The Supremacist Soteriology of Divine Omnipotence

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Omnipotence will not be abandoned by the Church until we can compellingly replace the soteriological function it plays for theology.

The Meaning of Words

In his 1929 entry for the "Critical Dictionary", philosopher Georges Bataille provided one of the earliest examples of the deconstructive gesture in European philosophy. "A dictionary begins," he writes, "when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their tasks."[i] Concepts are best understood, Bataille believes, not merely through formal definitions and logical analyses, but also by exploring *the functional role they play* in their context.

Such an approach, now commonly understood as deconstruction, has an important role in contemporary thought. Bataille was criticized by the Surrealist and Existentialist circles in Paris but eventually influenced an entire generation of prominent philosophers like Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Gilles Deleuze.

The power of Bataille's critical method is that it pays attention *to what an idea does in the world*. When and why is it used? Whose interests does it serve? These questions help illuminate dimensions of meaning not contained within the word itself, but which are nonetheless constitutive. Rather than mere dissection, a broader engagement pays careful attention to how an idea *moves*—and perhaps to what moves with it—to reveal its larger field of influence.

Theopoetics

For contemporary theology, and particularly for the still-emerging field of theopoetics, the Bataillean method may be useful. Though there is much to deconstruct within the tradition, the purpose of critical engagement is not solely to dismantle, but also to *enliven*—crafting ideas that can perform vitalizing tasks in the world. Just as Gilles Deleuze came to define philosophy as the creation of new concepts [ii], theopoetics can be conceived as bringing new theological expressions to life—*poiesis*, not just poetry.

Thomas Jay Oord's recent book *The Death of Omnipotence and Birth of Amipotence* is a good example of this kind of theopoetic approach[iii]—deconstructing omnipotence while constructively offering a new idea to take its place, which Oord calls *amipotence*, the power of love. Engaging constructively with Oord's work requires that we ask (with Bataille) what *tasks* omnipotence has been serving in the larger history of theology and whether to abandon those tasks or take them up in a new way with amipotence.

The purpose of the following brief reflection is to do precisely this. We will identify two prominent functions omnipotence has served in the broader theological context—

critiquing and rejecting the first while taking up the important challenge of the second. In support of Oord's thesis, we will close by pointing in the direction contemporary theology might go to replace omnipotence while keeping in mind the supportive function amipotence must then serve for the larger theological vision.

Order and Deliverance

If our desire is to influence those who may not be immediately receptive to what Oord calls the "death of omnipotence," we must be sensitive to the ways omnipotence fits within a larger theological construct and serves certain purposes. As in the reconstruction of a house, some walls are load-bearing. Omnipotence is precisely such a wall. If we wish to renovate our conception of God's power, we must ask how doing so will impact other parts of our faith and how to respond to the gap it leaves. No matter how strong our critique is, if we cannot offer a compelling alternative, many people will be unwilling to let go because of what else may fall with it.

Thus, we find that the concept of omnipotence has historically performed two essential tasks. The first, which must be resisted, has to do with establishing a hierarchical *order* to the world. The second task has to do with *salvation*—with our soteriological yearning for deliverance—and is a more complicated issue with which we must grapple if we are to fully embrace the death of omnipotence.

Cosmic Sovereign

Historically, one of the most prominent tasks of omnipotence—the task that must be vigorously resisted in contemporary theology if we are to free Christianity of a deep inner contradiction—has been the use of absolute divine power to establish God as '*Supreme Being',* the cosmic sovereign. This vision emanates from what we should clearly recognize as a projection—a human desire for power and control, placed within the symbol of God and used as an attempt to justify what cannot be justified.

A theology of divine omnipotence is ultimately about more than power, it is about *hierarchy*—about rulership, obedience, worship, and the proper ordering of the world. It is a vision that celebrates a distorted version of transcendence, and does not reflect the immanent, incarnational, perichoretic embrace of divine love at the heart of Christianity. As Alfred North Whitehead famously put it, when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire it came to embrace a deep idolatry of fashioning God "in the image of the Egyptian, Persian, and Roman imperial rulers."[iv] "Caesar conquered," he declared, and the Church then "gave unto God the attributes which belonged exclusively to Caesar." The imperial version of Christianity that subsequently developed across the centuries differed starkly from the "brief Galilean vision of humility" that inspired the early Church.

Not Benign

No matter how piously it is intended, the problem with the conception of God as supreme cosmic sovereign is that it serves *as the theological foundation for supremacism itself*. For truly, if we worship a 'Supreme Being' our view by definition takes shape around a theology

of supremacy. It instantiates a fundamental hierarchy into the order of reality, with God on top and creation below, and divinely ordains such a relational pattern as the original and proper state of affairs.

Though divine supremacy is conceived as a benign vision because of God's perfect love and righteousness, such an idea is emphatically *not* benign. We must think critically (again with Bataille) about what the *task* of such an idea truly is—how it moves in the world, and what moves with it. We find that the task of omnipotence is to establish authority and obedience as the primary theological axis—conceiving sin as rebellion and punishment as justice. Historically, this has provided cultural support and theological justification in the Christian world for movements of power, conquest, and subjugation across the ages—in deep contradiction to the radical teachings of its namesake.

