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God, Power, and Gospel in a Postmodern World—A Critique of Griffin’s Postmodern God

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1. Introduction

1.1 God and Gospel in Context

“What it means to talk about God is far from indisputable,” even among theistic religions.¹ A certain symbiosis seems evident by the inference that ours is an epoch analogous to that of which Dickens wrote: an age of wisdom and yet foolishness, belief and yet incredulity, light and yet darkness.² The philosophical fluidity of the times is evidenced in the semantic domain with doublespeak and pliable language commonplace.³ Lack of consensus in meaning is pervasive; whether the prevailing philosophical ethos is modernism or postmodernism remains a moot point. The close philosophy-theology relationship invariably transforms philosophical tensions into theological tensions such that traditionally commonplace doctrines are now suspect. Hence, ‘God’ may be used with a variety of meanings and, consequently, doubt is cast upon once-hallowed Christian beliefs. Motivated by these nuances of ‘God,’ this paper seeks to briefly explore how the understanding of God in contemporary society impacts theology and, in tandem, the Christian gospel.

¹ Armin Kreiner, “What Do We Mean by ‘God’?”, *New Blackfriars* 87, no. 7 (Jan 2006), 26. See also Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1975), 1.

² Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (New York: Dutton, 1970), 1.

³ Andreas J. Kostenberger, ed., *Whatever Happened to Truth?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 9.

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The New Testament—for example, Matt 28:19 and Acts 1:8—references the Christian’s missionary mandate to share the gospel of salvation from sin. Once, it was presumed that Christians accept the Biblical pronouncement of man’s proclivity to sin and everyone a sinner (Rom 3:23), its report of Christ’s atoning death as a reflection of God’s love (Rom 5:8), and its logical implication that salvation mandates acceptance of Christ’s substitutionary gift (Jn 5:24; Acts 16:31).

Missions describes the diversity of methodologies utilized by the church as a means of introducing people to God. Throughout the various epochs of history, the Christian church’s mission strategies have had to be pliable—preemptively or retrospectively.⁴ Present peculiarities not only suggest a new approach to missions but demand firmer philosophical and theological foundations⁵ to share that “God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life” (Jn 3:16 NLT). Hauerwas summarizes well the challenges posed by rampant contemporary relativity:

The crucial question is how we can make the story we believe to be true not only compelling for us but for the whole world. . . the challenge is how, as Christians, we can find a way to witness to the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Jesus without that witness becoming an ideology for the powers that would subvert that witness.⁶

Furthermore, “[h]ow *do* we convince postmodernists of the truth of the gospel. . . in a culture where a variety of rationalities coexist?”⁷ Is the

⁴ See, for example, discussion of several mission methodologies in Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: Volume 2: the Reformation to the Present Day 2 Rev Upd Edition*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2011.

⁵ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2003), xiii.

⁶ Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1991), 148, In Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, “Introduction,” in *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1995), 11.

⁷ Phillips and Okholm, *Christian Apologetics*, 11 (original emphasis). Here ‘postmodern’ is to be understood as both ideology seeking to transcend modernism and a theological context succeeding the period referred to as modernity (see also, David S. Dockery, “Introduction,” in *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement* (Nashville, TN: Bridgepoint, 2008), 13). Consider it a “diffuse sentiment rather than . . . any common set of doctrines” (David Ray Griffin, *God and Religion in the Postmodern World: Essays in Postmodern Theology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), x). Given the lack of an ‘ideal’ definition, this discourse is premised on a broad

spiritual deficit attributed to this age the cause or the effect of the conflicting profusions regarding the nature, extent and motivation of God's activities in the world?

1.2 Research Problem, Scope and Methodology

The paper is primarily concerned with an exploration of divine power⁸ as proffered by David Griffin's "constructive" model vis-à-vis a biblical Seventh-day Adventist perspective.⁹ As part of the process it implies the importance of a wholistic and systematic biblical perspective of God to the understanding and reception of the gospel and broadly suggests a strategy for missions in contemporary society. Of primary importance in this paper is the potential tension as it relates to the issue of the gospel of salvation and an understanding of God's power: can a God who is less than omnipotent save? Conversely, does a God who consistently exercises unilateral power actually save? Any misunderstanding of God's power inevitably stymies the gospel message.

In deconstructing Griffin's theses,¹⁰ pertinent considerations include: Does God act in the events of the human existence and, if so, how? What response does an understanding of God's power evoke as regards salvation and therefore the reception of the gospel? How can the Seventh-day Adventist self-identified remnant church of Revelation fourteen, commissioned with the divine imperative of bringing the gospel to all the world, efficaciously identify, articulate and communicate good news about a powerful God?¹¹

philosophical and cultural understanding.

⁸ The paper explores divine power generally—not a defense of divine power or an examination of the justice of God's activities (theodicy).

⁹ Seventh-day Adventism is not monolithic in its understanding of divine power. Rather than an unequivocal perspective, this paper presents one biblical Seventh-day Adventist perspective.

¹⁰ Griffin highlighted issues regarding God's power as the primary cause for modernity's decline in belief in God. Other reasons suggested but only tangentially addressed in this paper are: belief in God and legitimization of oppression, the clash between reason and experience and authoritarian truth, and the epistemological denial of an experience with God.

¹¹ The Seventh-day Adventist Church's response to the prevailing ethos has, unfortunately, been lacking, and the results of church's evangelistic efforts have not been encouraging in some quarters in this era. See, for example, Humberto M. Rasi and Fritz Guy, eds., *Meeting the Secular Mind: Some Adventist Perspectives* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1985). One of the major themes of this paper is that in order to address the issue, efforts must be focused on identifying and addressing the areas of disconnect between

A systematic exploration of selected themes within the context of several presuppositions relating to God, the Bible and the church is undertaken couched in a traditional conservative Seventh-day Adventist worldview.¹² Interspersed with biblical references throughout, but limited in exegetical details and discussions, this paper is intended to strengthen the resources available to the Seventh-day Adventist community and therefore for fulfilling the gospel commission particularly in ministry to the “contemporary” or “postmodern” mind.

