

Christianity and a God of Limited Power

One way in which a theist can avoid the problem of evil is to postulate a God of limited power. Why does God not act to prevent famines, natural disasters, and other tragedies? Believers in the ‘Omni-God’ – omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent – are forced to create elaborate theodicies to explain God’s reasons for allowing terrible suffering, or to suppose the existence of divine motives beyond our ken. Proponents of a God of limited power can accept at face value that the examples of seemingly gratuitous evil we find in the world are as they seem: pointless and tragic. God does not prevent them simply because They cannot. We can call this approach the ‘Limitation Solution’ to the problem of evil.

Of course, proponents of the Limitation Solution must explain what God *can* do, as well as giving a positive case for believing there is such a being. Following the pioneering work of Alfred North Whitehead, process theists have answered these questions in great detail, and I have also developed in some detail a different version of the Limitation Solution.¹ In the paper, I will assume for the sake of discussion that the Limitation Solution to the problem of evil is coherent and defensible, in order to ask a different question: Is the Limitation Solution compatible with Christianity?

There are a number of different ways one could approach this issue. Does scripture assert that God is all-powerful?² Is Christianity committed to perfect being theology, something which would seem to rule out a God with limited power? But the challenge I will focus on here centres on *miracles*. I will assume that, at the very least, Christianity involves a commitment to the incarnation and the resurrection of Jesus. As Paul says about the latter (1 Corinthians 14), ‘...if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation is in vain and your faith has been in vain.’ The worry for the Limitation Solution is that these miracles seem to return us to the problem of evil. If God can become incarnate, why does God not do this more often? It’d help down here on Earth with our many troubles to have God incarnate giving us some guidance and advice. And if God can raise the dead, why don’t They do that more often, thus avoiding the pain of grief and the tragedy of life cut short?

Of course, many Christian philosophers have formulated answers to these questions in the form of theodicies³. But the proponent of the Limitation Solution has already rejected such theodicies, as well as other familiar responses such as skeptical theism.⁴ What I would like to explore in this paper is the following question:

¹ Whitehead 1926, 1929/1978, Hartshorne 1941, Cobb 1965, Griffen 1976, Oord 2015, author reference removed.

² Thomas Oord (2023: Ch. 1) has argued for the compatibility of a God of limited power with scripture.

³ Brian Davies (2006) has argued that adopting classic theism allows us to avoid the problem of evil. I am assuming in this paper that the proponent of the Limitation Solution is not relying on this response either. Only by setting aside other solutions, for the sake of discussion, can we properly examine whether the Limitation Solution is compatible with Christianity. This is not to rule out the possibility of combining the Limitation Solution with classical theism.

⁴ Theodicies may play some role in the Limitation Solution, in combination with a story about God’s limitations. But for the proponent of the Limitation Solution, as I am defining it, theodicies *alone* are not sufficient to address the problem of evil. We could of course imagine a view on which theodicies alone account for some of the evils of the world, and the Limitation Solution is brought in to account for others. However, in this paper I will consider a pure version of the limitation solution, on which theodicies alone can provide no significant solution the problem of evil.

Could somebody who accepts the Limitation Solution, because they judge other more familiar solutions to the problem of evil to be inadequate, be a Christian?

Reconciling Christianity and the Limitation Solution will involve giving some account of God's powers which allows us to make sense of the incarnation and the resurrection, but without making God so powerful that we are unable to adopt the Limitation Solution.⁵

In section 1, I will outline a way of reconciling the incarnation and the resurrection with the Limitation Solution. In section 2 I will explore my preferred theory of the resurrection in relation to what we find in the New Testament. In section 3, I will go on to examine whether other miracles can be reconciled with the Limitation Solution.

1 – Making Sense of the Incarnation and the Resurrection

1.1 – The Challenge

Does endowing God with the power to become incarnate as a human being, in something like the way Christians standardly suppose, bring us back to the problem of evil? One question it raises is why God doesn't employ this power more often. Presumably God being incarnate in the world would give God the power to lessen some of the suffering in the world; at the very least regular incarnations would have allowed God to share wisdom and guidance with us throughout human history. I recall my late father – a lifelong agnostic Catholic – expressing skepticism about the truth of Christianity by posing the following question: 'Why didn't Jesus stick around?' Why doesn't God keep coming back, in something like the way Tibetan Buddhists believe the Dalai Lama keeps returning in different human forms? Of course, some religions might hold that this does happen. But Christians believe that in the whole of human history God has become incarnate only for a short 33-year period.

We could press this problem comes in three forms:

Backward-Looking Problem – Why didn't God incarnate earlier? It would have been handy for prehistoric humans to have God incarnate helping out with spiritual guidance.

Forward-Looking Problems – (A) Why didn't the risen Jesus stick around? (B) Why hasn't God become part of creation again already? Whether through (A) or (B), it would have been invaluable for God in human form to be among us assisting with the challenges of the modern world.

