

Marquette University  
**e-Publications@Marquette**

---

Theology Faculty Research and Publications

Theology, Department of

---

1-1-2013

# Human Contingency, Divine Freedom, and the Normative Shape of Saving History

Philip J. Rossi

Marquette University, [philip.rossi@marquette.edu](mailto:philip.rossi@marquette.edu)

---

Published version. "Human Contingency, Divine Freedom, and the Normative Shape of Saving History," in *The Shaping of Tradition: Context and Normativity*. Eds. Colby Dickinson L Boeve and Terrence Merrigan. Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2013: 117-130. [Publisher Link](#). © 2013 Peeters Publishers. Used with permission.

# Human Contingency, Divine Freedom, and the Normative Shape of Saving History

*Philip J. Rossi*

## I. Introduction: Contingency, Doubly Inflected

The claims and arguments offered in this essay function within the framework of a larger project, “Grace, Freedom, and the Fragility of Agency: A Theological Anthropology for a Fractured World,” which will offer the contours of a theological anthropology of human finite freedom that situates the workings of grace in the social world of the cultures of late modernity as described in Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*.<sup>1</sup> Taylor’s account articulates crucial ways in which various modes of secularity re-frame the conceptual and cultural coordinates for understanding the human in the aftermath of modernity. Inasmuch as these modes of secularity locate the human within a self-sufficient “immanent frame,” they offer little conceptual space from which to affirm that humanity and the cosmos stand in relation to the divine reality Christian faith names as the God who both transcends the world and is immanently present to it.<sup>2</sup> Taylor further argues that these re-framed coordinates, by making it possible to attend closely to the shape and import of the dynamics of multiplicity in human culture, nonetheless provide new conceptual space for delimiting fundamental human moral and spiritual aspirations. In consequence, even as a secular age sets loose forces fracturing once settled meanings about humanity’s relation to the divine, it also propels a “nova effect” opening new possibilities for discerning the Spirit working in the variety, breadth and depth of human and cosmic reality.<sup>3</sup>

As a result, a fundamental challenge for framing a theological anthropology appropriate to “a secular age” is that its account of the human needs to render intelligible the possibility of humanity standing in relation to a transcendent God, even as it is immersed within “secularities” that have both constituted an “immanent frame” for self-understanding

<sup>1</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter 15, “The Immanent Frame,” 539-593.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, Part III, “The Nova Effect,” Chapters 8-11, 299-419.

and energized a “nova effect” for the human spirit. The forces operative in the secularities of late modernity put efforts to understand the human into a matrix of what Taylor describes as “cross-pressures.”<sup>4</sup> On one side, there is pressure to reshape our understanding of what makes us human into contours provided by an immanent frame in which God is (presumed) absent but human spiritual impulses continue; on another side, there is pressure on believers to re-fashion their theological understanding of how the divine gifting that enacts the immanent presence of the transcendent God toward humanity and all creation – an enactment that Christian theology names “grace” – functions with respect to a spiritually restive humanity now dwelling within an “immanent frame.”

“Contingency” has emerged as a central theme for this project, resonating in the conceptual spaces both of anthropology, now keyed to (but not only to) an “immanent frame” as the locus for the human condition, and of “grace,” rendered as a locus of encounter of divine and human freedom. This theme, however, is differently “inflected” (i.e., functions with a different conceptual grammar) with respect to the terms – grace, freedom, and agency – the project title highlights as points of reference for theological anthropology. Articulating an anthropology of human finite freedom appropriately attentive to grace working in human cultures shaped in the aftermath of modernity will thus require situating human agency and its exercise within the dynamics of the multiple inflections of contingency. Such an anthropology should enable us to discern the lineaments of grace playing in the various fields of contingency stretched throughout the fracturing and fragmented cultures that humans now inhabit.

Two “inflections” of contingency are of major consequence for constructing this anthropology of finite freedom. The first articulates the contingency of creation, i.e., the original gratuity of God’s bringing to be the entire creation of which the human is part; the second articulates the contingency operating *in* creation, i.e., the dynamics of the created order that marks out the finitude of the scope and efficacy of the human agency exercised in that order. The first inflection renders the contingency of creation theologically as the sustained primal enactment of grace – good freely bestowed from and enacted by God’s abundant inner goodness.<sup>5</sup> The contingency functioning *within* the primal enactment of grace that is creation,

<sup>4</sup> Taylor, *Secular Age*, Chapter 16, 594-617.