The paper proceeds with a brief historical reflection on God and divine power. In Section 3, Griffin’s postmodern God is deconstructed following a brief contextualization detailing Griffin’s postmodern theology. Section 4 presents a cross-sectional biblical perspective on divine power and section 5 proposes a response to Griffin’s theses. Section 6 summarizes, noting potential areas for future research.

2. Philosophical and Theological Views of Divine Power

If it is true that “[e]verything in theology and life is affected by just how one understands the nature of God himself [sic] and the nature of God’s relationship with the created order,”¹³ and if it is true that the greatest need in a contemporary society is knowledge: “whether there is a God and whether God matters in [people’s] lives” and gaining an awareness of this supreme Being,¹⁴ then both God’s ontology and His concomitant relationship to humans are of primary concern. Evidently, the dissemination of information to a world apparently *en route* to self-destruction is urgent. The highs and lows of philosophical perspectives of God influencing theological thought throughout history have undoubtedly complicated

the church and the society.

¹²No intellectual defense is provided for the existence of God, God as creator, the Bible as God’s inspired Word, the integrity of Ellen White as a prophet of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the validity of the Three Angel’s Messages and the Seventh-day Adventist Church as the remnant church of Scripture.

¹³ Bruce A. Ware, “Introduction,” in *Perspectives on the Doctrine of God: 4 Views* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2008), 1.

¹⁴ Jon Paulien, *Present Truth in the Real World: the Adventist Struggle to Keep and Share Faith in a Secular Society* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1993), 205. Paulien wrote with specific reference to “secular” society. “Secular” is, arguably, a complex concept which is not specifically addressed in this paper. At the same time, assuming that the methodological issues to address postmodernism and secularism are similar in nature and extent—if not precisely in strategy—some degree of synonymy is implied here.

perspectives of the God-world relationship.¹⁵ Here we briefly explore thematic cross-sections.

2.1 God and Divine Power before Modernity

Broadly speaking, perspectives about God's ontology originate in Greek philosophy¹⁶ and were often expressed *via* poetry. In Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, for example, gods were portrayed as "corrupt, vain and self-serving . . . [seeking] to advance the fortunes of their favorites on earth."¹⁷ Implicit in this is that gods—seen as immortal humans with emotions, vices and power games analogous to their human counterparts—were perceived as unlimited in their power to bring about desired outcomes independently (restricted only by sphere—sea, sex or war). McGrath notes that Homer nevertheless caricatures divine activities as humor, and questioned ethics grounded in such "egocentric, jealous and petty tyrants."¹⁸

This general perception of god(s) as all-controlling and all-determining persisted across time and geography and could only have been reinforced by Augustine's *de facto* supersession of Pelagius and, later, by the Calvinist-Arminian debate of the seventeenth century which climaxed with the Synod of Dort.¹⁹ Despite a brief respite with eighteenth century British pietism, eventually, the confluence of negative perspectives of god and church as terror and hindrance to intellectual and political progress in western culture, led to quests to depose such oppressive institutions, reject divine authority, and substitute a religion of humanity for one of deity. A new and better future was envisioned grounded in nature and reason.

¹⁵ The critical relevant differences relate to the nature, attributes and activities of God. An implicit correlation with specific geographical region possibly in tandem with the concentration or dispersion of religious ideology in history is suggested. See, for example, Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*.

¹⁶ See, for example, Fernando L Canale, *Basic Elements of Christian Theology* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Lithotech, 2005). Canale further notes that the adopted timeless Greek reality constricts divine power since such a god cannot act in space and time. In fact, the god conceptualized according to Aristotelian logic, can only contemplate himself.

¹⁷ Alister McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World* (New York, NY: Galilee Doubleday, 2006), 5-6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁹ See, for example, Robert A. Peterson and Michael D. Williams, *Why I Am Not an Arminian* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2004), for a discussion of these issues in some detail.

2.2 Modern Views of God and Divine Power

By the early nineteenth century, conceptions of god evolved as the product of social and psychological factors. According to McGrath, “one of the most obvious lessons of history is that atheism thrives when the church is seen to be privileged, out of touch with people and powerful.”²⁰ Within the context of this discussion, McGrath’s summary of Feuerbach, Marx and Freud is instructive.

Amidst widespread upheaval and change and intellectual dissatisfaction, the church was used as an avenue to radically undermine and neutralize political structures. Ludwig Feuerbach brought credibility and acclaim to the concept of god as invention although the idea preceded him in some unsubstantiated way. Feuerbach proposed that god was a human invention as a consolation and distraction from worldly sorrow. As “a dream of the human soul”—a projection of human longings for itself—god was a human creation under the authority and control of humans, and impotent. “‘God’ thus becomes a redefinable concept, capable of being shaped and reshaped to meet the changing context of human existence.”²¹ In many ways, the propositions of Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud unfold as expositions of that Feuerbach. For Marx, material needs are pivotal to thought and behavior and determine an individual’s value system. His thesis that religion is purely epiphenomenon—a symptom of the material world—relegates God to a projection of desires or an attempt to cope with the pain from social and economic deprivation. God was opiate. Similarly, Freud’s thesis, anchored in psychoanalysis, presents god as illusion—a projection of intense, unconscious desires linked to repressed, infantile longings for protection and security.

2.3 Divine Power in Contemporary Society

Contemporary society boasts a resurgence of religion and god to a place of prominence with a collage of “gods” with varying attributes and potency. At one end of the continuum is the god with power to exercise exhaustive meticulous unilateral “control over all contingencies,” at the other end is the god lacking exhaustive knowledge of an unreal future and therefore potentially incapable of unilaterally directing it; somewhere in-between is

²⁰ McGrath, *The Twilight*, 55. Church and god were seen as inseparable and the sentiments applied equally to both.

