CHAPTER FOUR

DESCRIBING GOD’S ACTION IN THE WORLD IN LIGHT OF SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE OF REALITY

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1. Introduction

I intend this brief essay as a “trial balloon.” I shall sketch how we can describe God’s action in the world, accepting with critical seriousness both our present and projected knowledge of reality as we have it from the sciences, philosophy and other non-theological disciplines, and our present knowledge of God, his/her relationship with us and our world, and his/her activity within it.

By saying that we shall accept the knowledge we have from both ranges of experience with “critical seriousness,” I mean accepting it as indicating something about the realities it claims to talk about, after carefully applying the critical evaluations of such claims which are available within the disciplines themselves, and within philosophy and the other human sciences. This obviously involves beginning with a number of definite presuppositions, some of which favor neither the sciences nor religion and spirituality, and some of which do. But it also involves the presupposition that the claims of each have been carefully examined in the light of the different ranges of experience and certain principles of interpretation and validation. I shall not spend time here going through that process step by step, but instead shall simply assert some general results in each area which derive from such a distillation. It will be somewhat obvious to those in the respective fields what critiques I have applied to reach the results I shall assert. Then I shall attempt to marshall these results into a roughly-sketched, integrated theory of God’s action in the world.

The input into this integrated, coherent theory of God’s action will not consist of highly technical assertions—either from science or from philosophy and theology—but rather assertions which more or less describe the general character of the world as we know it from the contemporary sciences and the limits of our knowledge of it, and
the general character of God’s action in the world as we know it from contemporary Christian belief and theology. The latter has already developed a great deal in response to the input and challenges mediated to our culture by the sciences. In other terms, we wish to attempt to describe more adequately God’s action in the world, given that we know that the world, its structures, and processes, are presently best described in such and such a way (from the sciences and philosophy) and that God and his/her relationships to the world are presently best described in such and such a way (from theology and philosophy). What we know from each set of disciplines must critically interact with what we know from the other set according to certain principles (which we shall later outline). This interaction should modify each set of disciplines—particularly in our interpretation of the conclusions each one reaches at a philosophical level—and allow us to describe God’s action in the world in an integrated way.

Implicit here, as Stephen Happel has pointed out to me, is the methodological problem of how these two languages are to be integrated. This is an issue which is important, but one which is best treated after allowing the interaction to occur via the critical apparatuses which are already available and functioning. The two languages of science and religion/theology, though different, are not isolated from or out of contact with one another. They continue to be in dynamic interaction in our common cultural and academic fields.

In describing what we know about the world and about God, and his/her relationship to us and to physical reality, I need to employ a language, a set of categories, and certain philosophical presuppositions. In particular, I assume a weakly critical-realist stance and use some of the language, categories, and metaphysical presuppositions of Aristotelianism and Thomism, most notably the notions of primary and secondary causality. Other categories might have been chosen and other assumptions might have been made instead. I have chosen these because, in my opinion, they are more adequate to both the scientific and the theological data, and lead to fewer difficulties in explicating the essential differences between God and his/her creation, the relationships between them, and the ideas of divine immanence and transcendence. It is important to note also that I use the term ‘law’ in the context

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1 Personal communication. Here and elsewhere in this paper I am indebted to Happel’s very helpful comments.