faithfulness to the Gospel. Moreover, churches today must learn from the history of the church for they share in that history. There is always a danger of the church being acultural or ahistorical or both. We must recognize the unity of the church while taking into account cultural and historical differences.