²¹ McGrath, *The Twilight*, 58.

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the god who is in charge but not being “fully in control.”²² Of course, for the God of process theology, omnipotence is explicitly denied.²³

2.4 Perspective

Scripture records God promising knowledge and understanding of Himself. For example: Thus says the LORD: . . . let those who boast, boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the LORD; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. . . (Jer 9:23-24).

Jeremiah seems to suggest that not only is there a Lord (God), who is knowable and understandable, but whose actions are evident in the earth.²⁴ Nowadays, one is impelled to question exactly how this God relates to a world seemingly out of control. However, assuming that God exists, to *what extent* does He really “. . . act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth”? How should we understand the relationship between God’s power and the role, if any, of human choice in the unfolding drama of life? Has God, through his almighty power, willed an eternal and immutable plan or, alternatively, is God limited at best or powerless and passive at worst?

If divine activities are understood as being commensurate with divine nature, then it appears, at least phenomenologically, based on the law of non-contradiction, that God is ontologically constrained.²⁵ Obviously, the humanly devised projections produce gods that are not only human but, necessarily, supernaturally incompetent. The influences on the cultural viability of the notion of god have been pervasive.

3. Understanding Griffin’s Postmodern God

Certainly, the view embraced regarding ‘god’ and the relevance to individual existence influence the reception to the gospel. This paper stresses the centrality of God, and proposes that a true understanding of God’s power is necessary, to any serious theological or missiological

²² See Paul Helm, “Classical Calvinist Doctrine of God,” Roger E. Olson, “The Classical Freewill Theist Model of God,” and John Sanders, “Divine Providence and the Openness of God,” respectively, in *Perspectives On the Doctrine of God: 4 Views*, ed. Bruce Ware (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2008).

²³ See, for example, Charles Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1984).

²⁴ In this paper, the capitalized first letter of ‘God’ and related pronouns is promoted.

²⁵ A discussion of the breadth of issues implied here is outside the scope of this paper. It is noteworthy, nonetheless, to highlight the dissension of classical theists.

engagement with contemporary society, which must optimally be informed by understanding the postmodern epistemology of God. Consequently, it is instructive to examine the self-perception of contemporary society vis-à-vis god.²⁶

3.1 Griffin's Postmodern Theology

Griffin observes that, for a number of reasons, the modern scientific worldview rendered theology—and god—irrelevant. For Griffin, postmodernity marks a new beginning for theology and is the preferred worldview as it facilitates “renewed interest in religious spirituality as the foundation for both individual and social life.”²⁷

Griffin notes, that the postmodern worldview is built on theses which challenge the “mechanistic interpretation of nature and the sensationist epistemology” of modernism which view experience as sensory only. Postmodernism boasts the “naturalistic theism” of the new paradigm contrasting the modern assumption of naturalism.²⁸ The postmodern worldview is considered advantageous because of its rejection of modernity's *a priori* rejection of religious truth and/or its constriction to the private domain.²⁹

Griffin's “constructive or revisionary” postmodern worldview attempts to utilize a “creative synthesis” of “positive” modern premises (such as the human self, historical meaning, and truth as correspondence) and traditional premodern concepts (such as divine reality and cosmic meaning).³⁰ In alerting readers to postmodern modifications, Griffin is careful to point out that his treatises are aimed at readers who “have found traditional theology

²⁶ Griffin notes that what is presented is really “a proposal for the direction theology should take in the postmodern period” (*God and Religion*, 3). The paper seeks to present a true précis of the theses as outlined in Griffin. While considerations regarding human free will are integral to this thesis, a discussion of freedom/free will is outside the scope of this paper. At the same time, recognizing that the methodological issues to address intellectualism, postmodernism and secularism are so similar in nature and extent—if not in precisely in strategy—the terms are used synonymously.

²⁷ Griffin, *God & Religion*, 3.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 63. The modern world is defined in terms of the modern worldview of the seventeenth century with its formal commitment to freedom (experience and reason limited to sense-perception).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, xiii.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, x-xi.

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incredible and modern theology irrelevant.”³¹ Still, the issue of fundamental import to this paper is the postmodern epistemology of reality—and therefore of God. According to Griffin, “[e]pistemologically, postmodern theology is based on the affirmation of nonsensory perception. . . as the fundamental mode of relating to [the] environment.”³² Reality is seen as an experiential event: experiential because it has “inner reality” and event because it lasts only momentarily. This “inner reality” as an “embodiment of creative power” carries cogent implications for this exploration of divine power. Griffin names postmodern theology “a Christian philosophical (or natural) theology. . . it is process theology.”³³

3.2 Griffin’s Postmodern God

Griffin references the generic idea of god in the West as a:

[P]ersonal, purposive being, perfect in goodness and supreme in power, who created the world, acts providentially in it, sometimes experienced by human beings, especially as the source of moral norms and religious experiences, is the ultimate ground of meaning and hope, and is thereby alone worthy of worship.³⁴

He then highlights the incompatibility between this “traditional” god, with its inherently “fatal problem[s],” and the modern worldview with its own accompanying problems. He notes that “the idea of divine power put belief in god in opposition to the modern commitment to social and intellectual freedom. . . [and that for] theistic postmodernity to be viable [it] must challenge the idea of divine power traditionally associated with the generic idea of God.”³⁵ Ultimately, Griffin’s narrative approach—problem and solution—suggests a necessary worldview change, contingent on the commitment to freedom, experience and reason.