<sup>5</sup> See David Burrell, “Creation as Original Grace,” *God, Grace and Creation*, ed. Philip J. Rossi (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010) 99: “Avowing that the origin of the universe is free means, of course, that it is an utterly gratuitous act of God, a grace.”

however, is one that, in contrast, is inflected – particularly with respect to human agency – as a “contingency of uncertain outcome.” This is the contingency of what might have been different, a contingency often manifest as a contingency of fracture, of events that could – and should – have been otherwise but were not, of “things gone wrong” in consequence of the enmeshment of human agency in the webs of multiple contingency in the workings of a created world standing totally in radical dependence. As a result, an adequate theological parsing of the differences between these two “inflections” of contingency must keep their uses in proper relation to one other. It requires that its account of (the grammars of) divine and human freedom serve a dual function that enables us, first, to recognize – with respect to each inflection – the radical difference between divine and human agency and, second, to articulate appropriate ways, notwithstanding that difference, for characterizing their relationship to each other.

It is thus with reference to this project of articulating a theological anthropology of finite freedom, indexed to grace in terms of the double inflection of contingency, that I offer the three main points of this essay. These focus on human vulnerability as a central anthropological marker for discerning how the double inflection of contingency bears upon efforts to render the workings of grace theologically intelligible within the dynamics of “a secular age.” In particular, I argue for marking out human vulnerability as a “gracing,” a divine gifting, enacted in a three-fold modality: first, as inscribed in the contingency of Creation; second, as taken into the triune relationality of God in the Incarnation; and, third, as transformed to salvific efficacy in the outpouring of the Spirit from the crucified and risen Lord Jesus. I will further propose that rendering human vulnerability as such a three-fold graced enactment then provides a central locus from which to discern normative claims emergent from the contested fields of interplay between “history” and “tradition.”

## II. Normativity and the “Immanent Frame”

Before setting forth the specifics of these points about the shape and function of human vulnerability within an anthropology of freedom and the bearing they have upon normative claims arising in history, it will be useful to provide a conceptual framework in which to situate “normativity” with respect to “history” and “tradition.” While we can trace efforts to delineate the basis, function and scope of normative terms and judgments at least as far back as Socratic inquiry about the virtues, the trajectory of

recent Western treatments of normativity has followed the conceptual vectors ingredient in what Taylor terms the “Great Disembedding” formative of modernity’s “social imaginary” – i.e., “the ways in which [people] imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations which are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.”<sup>6</sup> Among these vectors are shifts that have taken place in understanding the self (from “porous” to “buffered”<sup>7</sup>), the fundamental structure of social relations (from a society of mediating “hierarchical complementarity” to one of a horizontal “direct access,” with a corresponding shift from “network” identities to “categorical” ones<sup>8</sup>), the workings of the natural world (from “enchanted” to “disenchanted”<sup>9</sup>), and time (from a dyadic interpenetration of “sacred” and “profane” times to an undifferentiated monism of a purely linear, immanent temporality<sup>10</sup>).

These shifts have coalesced, on Taylor’s account, into a “constellation” of interlocking cosmic, social and moral orders of self-sufficient explanation, justification, and practice that make possible the social imaginary he calls “the immanent frame.” Within the immanent frame, the long standing presumption in Western culture for belief in a (transcendent) God as origin and fundament for the cosmic, social, and moral orders has become so contested that it no longer stands as the “default” position: Belief and unbelief are both contestable options, functions of individual choice no longer requiring a locus of social embedding for their intelligibility. Within such mutual contestability for both belief and unbelief, the “immanent frame” has a particularly consequential function for my placement of human vulnerability as a focus for discussion of the relation of normativity to history and tradition: The immanent frame now provides the dominant field of meaning in which modernity’s high moral demands for universal benevolence and justice insistently pressure both belief and unbelief into a shared dilemma. This dilemma is whether either of them has sufficient moral capacity to empower fragile and vul-

<sup>6</sup> Taylor, *Secular Age*, 171. See Chapter 3, “The Great Disembedding,” 146–158, Chapter 4, “Modern Social Imaginaries,” 159–211, and Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004) for detailed discussions of these concepts.

<sup>7</sup> Taylor, *Secular Age*, 134–142, 300–307; see Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) Part II “Inwardness,” 111–207, for his account of the emergence of “the buffered self.”

<sup>8</sup> Charles Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011) 272.