It is for this reason—to reject the idea that supremacy contains a holy truth—that contemporary theologians like Thomas Jay Oord are correct to set their theopoetic sights on a different way of conceiving our relationship with God. The goal is not to abandon religious faith but to overturn the logic of empire that has become embedded into our language about the divine. As Oord outlines, omnipotence is not a Biblical concept, nor a philosophically coherent one, and it cannot satisfactorily answer the intrinsic question of theodicy it provokes: How an all-powerful God could fail to prevent suffering, injustice, and evil in the world.

But even in affirming all of these points, there is still something we must grapple with if omnipotence is ever to be formally discarded by the Church. This issue has to do with the flip side of the coin of theodicy: *the question of liberation*—which amidst the prayers and tears of a wounded world is the theologically important topic of 'soteriology', to which we turn next.

The Power to Save

If *God Can't*[v]—as the title of one of Oord's recent books declares—then the question becomes: What *can* God do? Does God's presence in the world count for something? This question matters as much to the vulnerable depths of our spirit as to the vibrant materiality of our existence. And it points therefore to the second task of 'omnipotence' in theology, which has been to ground our soteriological hope—our yearning for a world that would one day be free of suffering, injustice, and oppression.

This hope that God *can* is where the belief in omnipotence finds its de facto appeal, and what makes it mostly immune to academic debates about scriptural interpretation and logical incoherence. For many people, only an all-powerful God is conceived as strong enough to overcome evil, to overthrow tyrants, and loose the bonds of oppression. It is a hope for hope itself—a hope for the divine power to *save*. The theology of supremacy has been able to use this hope against itself, so the only way to truly dislodge the concept of omnipotence from its larger religious embrace is to find a new way to respond to this question of salvation.

When approaching this topic, we are not talking about being saved from damnation—which is itself a conceptual attendant of the cosmic sovereign. We are asking whether divine love has the power to *transform*—and what exactly we mean by such a statement. This is not meant to be an abstract question, nor a purely eschatological one. It is a question about war and empire, about ecological collapse and personal trauma, about domestic violence and systemic racism. It is a political question and a personal one. It is the question of whether a theology of poured-out love has the strength to overcome evil and not be annihilated by it.

The Power of Love

It is with this question in mind that we must ask with Oord whether amipotence—*the power of love*—is capable of responding in a compelling way to the soteriological hope that has previously been addressed by the theology of divine omnipotence. I believe the answer is a qualified yes, but the theological importance of this topic requires a robust engagement in the question of *how*—how, beyond a merely symbolic sense, can love be conceived to have true efficacy in the world, true liberative potential?

It is not possible in just a few paragraphs to respond to such an important undertaking for contemporary theology. But the possibilities for our social and political imagination in this most precarious of centuries is intimately and urgently implicated in the answer. We must find a way to resist the forces of racist and religious nationalism that will surely continue to gain prominence in the century ahead—forces we recognize as deriving significant energy and narrative appeal from theologies of hierarchy and supremacism.

Though we cannot complete such a task here, we can certainly point in the direction we might go. Contemporary theology has a strong opportunity to establish a new, non-supremacist soteriology based on an *ontological* understanding of how love moves in the world. This opportunity is to be found by taking up the task of reconceiving a spiritual cosmology for a post-Newtonian, post-Constantinian world—one that panentheistically embraces the way the world *becomes* in relationship with the divine*,* at the dynamic intersection of possibility and actuality. These themes operate visibly in the background of Oord's thesis, but must be unpacked if we wish to make the full theological case. If God's relationship with the world is located at the level of its processual becoming, we can argue coherently and convincingly about love's powerful, intimate role in this process. It would enable us to pursue an inclusive soteriology of healing for *all* of creation, not just humans alone—one that depends not on the exercise of force but the entangled embrace of invitation and gift.

The theme of love's processual *perichoretics* is just as central to the religious tradition as omnipotence—it is present at the very beginning of the theological record. But love has not previously been understood as having true *power* in the world. A vital path is to be traced through a serious philosophical engagement with the ontology of divine love and its role in the vibrant becoming of the world. Doing so, we can lay claim to an alternative basis for our

soteriological hopes and abandon the false vision of the cosmic sovereign. We can reject omnipotence and its imperial tasks, and welcome instead the true power of divine love—love poured out for the healing and restoration of all creation.

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[i] Georges Bataille, "Formless" in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927–1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 31.
[ii] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994)
[iii] Thomas Jay Oord, *The Death of Omnipotence and Birth of Amipotence* (United States: Findaway Voices, 2023).
[iv] Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: Free Press, 1985), 342.
[v] Thomas Jay Oord, *God Can't: How to Believe in God and Love after Tragedy, Abuse, and Other Evils* (United States: Findaway Voices, 2020).

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