Griffin’s postmodern god is “similar to the traditional God, except for a modification of . . . the doctrine of divine power.”³⁶ The postmodern god is “the supreme, all-inclusive embodiment of creative power” facilitating

³¹ *Ibid.*, xiii. Griffin notes because people do not reflect together about what is believed to be of ultimate importance, there is no means for policies to be shaped by the deepest intuitions and the highest thoughts about this most fundamental question.

³² *Ibid.*, 4.

³³ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 62.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

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appropriation, self-actualization and efficient causation. Because this god “appropriates elements from [the] environment . . . actualizes [the self] by creatively synthesizing [environmental] influences into an experiential unity . . . [and] exercises a creative influence upon subsequent events. . . god both influences the world and is influenced by it.”³⁷

Notwithstanding the inherent similarities, the postmodern god is distinguished from other “experiential events” by the absence of spatial or temporal limitations and the presence of unlimited knowledge and compassion. While Griffin’s vision is of a postmodern god who possesses “supreme power,” and “exemplifies the idea of the modern God,” divine power is modified yielding only limited creative and providential power to influence others.³⁸ Griffin attributes this truncation of power to inherent, irrevocable, creative creaturely power for self-actualization and efficient causation. God therefore affects creatures by persuasion from within, not by coercion or determination. The effects of this limitation of divine power are pervasive on traditional Christian thought and belief extending across hermeneutical considerations of creation and miraculous acts and other encounters with the world. Unlike other process thinkers, Griffin commendably concedes that such a god is omnipotent, although modified in semantic postmodern meaning to describe one “having all the power that it is [com]possible for one being to have.”³⁹ Consequently, the postmodern god is impotent to create *ex nihilo*, to infallibly inspire a book (such as the Bible) or an institution (such as a Church).⁴⁰ This conception of God is

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 64.

³⁸ Griffin’s “supreme power” is not equivalent to omnipotence. His vision is consistent with the ideas of Charles Hartshorne, best known for developing process theology from Alfred North Whitehead’s process philosophy. Griffin notes “forward symbiosis” with process theology but stresses a semantic distinction where specific thought is given to addressing problems peculiar to modernity. On Hartshorne’s views see, for example, his *Omnipotence*. On Whitehead’s views see, for example, his *Process and Reality (Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of Edinburgh During the Session 1927-28)*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Free Press, 1979).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 65. Griffin nebulously contrasts the traditional understanding as “having or . . . potentially exercising all the power there is.” I am especially indebted to John C. Peckham for this point.

⁴⁰ Using Whitehead’s understanding of creativity as ultimate reality of which God is ultimate but not sole actualization, Griffin sees actual events—electrons, cells, humans—as spacio-temporal creative experiences resulting from past and present internal and external experiences. Because creativity cannot thus exist in one actuality, God is limited to co-creator and creation *ex nihilo* is counter-intuitive.

thought to ratify “full human freedom.”⁴¹

3.3 Perspective

Griffin’s theses reflect one of the many ways in which the Christian doctrine of God has been interpreted. He claims that *the* god for postmodernism is the god of process theism who “could not and does not have a monopoly on power and therefore cannot unilaterally determine the events in the world.”⁴² His theses reflect significant similarities with extant Christian interpretations, for example in its rejection of determining or coercive divine power and its denial of God’s monopoly of power.⁴³

However, the constructive model has sought to explicate the impugned omnipotence of the traditional God by providing a patronizing redefinition of the concept and ultimately promotes an ‘empowered individual’ and a ‘disempowered God.’ In his apparent ratification of human freedom as a way of acquitting God of the problem of evil, *inter alia*, the non-sensory epistemological credentials of Griffin’s theses are brought into question. It seems that God has been reconstructed by humans and no longer reflects an objective reality; in what sense is Griffin’s experiential-entity-god a “being” and how is this entity capable of fostering a relationship with the world? How has Griffin’s god corrected for the deficiencies he identified in the modern god? Moreover, as he preemptively acknowledges, this god appears devoid of the attributes he prescribes as necessary for a public theology:

A public theology must be able to pass public scrutiny. . . is the account self-consistent? Is it adequate to all known facts? Does it tie several known facts together in a new, illuminating way? And (ideally) does it illuminate previously unknown facts?⁴⁴

Griffin’s thesis also reflects the troubling tendentious manipulation of language that has, apparently, become characteristic of this epoch. Furthermore, from what source has Griffin been able to identify this god?

⁴¹ Much attention has been given to the power of God vis-à-vis the seemingly inexhaustible problem of evil and the freedom of created beings, a discussion of which is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁴² Griffin, *God & Religion*, 65.

⁴³ Of course, this assumes agreement in meaning of ‘power,’ an issue which is addressed later.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, xiv.

Undoubtedly, the source(s) from which a knowledge of God is sought is decisive.

4. Reconstructing Divine Power

Perhaps the most significant reasons for diversity in interpretations of conceptions of God lie in epistemology and, secondarily, in hermeneutics. Morris pointedly states that:

It has been the intent of theologians throughout most of the history of the Christian faith to describe correctly, *within our limits*, certain important facts about God, human beings, and the rest of creation given in revelation and fundamental to the articulation of any distinctively Christian worldview (my emphasis).⁴⁵

Whereas nature in its various forms has been considered as a source for a doctrine of God, the Bible presents itself—as the source of data of God’s self-revelation—as the ultimate source for such doctrine (Heb. 1:1-3; Rom. 16:26). Naturalistic theism as proposed by Griffin is human philosophical interpretation of God built on the sole basis of natural data and akin to natural theology, must be seen as inferior to the true knowledge about God available in biblical revelation.⁴⁶ It is to these Biblical considerations that we now turn.