<sup>9</sup> Taylor, *Secular Age*, 25–42.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 54–59.

nerable human agents to respond adequately and consistently to the powerful aspirations to human fullness embedded in these demands.

Taylor's account of "the immanent frame" has antecedents in his long-standing project to counter reductive naturalism.<sup>11</sup> Since the publication of *Sources of the Self*, moreover, questions of moral normativity framed in terms of "moral sources" and "constitutive goods," have served him as key points of reference for tracking the moral, religious, and spiritual condition of humanity as it has fitted itself (neither fully nor comfortably) into its current "immanent frame." Of particular note for my purposes is that his treatment of the normative coordinates he sees functioning in the cultures of secularity (as well as in its antecedents) explicitly attends to the workings of the multi-layered historical contexts from which these coordinates emerge, develop, and function. Furthermore, while not explicitly framing his project methodologically or substantively as theological, Taylor pays close attention to the theological horizons against which the "Great Disembedding" took place. His account acknowledges – far more than most forms of what he terms the standard "subtraction" story of secularity and secularization – the complex role that the religious and theological dynamics in the trajectory of "Christendom" (particularly the dynamics of "Reform") have had and continue to have in this process.

In consequence, his work offers particularly useful conceptual, methodological, and interpretive patterns from which to address the normativity at stake for theology in the interplay of history and tradition. These can be found throughout the various layers of his robust philosophical affirmation of a moral normativity discernible in the reflective and self-interpreting workings of human agency as it engages history and culture. Taylor's account of the functioning of moral normativity in history is constructed with a view to providing an alternative narrative, with an appropriately differentiated conceptual framework, that disputes various contending views about the rise of the "modern social imaginary" and the "immanent frame" it brings in its wake. Some views – those espoused by the "boosters" of modernity, to which Taylor devotes considerable attention – often read modernity as a largely praiseworthy outcome of historical dynamics by which humanity has succeeded in placing itself intentionally and consciously on an upward epistemic and moral trajectory.

Within this set of views, there is a strong strain of "exclusive humanism" that counts the sidelining of transcendence by the immanent frame as an

<sup>11</sup> Charles Taylor, *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 1-12.

important human gain wrought in the course of modernity. Even as Taylor vigorously disputes these views on a number of counts, he does thereby not align himself with the counter views put forth by those he terms the “knockers” of modernity – be it a backward looking hankering for a social world of hierarchical complementarity, a Nietzschean transvaluation of the priority that modernity has given to justice and benevolence, or an anti-foundationalist skepticism about the possibility of any non-arbitrary construction of values. At the same time, he considers elements of yet another approach – what he terms the “immanent revolt” deployed by forms of romanticism and expressivism in their stance against the forces of exclusive humanism – to indicate the persistence of a spiritual dynamic in human agency that the immanent frame has mostly made invisible.<sup>12</sup> This dynamic, at work in both artistic and conceptual modes of the “immanent revolt,” has played a role in drawing attention to human vulnerability and fragility as sites of “fissure” in the immanent frame. This suggests that, to the extent that an anthropology of human freedom recognizes the crucial role of vulnerability in marking out human freedom as finite, such vulnerability provides an appropriate vantage point for attending to grace at work amid and within these fissures.

Embedded in Taylor’s counter-account of “a secular age” is an affirmation central for discussion of the bearing of normativity upon history: History and culture provide the primary field for the enmeshment of human agency and freedom with the contingency of events in the world, as well as a vantage point offering a glimpse into the radical contingency of creation. That field encompasses, on the side of agency and freedom, the full array of self-determining human conduct and social practice, and, on the side of the contingency of events, the natural and social processes that function beyond the range of full human direction and control. Taylor’s account also affirms a “moral realism” for the normative governance of human freedom and agency exercised within that field of interaction. He disputes views claiming that the contingency of events in the world and self-determining human conduct are the only elements in the formative dynamics of human moral valuation and action. Against these views, he argues that structurally ingredient in the constitution of that moral field is also a set of constitutive goods, which he describes as “something the love of which empowers us to do good and be good.”<sup>13</sup> These “strong moral sources” have a normative function that is both ethical and metaphysical.<sup>14</sup> These sources function as normative by

<sup>12</sup> See Taylor, *Sources*, Chapters 23-24, 419-493; *Secular Age*, Chapter 16, “Cross Pressures,” 594-617.

<sup>13</sup> Taylor, *Sources*, 93.