4.1 Divine Power

Although the word “omnipotent” appears only once in Scripture (Rev 19:6), the Bible is replete with examples of powerful divine acts occurring independently of, and cooperatively with, creative beings both individually and collectively.⁴⁷ The biblical evidence of divine power reflects active involvement by all members of the Godhead and across a spectrum of experiences: control over nature, healing from spiritual and physical maladies, empowerment and salvation of humans, and even delivery from

⁴⁵ Thomas V. Morris, ed., *Divine and Human Action: Essays in the Metaphysics of Theism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 3.

⁴⁶ John P. Newport, *Life’s Ultimate Questions: a Contemporary Philosophy of Religion* (Dallas, TX: W Pub Group, 1989) provides a comprehensive discussion of the issues.

⁴⁷ Notably, of the more popular translations, “omnipotent” appears only in the KJV and NKJV. Other similar translations substitute “Almighty” or “All Powerful.” The Greek *pantokrator* used in Rev 19:6 is translated “the Almighty (of God)” (Barclay M. Newman, *A Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2010), 134).

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death.⁴⁸

Contrasting the biblical understanding, Griffin's god is ontologically limited in power and dependent on inherently empowered humans to create. In the account of Job's encounter with God (chapters 38-40) when God questions Job regarding "foundations," "measurements," and "cornerstone," *inter alia*, a clear context is provided of a divine 'imprint' in creation which is later substantiated by questions relating to humanly impossible tasks associated with nature (e.g. awakening the dawn, and commanding clouds and lightning). God clearly and emphatically demonstrates not only the limits of human capability in contradistinction to divine, but also the contingent nature of divine cooperation with human: "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?" (38:4 NKJV), "when I made. . . fixed. . . said. . . stop to the sea!" (38:9-11). This narrative, among others, reflects the seemingly paradoxical reality of divine power: divine power has actual and potential unilateral capacity. Any request or accommodation of participation with humans must be understood as voluntary from the One who is the source of power as humans are equipped and enabled to function. The Bible not only states that God is home to all wisdom and knowledge (Col 2:2, 3), but that all Scripture is inspired by God (2 Tim 3:16) to thoroughly equip those who choose to good. God is the source and he bids us to ask, seek and knock. Further, lack of coercion and determination is evident in humans' liberty to choose the prescriptive norm as is evident from the biblical account of God's promises to Abram; evidently the actualization of the promise was dependent on Abram's choices (Gen 17ff).

Some philosophers believe that humans devise gods to cope because life is meaninglessness and painful. However, the biblical God promised Israel meaningful life with good plans for prosperity (Jer 29:11). Although sin has caused pain in life, Jesus constantly assured persons that life is pregnant with meaning from beginning to end so they could "be of good cheer"⁴⁹ and have hope. Jesus declared Himself the recipient of "all power" (Matt 28:19) which he chose to share with the disciples to enable discipleship. Humans are equipped and empowered to voluntarily participate in the plan larger than their individual lives. Similarly, on the

⁴⁸ For example: God's Word brought the world and everything in it into being (Gen 1:1-31) and blessed the Sabbath day (Gen 2:3); God empowered Moses to part the Red Sea (Ex 14:16, 21-22); Jesus healed a man of unclean spirits (Lk 4:33-37); Jesus empowered His disciples to destroy unclean spirits and heal diseases (Matt 10:1); the Holy Spirit empowers the disciples (Acts 2:1-4), and Jesus calls Lazarus back from death (Jn 11:43).

⁴⁹ For example, Matt 9:2, Mark 6:50, Lk 8:48, Jn 16:33, Acts 23:11.

Mount Olivet He promised power to them to enable them to witness (Acts 1:8) and, having accepted, they “turned the world upside down” (Acts 17:6). By no inherent entitlement or qualification, humans are lovingly endowed with power to carry out God’s providential plan. Accordingly, a brief word on providence is in order.

4.1.1 Divine Power and Providence

Providence is generally conceived as divine care or guidance and closely related to divine power. Fernando L. Canale notes that although the term is not biblical, “the concept is central to Scripture and refers to the revelation regarding God’s government of the world and the universe” as human realities flow in their complexities.⁵⁰ He distinguishes indirect and direct divine providential activity; the former includes divine decisions regarding specific historical situations such as allowing sin to follow its natural course (e.g. Gen 3:8-15), limiting sin’s actual reach (e.g. Job 1:12), using potentially evil situations to bring about His purpose of salvation (e.g. Gen 50:20) or intervening in order to prevent a human being from sinning (e.g. Jude 24).⁵¹ The latter is evidenced in God’s choice to dwell among His people and direct them (e.g. Ex 25:8), the incarnation (e.g. John 1:14), prophetic revelation, miraculous acts and the mission of the church, and His “alien work” of divine wrath.

Canale suggests that the purpose of providence “is to change the mind of free human beings by allowing them to understand and freely choose God’s revealed will. . . .”⁵² Human history then develops freely according to God’s plan as transformation of humans progresses. The community of disciples so formed then seeks to perpetuate itself. This, Canale notes, is the mission of the church and its *raison d’être*.

4.2 Perspective

Where and how has God revealed Himself? As Creator and Sustainer of the world God’s revealed, inspired thoughts in the Bible are the best

⁵⁰ Fernando L. Canale, “Doctrine of God,” in *Handbook of Seventh-Day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen, Commentary Reference Series (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 12:118.

⁵¹ These patterns of providential activity are known, respectively, as God’s permissive, limitative, directive, and preventive wills (*Ibid.*). John C. Peckham, “Providence and God’s Unfulfilled Desires,” *Philosophia Christi* 15, no. 2 (2013): 227-36 discusses some issues of relevance to this paper.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 120.

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standard for faith and practice that is available to everyone. The Bible presents a God who is all powerful, almighty and capable of what postmodernism denies: creation *ex nihilo* and inspiration of a book that defines the standard of morality. Indeed, such a powerful God is also, *de facto*, capable of being a tyrant—by unilaterally exercising power and causing terror. However, this ‘theoretical’ knowledge of God through His word is translated in individual lives by His power and “it is through understanding how God works in our individual lives that we can truly understand how God directs the course of history.”⁵³ In Revelation “Christ is represented as holding seven stars in His right hand. This assures us that no church faithful to its trust need fear coming to nought, for not a star that has the protection of Omnipotence can be plucked out of the hand of Christ.”⁵⁴ Herein we see the true character of divine power as also revealed in Rev 5:5, 6—as “Lion” and “Lamb” reflecting the “union of omnipotent power and self-sacrificing love.”⁵⁵

Biblical examples demonstrate that one’s relationship and experiences with God will define a perspective of Him and His relationship with the world that reflects that divine power, even when applied in rebuke, is administered in love. Perceptions of God are heavily influenced by self-perception: a single act may be interpreted as terror and wrath to smite by some is simultaneously mercy and deliverance for others. The distinction lies primarily in whether or not one is alienated from divinity by sin. Of course, postmodernism boasts a lack of allegiance to an external authority or standard as presented in Scripture. The widening divide between the church and society highlights an increasing recognition of a need for a model to bridge this gap. It is to this that we now turn.

5. Rethinking the Problem: Responding to Griffin

The polarity of perspectives on God’s nature and, consequently, relationship with the world has been noted; apprehending the ‘correct’ claims even within Christianity has, apparently, had the unfortunate effect of fragmentation of options rather than unification of beliefs. Undoubtedly, this has contributed to one of the greatest challenges facing the Christian church today: that of finding an intelligible means of communicating the

⁵³ David A. Noebel, *The Battle for Truth* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2001), 326.

⁵⁴ Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2002), 586.2

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 589.2.

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gospel in this epoch. Yet, despite the nature and/or extent of the challenges, the church is constrained by its God-given mandate—indeed, its *raison d'être*—to “make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19). Therefore, if the church is to be faithful in this age characterized by radical pluralism and increasing humanism, relativism and postmodernism, it must make its way “into all the world and proclaim the good news.”⁵⁶

Arguing for its propositions strictly in terms of scientific and philosophical criteria—self-consistency, adequacy to the relevant facts, and illuminating power—Griffin presents postmodern theology as oxymoron: *relatively* closer to truth than extant theological positions. While it appeals to fundamental issues in religious experience, it is a philosophy. Yet, firm in its commitment to freedom and reason, this proposed model of God is specific to a desired postmodern worldview with a mutually supportive postmodern world comprising of postmodern persons, spirituality, society, and eventually leading to a postmodern global order.

Hermeneutical issues aside, this paper contends that the Bible provides a more consistent and adequate system than any philosophy anchored in the flux of human hubris. Our glance at Job’s narrative above revealed a glimpse of God and divine power, and Job acknowledges the futility of attempts to know God apart from His self-revelation (Job 11:7-9). Limited by finitude and tainted by sin, humans are deficient to fully understand the very nature of a God whose “greatness is unsearchable” (Ps. 145:3). So how does the church fulfil her responsibility? Certainly, adequately responding to an issue of such complexity is beyond the scope of this paper.⁵⁷ What follows is a brief exploration along the lines of possibilities.

5.1 Redefining Divine Power?

There has been an apparent misinterpretation of divine power posited on misguided historical ecclesiastical events purportedly in the name of God. Apparently, these historical events have conspired against a biblical understanding of divine power such that earthly power has become the standard for understanding divine power. Accordingly, in any consideration

⁵⁶ Mk 16:15 NRSV. See, for example, Millard J. Erickson, *Postmodernizing the Faith: Evangelical Responses to the Challenge of Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), for a discussion of issues characterizing contemporary society.

⁵⁷ The issues involved are undoubtedly complex and much has been presupposed regarding the related issues that are critical to the way in which divine power is conceived. The nuances relating to the meaning of divine power and human freedom varies among and within worldviews.

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of power, coercion has replaced capability and ennobling, terror replaced strength and might, fear replaced favor, adversary and competitor replaced companion in tribulation and strength in weakness, and instrument of destruction replaced shield of protection and source of all strength, wisdom and knowledge.⁵⁸ Unsurprisingly, the perspectives of god noted above have reflected this misunderstanding.

Postmodernity's primary dissatisfaction with, and attempt to redefine, divine power further misinterprets omnipotence as determinism especially *vis-à-vis* the persistence of egregious evil in the world. Griffin accused modernism of redefining God beyond recognition in its efforts at compatibility to the extent that God became impersonal, and opted to "preserve" God by redefining divine power instead. While this redefinition preserves "the idea of God," this paper purports that it is essentially semantic and likewise leads to the 'death of God.' According to Griffin's hypothesis, an omnipotent God does not fit naturally into a context of predetermined and therefore powerless humans. What Griffin fails to acknowledge is that a powerful God does not mandate, nor produce, nor is automatically equivalent to, predetermined humans. Humans are not automatically powerless—devoid of choice—if God is omnipotent. Moreover, any divine knowledge of the future does not mitigate freedom.⁵⁹

Griffin's attempt at redefinition is commendable and correct but epistemologically flawed. Finite philosophical devisings cannot replace Infinite self-revelation. A correct understanding of God must come from the source God attests—the Bible (2 Tim 3:16)—which, as we have seen, portrays God's power in history. The Bible portrays an all-powerful God who empowers and lovingly endows freedom to humans. Many will agree that in the midst of pain, suffering and the complexities of life, they invoke God's omnipotence and God's providence in order to secure hope and strength to persevere. Such appeals are not mere projections, inventions, illusions, opiate or events but, rather, reflect rational proofs of God's power in their lives that corroborate biblical data. God does not manipulate the evidence to acquit himself. Neither should we. An intellectually and philosophically sound explanation for the problem of evil is possible based

⁵⁸ Similar sentiments are discussed in White, *Acts*, 12.1.