<sup>14</sup> Although Taylor does not explicitly address the ways in which moral and metaphysical ordering intersect, I believe that he would agree with Susan Neiman’s dictum that

giving direction to the self-determining activity of human freedom and agency. Taylor's moral realism is thus robustly teleological; its sources draw human conduct towards a "fullness" that, even as it encompasses human well-being in its totality, is not thereby determined exclusively or exhaustively by that well-being, nor brought about solely by self-determining human conduct. The normativity of these sources is also metaphysical. Taylor takes the fullness to which human activity is ordered to have its basis in that which can be appropriately affirmed not merely as an ideal moral horizon arising from the self-determining structure of human freedom; it is a genuinely transcendent reality, providing the exercise of freedom in human moral agency with a fundamental vector towards a fullness that is not merely of its own making.

### III. Situated Freedom: Embodiment, Finitude, and Human Vulnerability

Taylor's teleological moral realism of constitutive goods thus provides a major element in the conceptual framework within which to locate my claims about human vulnerability as a normative marker for the working of grace in history. A particular value of Taylor's account is that it makes possible the articulation of the "anthropologies of situated freedom" that he has long considered central for an adequate philosophical account of the human condition in the circumstances of late modernity and its aftermath.<sup>15</sup> Taylor's overall project – the construction of a philosophical anthropology to counter the reductive naturalism entrenched in twentieth-century accounts of human agency<sup>16</sup> – models a range of strategies needed for appropriately "situating" human freedom and the subjectivity it encompasses "by relating it to our life as embodied and social beings, without reducing [them] to a function of objectified nature."<sup>17</sup> Notable among these

"Ethics and metaphysics are not *accidentally* connected. Whatever attempts we make to live rightly are attempts to live in the world." See Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002) 327.

<sup>15</sup> See Taylor, *Sources*, 514–515. Taylor does not offer a thematically focused treatment of "situated freedom" in *Sources*, but relies upon the discussion of this concept in *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975) 559–571; reproduced in *Hegel and Modern Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) 154–169.

<sup>16</sup> For his characterization of his project as "philosophical anthropology," see *Human Agency and Language*, 1, as well as the second in a series of 2011 interviews on CBC radio [<http://www.cbc.ca/ideas/episodes/2011/04/11/the-malaise-of-modernity-part-1--5/>; accessed November 13, 2011].

<sup>17</sup> Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, 167.



strategies are the forms of “thick description” he uses to capture the historical, socio-cultural, and conceptual dynamics providing the context for concrete enactments of human freedom. As Taylor’s thick descriptions unfold, he renders these enactments in terms that show them manifesting a capacity he considers crucial for articulating what it is to be human: self-interpretation.<sup>18</sup> Such thick descriptions, moreover, require close attention to the material circumstances of the human condition in which self-interpreting human agents enact their freedom. At this level, framing an anthropology of situated freedom requires recognition that one fundamental coordinate of the human condition is that the self-interpreting human agents who enact their freedom are *embodied* agents, whose agency functions in social relationships to other embodied agents within a nexus of interaction constituted by the material conditions of nature and culture.

This recognition – i.e., that human freedom is enacted in society, culture, and nature by self-interpreting embodied agents – is crucial. It links the prior discussion of the function of constitutive goods as the locus for normativity within Taylor’s account of human freedom situated in the historical context of a secular age to the claims that I make about human vulnerability as a normative marker for the operation and efficacy of grace in history. Taylor’s situating of human freedom is primarily articulated in a mode that offers, as part of his efforts to refute naturalism, a philosophical parsing of the language of human agency that can vindicate the validity and aptness of speaking of the structure and operation of subjectivity in that agency as enactments of an “enfleshed spirit.” Transposed into the language of a long tradition of theological anthropology, Taylor’s project can be read as an effort to provide a contemporary philosophical grammar with which to parse an affirmation that body and soul, flesh and spirit, are mutually constitutive of human persons.

His account of agency is thus, at least in part, an argument that we can truly construe our existence as human selves to be that of an embodied spiritual reality, i.e., that our human activities are animated at their inmost core by what properly may be termed “spirit.”<sup>19</sup> Taylor’s philosophical account of our human reality in its concrete situatedness is further marked

<sup>18</sup> Self-interpretation requires both language and valuing: “[T]o be a full human agent, to be a person or self in the ordinary meaning, is to exist in a space defined by distinctions of worth. A self is a being for whom certain questions of categoric value have arisen, and received at least partial answers” (*Human Agency and Language*, 3); see also “Self-interpreting animals,” *Human Agency and Language*, 45-76.

<sup>19</sup> Taylor, *Sources*, 520: “The intention of this work was ... to bring air back again into the half-collapsed lungs of the spirit.”

by an inclusive, soberly measured hopefulness for the future of humankind, a future also properly articulated in the grammar of "spirit." Normativity in history is thus indexed to what enables the capacities and activities of the embodied agency of human spirit to attain its proper "fullness." This enabling condition for the capacity of human agents to attain fullness, as well as for that fullness itself, is the transcendent God upon which all that is stands in the radical contingency of creation.

I will thus advance the claims made in the rest of this essay against the background of this reading of Taylor's project. These claims relate his philosophical parsing of the language of the freedom enacted by embodied human agents as an affirmation of our human spiritual reality to a counterpart theological parsing of the language of "human vulnerability" that is made in terms of its significance for the embodied social enactment of human freedom. This theological parsing of our human vulnerability will be delimited by indexing it to two central dimensions of our human situatedness, "contingency," and "finitude," as they stand against the background of a Trinitarian construal of the relational gifting that is "grace." Within this parsing, the hopefulness for the fullness that Taylor gestures toward in his grammar of spirit can be construed as the space within which possibilities open up for the created and human orders to be bearers of the grace of God and, insofar as they bear that grace, for their thereby being transformed by it. The addendum that I offer to Taylor's gesture toward fullness is that human vulnerability constitutes a central space upon which such possibilities open.

Let me locate these claims in terms of an anthropology of human freedom that situates the workings of grace within the fracturing dynamics of the cultures of late modernity. The claim I am advancing here of most importance for that anthropology is that our embodiment is a fundamental marker of the vulnerability inscribed in our humanity in virtue of our being participant in both "inflections" of contingency: Vulnerability manifests the fragility of a human finitude that is created as embodied. We are vulnerable in terms of the contingency that marks the radical dependence of creation upon the "original grace" of God's enacting and sustaining all creation into its being. This vulnerability is evoked in the recognition that we might not have been at all and, indeed, that creation need not have been at all. It is the vulnerability of standing before an abyss of not-being, a vertiginous marker of the radical dependence inscribed in our being creatures. We are vulnerable as well in terms of the workings of the contingency of uncertain outcome in creation, as that contingency bears upon the multi-leveled materiality of our embodied selves enmeshed in the

working of nature and culture; this vulnerability is most pronounced in the face of those ravages of contingency we rightly name suffering and evil. These are constituted in their unintelligibility precisely by the manner in which they resound with the dissonance between the two inflections of contingency. In consequence, even as the vulnerability marked by this latter inflection of contingency is often the one we experience as most pressing, adequately construing its anthropological and theological significance nonetheless requires reading it in conjunction with the first inflection, the contingency of a creation that stands in radical dependence.

#### IV. Human Vulnerability and the Historical Normativity of God's Incarnation

Taylor's project of situating the freedom of our self-interpreting embodied social agency, particularly as that agency dwells amid "cross-pressures" from the "immanent frame," provides conceptual coordinates from which my account of human vulnerability, as it stands where the two inflections of contingency intersect, engages questions of the normativity of history. These coordinates structure a syntax by which the contours of this intersection – and the dissonance it brings forth – can be indexed historically and theologically to the trajectories impelled by the dynamics of socio-cultural fragmentation in late modernity. This indexing involves tracking the freedom of our embodied social agency along both inflections of contingency: Even as the "immanent frame" evokes new dissonant modulations from the workings of the contingency of uncertain outcome, it also places the exercise of our self-interpreting agency into a context of a radical sundering from the contingency of creation. The coordinates drawn from Taylor's project provide a way to discern theological intelligibility in the modulations and the sundering at play in the immanent frame, each of which challenges the possibility of normative claims emerging out of the working of history. In particular, his account of the dilemmas that "cross-pressures" from persistent human moral and spiritual aspirations place upon "the immanent frame" suggests that our enfleshed vulnerability constitutes a central dimension of the human space in which the gifting of grace becomes normatively operative with respect to those aspirations.