⁵⁹ See, for example, Roger E. Olson, "The Classical Free Will Theist Model of God," in *Perspectives*, ed. Bruce A. Ware, for a model of divine foreknowledge that preserves the notion of human freedom.

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on biblical data.⁶⁰ God remains omnipotent nevertheless.

Ultimately, is the postmodern god of limited power relevant? Is this god a being capable of relationship? Can the postmodern god save—if indeed there is a need for salvation? How does the postmodern god influence the flow of life, and to what end? This paper insists that a correct biblical perspective of divine power will lead to changed views on God, man and the world and the response to the gospel. Theology constructed to accommodate dynamic philosophy is unreliable. A correct perspective on divine power mandates, primarily, “[t]hinking in the light of Scripture [which] requires replacing philosophical and scientific views on reality with biblical views on ultimate reality, beginning with the reality of God.”⁶¹ Certainly, divine power must be redefined, but not the way Griffin proposes. Divine power must be redefined to show its ultimate source in the Creator God and to change its connotations from coercion and subjugation to capability and empowerment. Griffin is right: it is a question of worldviews, addressing issues in origins and *telos*, and how the journey

⁶⁰ Although a discussion of theodicy is outside the scope of this paper, a word on the battle between good and evil is apposite. Griffin correctly acknowledges world history as essentially a battle between good and evil (131). He notes that the God of love will ultimately destroy those who choose evil because he was not powerful enough to convert them. To conclude that God’s power was not sufficient to convert evil people does not accord with the scriptural evidence and implies that ‘good’ has lost the battle. The victory of good was confirmed when Christ proclaimed “it is finished!” (Jn 19:28, 30). To conclude that because some failed to choose good (God) it is an issue of power is to confuse the battle as one of might rather than one of allegiance and love and to deny choice. An alternative, biblically based explanation is found in the great controversy motif recognized and utilized by Seventh-day Adventists. Of critical importance, the reason for the eventual destruction of some is the constraint of God’s love which grants humans freedom. These persons have freely chosen to reject God and His love and have resigned themselves to the reward awaiting such a choice. The motif was developed as “a satisfactory solution to the problem of evil.” It is based on presuppositions of God as love, omnipotent, omniscient Creator and creatures endowed freed will to respond to God. In brief: the government of God was questioned by the scheming and deception of Lucifer—highest among the angelic host—who was eventually repudiated from heaven with his co-conspirators. Because of Lucifer’s apparent preoccupation with a desire for independence, disbelief and disobedience of God’s laws, sin entered into God’s perfect world and Satan now seeks to lure others to join him through sin and therefore to experience the alienation from God, the loss of freedom and eventual death which inevitably results. But the Bible assures that good will triumph over evil and that those who choose good and persevere to the end will receive the good reward. See Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911, reprint, 1950).

⁶¹ Canale, *Basic Elements*, 43.

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advances from beginning to end. Thinking in the light of scripture requires a transformation of worldviews. The persistent challenge is *how* to effect worldview transformation to the postmodern mind.

5.2 Transforming Worldviews

This paper insists that a sound, biblical conception of God is intuitively fundamental to the understanding and reception of the gospel. Advancing from the premise that the biblical worldview is the correct one how do we facilitate a transformation of worldviews, particularly in this post-modern epoch?⁶² The philosophical foundation of Griffin's postmodern theology renders it vaguely Christian in the sense of being naturalistic yet more specifically Christian in being theistic, though the concept of god is intellectually contrived. Pluralistic postmodern theology relies on no single all-inclusive perspective of the divine center of reality. How then do we know the God referenced in Jeremiah chapter nine?

This paper suggests that a strategic opportunity is inherent to the postmodern ethos itself. If indeed, to be postmodern is to cherish an impulse "to do things differently," if it is best construed as an "exodus" from constraints rather than having to conform to structures and strictures of any universal system,⁶³ then Christians ought to be understood as postmodern for Scripture repeatedly teaches precisely about "change," "difference" and "exodus." Christians are admonished "to put away former things" (Eph 4:22) and "not to conform to the world" (Rom 12:2) but to "come out of [Babylon]" (Rev 18:4). Moreover, the concept of *faith* must be 'postmodern' because it *is evidence* of unseen things" (Heb 11:1) and not just a basis for examining or for believing the evidence. Certainly, belief in the undiluted power of God is 'postmodern' because it does not mandate scientific or philosophical logic to believe that God can create *ex nihilo*, inspire all Scripture and manage the world providentially. These examples of Christian norms and beliefs depict postmodern characteristics. Like Paul on Mars' Hill (Acts 17:22-24), Christians have sufficient common ground to engage the intellectual/postmodern as an initial step in worldview

⁶² Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 266, cautions that the unity of Scripture must be preserved and that the biblical worldview must be understood as a whole. Any interpretation of divine power that does not accord with the picture of the God of Scripture in its entirety must therefore be discarded.

⁶³ See, for example, Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996).

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transformation.

While spiritual transformation is the outworking of the power of the Holy Spirit, Christians can facilitate worldview transformation by incarnating the gospel message in everyday life as they preach the good news, heal the brokenhearted, proclaim liberty to captives and sight to the blind, and free the oppressed (Lk 4:18).