In the remainder of this essay I will thus briefly indicate how, within those dynamics of fragmentation, such "cross pressures" upon the immanent frame provide a basis from which to orient theological efforts to construe history normatively in a secular age. I will propose that the normativity

at work in the interplay of divine and human freedom constituting history is most properly referenced to the Incarnation, inasmuch as “the Word become flesh” stands to history as the graced fullness of divine and human freedom. I will do this by using Taylor’s work as source for a preliminary “syntax of grace” to render theologically intelligible the dissonant intersection of the two inflections of contingency. This will make possible the articulation of a fundamental normative principle for the working of grace in the history that has eventuated in the fractured condition of a secular age. I will propose that this principle, which Taylor has formulated as “God’s steadfast resolve not to abandon humanity in its worst distress,”<sup>20</sup> exhibits its normativity through its full enactment in the incarnation and the suffering love of Jesus, from which stem the salvific outpouring of God’s Spirit upon history, reaching its fullness for our enfleshed, vulnerable agency in the eschatological promise of the resurrection of the body.

The incarnation and the outpouring of the Spirit in a history ordered to eschatological fullness thus form the end point from which to read a normative theological intelligibility at work in the dynamics of dissonance and fracture, particularly as they have, in the aftermath of modernity, thrown into relief the space “between” these two inflections of contingency as a central locus for our human vulnerability.<sup>21</sup> Attention to this space of dissonance is, however, hardly a new concern arising uniquely within modernity encompassed within an “immanent frame.” This dissonance defines the compelling tension in the Book of Job, which thus offers a useful starting point from an earlier horizon through which to read the theological intelligibility of those dynamics. This point is staked out within that book’s narrative and argumentative contestations over the inflections of contingency as the space of interplay for the workings of human and divine agency. Underlying Job’s defense that the woes besetting him are unwarranted is an awareness that he – and indeed all humans – dwell in a dissonant space in which the inequitable workings of contingency in creation can ultimately render morally pointless the contingency of radical dependence. The case he makes against the smugness of his friends’ claims that blameless suffering is not part of the contingency in a world that comes from God is not simply a defense of

<sup>20</sup> Taylor, *Secular Age*, 654.

<sup>21</sup> *Sources of the Self* and *A Secular Age* attend to various manifestations of these “dynamics of fracture.” Both Susan Neiman (*Evil in Modern Thought*) and George Steiner (*Real Presences* [Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989] and *Grammars of Creation* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001]) provide astute commentaries on the forces at play in such fracturing.

his innocence within that world, as it would be if only the contingency of uncertain outcome within creation were at issue. It is also a protest that puts the contingency of creation itself at issue by rendering morally problematic, not simply the particular workings of the world's contingency afflicting him, but the world's very being.

The Book of Job stands as an enduring marker for how our embodied human vulnerability to the contingency of uncertain outcome continues to be manifest in poignant ways: in lives cut short in infancy and youth, in life projects gone amiss, in the ravages of pain and suffering inflicted by human neglect, violence, or enmity, and in disastrous consequences ensuing from even the best of our intentions. Job sees far more clearly than his friends that contingencies in the world do not order themselves according to justice unfailingly rendered to humans who dwell in that world – Job is well aware that he is not the only righteous one subject to unwarranted suffering. This clarity of vision not only allows him to reject the stratagems his friends offer to render such injustice at least theologically, if not also morally, palatable; it emboldens Job to call the Creator to account for bringing into being an order of contingency that is morally opaque or, even worse, has no reliable moral structure at all. In this challenge to God, Job is probing, more deeply than his friends have the wisdom or the courage to do, the space upon which the contingency of the radical dependence of creation – from which issues the unasked-for character of Job's own existence as well as the sheer abundance of a cosmos teeming with energy and life – intersects most painfully with the contingency of fracture and uncertain outcome, with things gone wrong within creation.

The dissonance between these two inflections of contingency resounding throughout the book has made it a multivalent point of reference for the modern enterprise of "theodicy," which often weaves together various strands of the argument – though perhaps not the most theologically important ones – between Job and his friends. Yet Job himself, as Kant (among others) has pointed out, can hardly be considered to have either offered or accepted a "theodicy."<sup>22</sup> Neither can it be satisfactorily argued (at least in my judgment) that the concluding narrative restoring Job's prosperity is sufficient to silence the dissonance. A reader attuned to Job's acute sensitivity to the fragility of a human life led righteously in a contingent world, may very well wonder whether the echoes of all that

<sup>22</sup> See Kant's 1791 essay "On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy," trans. George di Giovanni, in Immanuel Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 24-37.

has befallen him can – or should – ever fully fade from his or our memory. Job’s new progeny open new space in his world for human satisfaction, yet they cannot re-fill the space made abruptly empty by the calamity that befell his other children. That past is stubbornly recalcitrant to full erasure, so the renewal of Job’s prosperity and well-being does not suffice to exhibit the cosmos as working in ways that are normatively fully intelligible to the deepest aspirations of our enfleshed vulnerability.

What I thus propose in place of a reading framing these dissonances in terms of a theodicy of a moral order inexorably inscribed in the cosmos is one framing them in terms of “grace,” understood as a gifted enactment of God’s relationality that becomes operative in the intersecting space of both inflections of contingency. On this reading, the crucial narrative moment is not the restoration of Job’s health and prosperity vindicating his righteousness and the normative intelligibility of the cosmos, but God’s replying to Job as a performative enactment of grace. This is a divine initiative whose graciousness consists in *standing with Job* in the space upon which the dynamics of contingency have disastrously ravaged him. God thus enacts the vindication of Job’s honest boldness in calling the Creator to account by being present to and standing with Job even as Job remains amid the ruins of his world. In this regard Taylor’s remark about the “the first mystery” is particularly apt as an emblem of the grace at work in this narrative crux, a grace that finds its culmination in the “being with us” that is the Incarnation of God’s word: “God’s initiative is to enter, in full vulnerability, the heart of the [human] resistance [to God], to be among humans, offering participation in the divine life.”<sup>23</sup>

There is no single theological line bringing us directly from reading the Book of Job as a not altogether unambiguous narrative enactment of “God’s steadfast resolve not to abandon humanity in its worst distress” to the Christian confession that the Word of God became incarnate. Though it may be quite proper to consider God’s response to being called to account for creation by Job as instancing some element of that steadfast resolve, the moment of grace in which God stands with Job still seems distant from what is enacted in the Incarnation: God’s entrance “in [the] full vulnerability” of human flesh to “the heart of the human resistance,” with its offer of “participation in divine life.” At the same time, however, we may well remember the strand of Christian theological reflection and piety that has seen fit to take Job’s confidence that a vindicator will stand by him (Job 19:25-27) as an anticipatory affirmation of that graced mode

<sup>23</sup> Taylor, *Secular Age*, 654.

of enfleshed participation in divine life that is the fruit for us of the Incarnate Word's passage through death to life: the resurrection of the body.<sup>24</sup>

In a moment in which Job's enfleshed human vulnerability has been stretched to the utmost, first by the events that have befallen him, and then by the well-intentioned but ineffectual and theologically arrogant consolations offered by his friends, God finally does stand by and with Job. This can be taken (at least by a Christian reader) as a partial gesture toward a more complete mode of divine enactment of the resolve not to abandon humanity in its worst distress, a mode beyond the horizon of human hope and imagination until it came to pass in the graced fullness of the mutual historical enactment of divine and human freedom that Christians name the Incarnation. By the Incarnation of God's Word in the person of Jesus Christ, the human enfleshed vulnerability into which we have been inscribed within the radical contingency of creation is invited and taken into the triune relationality of God. Yet even as it is taken into that relationality, it does not lose its own proper depth as the enfleshed vulnerability of human agency that stands in the radical dependence of creation. This has been recognized in the wisdom by which centuries of piety and iconography have inscribed onto Christian imagination the narrative affirmation of the gospels that the wounds of the Passion remain enfleshed in the risen One.

This enfleshment of the Word may be enough by itself to give normative status to human vulnerability, but it seems also appropriate to claim that there is yet even more depth to its grounding, arising as an excess from the abundance of the divine graciousness. The incarnational divine entrance into the full range of created contingency and human vulnerability is made even deeper in the confession that this enfleshed Word is the Jesus who has been crucified, now is risen, and whose saving Spirit has been poured out upon all creation. In making the enfleshed vulnerability of the now-risen crucified one the locus of the salvific efficacy of the spirit – captured in the proclamation that “by his wounds we are healed” (Isa 53:5) – human vulnerability is constituted “all the way down” as a normative marker for the operation and efficacy of grace in history. In confessing the full enactment of God's graciousness towards us in the incarnate, crucified, and risen Word of God, we are also affirming the grace of God as always and everywhere offered and encountered throughout all the spaces of enfleshed human vulnerability.

<sup>24</sup> This connection is notably made in the use of Job 19:25-27 for Christian funeral and burial services.