Yet Christians must remain ‘sober and vigilant’ as they declare the undiluted Word of God. Phillips and Okholm caution that:

“[t]he postmodernist use of language is not a morally neutral tool that Christians can employ for their own ends, for it focuses on psychological effectiveness over against the truth. The goals of manipulating the environment and making the process itself as pleasurable as possible trivialize Christian concepts of sin, forgiveness, guilt, grace, death and resurrection.”⁶⁴

Nash reiterates that in the world of ideas, intellect is far from sufficient and there is a continued need for fitting the full armor of salvation. It is God through His Holy Spirit who will provide the power, wisdom and knowledge that the Word be shared with those in need. Christians must constantly rely on God for it is not by might or power that lives will be changed but by the Spirit of God.⁶⁵

5.3 Perspective

Worldviews determine perspectives of the god-world relationship. Accordingly, irrespective of whether one’s worldview is a smorgasbord of classical to postmodern, the church must incorporate into its missionary modality the knowledge that each person has a worldview. Obviously, the question of worldviews prejudices whether God is even a factor in the conception of history and the affairs of mankind and, further, if indeed God exists and plays a role, precisely what God’s role is and how it is actualized.

The real issue underlying the postmodern ethos is a fluid neutrality that appears to be attempted universal compatibility. The apparent attempt to accommodate every ideology creates tension because of the “incompatibility” in such an endeavor. This fundamental flaw emphasizes

⁶⁴ Phillips and Okholm, *Christian Apologetics*, 15.

⁶⁵ Ronald H. Nash, *Worldviews in Conflict: Choosing Christianity in a World of Ideas* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992).

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that Christianity and other ideologies are essentially mutually exclusive.⁶⁶ Yet, humans seem intent on absolving themselves of all responsibility and the postmodern god facilitates the maintenance of a form of godliness while denying its power. Unsurprisingly, Scripture foretold these last-day eventualities and exhorted Christians to be wise for those lacking power do so by their own choice. They are “always learning and never able to come to the true knowledge of the truth” for they “resist the truth.” Those who know the truth are encouraged to continue in the truth which they learnt from the best source—the Holy Scriptures—which are able to make them wise unto salvation through faith in Christ. Contrary to Griffin’s postulate, Scripture affirms that all Scripture was inspired by God so that truly godly persons may be empowered to good deeds.⁶⁷ Kenneson observes another advantage and opportunity for the church in this era:

Eliminating the idea of objective truth will force the church to take responsibility for the way it sees and understands the world. In the end, by listening to postmodernism’s critique of modernism, the church may learn that it is not “objective truth” which gives its testimony, authority and intelligibility, but the fact that the church lives its life in a way incomprehensible apart from the God to whom it witnesses.⁶⁸

Evidently, our lives should reflect the imbued power of the omnipotent God as we abide in Him.

6. Summary and Conclusion

In this exploratory work, this paper has not sought to defend or develop the existence or origin of God. Nor has it sought to analyze or engage in a systematic critique of Griffin’s model. Rather, it has sought to use selected themes of Griffin’s framework and his model and to extrapolate these to the broader concerns relating to God and the gospel in contemporary society. In the first place, it has explored the concept of God in contemporary society and explored how this might inform thinking and strategy regarding the gospel. As a second objective it has highlighted the centrality of a

⁶⁶ Griffin somewhat naïvely proposes that the principle of postmodern theology provides a framework which potentially affords the opportunity to different religious traditions to “interpret its own more particular emphases” (9).

⁶⁷ 2 Tim 3:1-17

⁶⁸ Philip D. Kenneson, “There’s No Such Thing as Objective Truth, and It’s a Good Thing, Too” in Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, eds., *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1995), 20.

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proper understanding of God's power to the gospel. In doing so, this paper has responded to Griffin's recommended strategy by which the church ought to address the perceived disconnect with contemporary society *via* the delimited god for a postmodern worldview.

What this paper has shown is that where an omnipotent Creator is rejected in favor of "natural" independent processes, individualism, and humanism are promoted. Where natural overshadows supernatural processes, the power of God is eclipsed and the result is invariably the death of God. Ultimately, any philosophical or theological system thus founded promotes an evolutionary worldview which is obviously incompatible with Biblical supernatural creative power *ex nihilo*. Therefore, Griffin (and others) who attempt to be all things to all men, are desperately seeking to 'mix iron and clay.'

While this paper focused on missions it has done so in a rather tangential manner as it focused primarily on God as the object of interest to the postmodern mind. This somewhat backhanded approach was grounded in the assumption that a proper understanding of the biblical God would mitigate barriers to the acceptance of a biblical worldview resulting from the postmodern rejection of the metanarrative. If postmoderns are able to understand, acknowledge and accept the God of everyday life then, presumably, there will be greater openness to the story of the person (as recorded in the Bible).

The paper has highlighted the need—indeed the urgency—for a well-defined and articulated biblical doctrine of God as a necessary foundation and anchor for the gospel message. As the Seventh-day Adventist church contemplates these critical times, love for the lost must add fillip to the obedience to the commission to "go . . . make disciples of all nations" (Matt 28:19) and drive action that cooperates with divine power for transforming worldviews and lives. As potential avenues are prayerfully considered, constant attention must be given to the importance of sound theological underpinnings to the gospel effort. Canale's thoughts are instructive:

Seventh-day Adventists have limited themselves to dogmatic and theological statements, staying away from a systematic development of the Doctrine of God and the Trinity. Most theological statements have been produced within the context of studies about Christology, atonement, and redemption. . . .⁶⁹ Generally speaking, contemporary Adventists have

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continued to center their theological interests in soteriological and eschatological matters. For this reason the technical discussion of the doctrine of God has not become an issue. . . .⁷⁰

Evidently, a well-articulated doctrine of God is a necessary element of an equally well-articulated gospel message—particularly in a pluralistic and relativistic society lacking interest in genuine spirituality.⁷¹

Issues relating to human free will and the juxtaposition with divine power have not been explored in this paper and are therefore ideal candidates for future research.

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⁶⁹ Fernando L. Canale, “Doctrine of God,” in *Handbook of Seventh-Day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen, Commentary Reference Series (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 12:148.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 150-51.

⁷¹ John C. Peckham, *The Concept of Divine Love in the Context of the God-World Relationship* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2014), represents one example of an attempt at such a doctrine since those comments were made.