What about the resurrection? As noted above, giving God the power to resurrect returns us to the problem of evil in a quite straightforward way, as it seems God could massively reduce the suffering in the world by using that power more often, for example, by raising those who have tragically been killed very young. The resurrection of Jesus in particular also threatens to bring us back to the problem of hiddenness, the important aspect of the problem of evil which presses why God doesn't

⁵ It is somewhat controversial what proponents of the Limitation Solution take to be God's basic powers beyond those discussed here. In my own version (author reference removed), God is able to create from a singularity a universe with physics of a certain form: the form of actual physics with the numerical values of the constants taken out. In other words, in creating the universe God had the freedom to select the values of the constants, and thus we are able to explain in terms of God's actions why the values of certain constants in physics are fine-tuned for life, but God has little or no powers of intervention thereafter. Readers may follow up the references in footnote 1 for the various views of process theologians. At any rate, God's powers to intervene in everyday affairs must be fairly limited to be consistent with the Limitation Solution to the problem of evil.

make Their existence more evident.⁶ For it seems a resurrected physical body that could be seen and touched could surely have shown itself to thousands. Why didn't Jesus make his resurrected state known to everyone in Jerusalem and beyond, thus making the truth of Christianity an undeniable historical fact? Indeed, the gospels seem to describe the risen Jesus as having supernatural abilities, e.g. to suddenly appear in a locked room. Could Jesus not have employed these supernatural abilities to share his resurrected state with millions?

Of course, in the case of all of these challenges, traditional Christians have come up with theodicies to explain why God chooses not to use Their powers in this way, and we cannot dismiss these without argument. But for the purposes of this essay we are taking the position of someone who is unsatisfied with traditional solutions to the problem of evil, such as theodicies or skeptical theism, and has turned instead to the Limitation Solution. How can we extend God's powers to accommodate the incarnation and the resurrection without returning us to the above versions of the problem of evil?

In what follows I will offer a hypothesis that could make sense of this. I will not be arguing that this hypothesis is true, even conditional on the truth of Christianity. We can think of the task rather as a proof of concept, a demonstration that Christianity is compatible with the Limitation Solution. By 'compatible,' I don't mean mere logical compatibility. It is also important that the proposal avoids inelegance and complexity, as these will greatly lower the prior probability of the hypothesis. It's no good avoiding the problem of evil if the resulting view is ludicrously improbable for other reasons.

In 1.2 and 1.3, I will outline two hypotheses that form the core of the form of Christianity I will be exploring: the identity theory and the participatory theory of salvation. In 1.4, I will bring these two hypotheses together. In 1.5, I will explain how the resulting view can help us to address the challenges raised in this section.

1.2 The Identity Theory

The form of Christianity I will develop involves the following hypothesis:

The Identity Theory – The resurrection and the ascension are the same event.

Obviously this differs from the more familiar narrative, as depicted in Luke's gospel and the Acts of the Apostles: that Jesus rose from the dead, remained physically on Earth for a period of time, and then ascended to heaven. On the identity theory, in contrast, the event of Jesus 'rising from the dead' on the Sunday morning, and the event of Jesus physically 'returning to the Father,' were one and the same event.

What about the resurrection appearances? Proponents of the identity theory will adopt the *objective vision* theory of the resurrection appearances, defined as follows:

- the resurrection appearances were visions rather than sensory experiences of light bouncing off a body and entering the eyes,
- these resurrection appearances were nonetheless veridical perceptions of the risen Jesus.⁷

On this view, the resurrection appearances of the first Christians were more like the resurrection appearances of Paul on the road to Damascus, as depicted in the Acts of the Apostles. So the idea

⁶ Schellenberg 1993.

⁷ The objective vision theory originates with Theodore Keim (1883: 334ff, 351-60) but is defended in recent times by Dale Allison (2021).

would be that on the first Easter morning, Jesus' tomb was found empty, and then, soon after, the followers of Jesus started being thrown to the ground and overwhelmed by intense visions: first Mary Magdalene, then Peter, later the eleven remaining disciples, five hundred people at once, James the brother of Jesus, and many others, much later including Paul. Despite not involving a body that could be physically seen and touched, such novel and intense visions, occurring both to groups and individuals, could be enough to render it undeniable that something new and real is going on.

We will deal later with whether the objective vision theory is compatible with the resurrection appearances as depicted in the New Testament. For the moment, we can note that, whereas standardly the objective vision theory takes Christ's resurrection to be purely spiritual – the visions are of Jesus existing in a spiritual form in heaven – the hypothesis currently under consideration is one on which Christ's resurrection was *physical* – post-resurrection, Jesus exists within the Trinity in a physical form. If it sounds a bit weird to imagine a *body* inside God, we can take it that the physical form of the risen Jesus is radically different to Jesus' physical form pre-resurrection, perhaps more like a formless energy than a normal body with limbs and intestines: the same stuff but in a different form.

To be clear, by talking of the physicality of Christ being 'within' the Trinity, following the ascension, I am not suggesting that the Trinity is located in some spatial location and that Jesus isn't 'there' so long as he's hanging around on Earth. But the New Testament does portray Jesus talking of coming from and returning to the Father (John 16:28), and if we are to take these versus seriously, we need to find some way to make sense of this talk. I suggest that we can make sense of this by holding that the full unity of the Trinity was partially disrupted by the incarnation, by one person of the Trinity becoming fully present in a specific location in space and time. Only when the Logos gave up having a location in space and time – whilst not giving up His physical nature – could the Logos be once again fully unified with Father and Spirit, thus allowing His new physical nature to be fully unified with the Father and the Spirit.⁸

Assuming the identity theory, accounting for both the incarnation and the resurrection involves attributing to God the following powers:

- God is able to unify the Logos with a human person and thus become incarnate in line with the doctrines of traditional Christianity.⁹
- Once the Logos has unified with a human person, God is able to fully unify that physical human person (albeit in a radically transformed form) with the other persons of the Trinity (even after the human person has died) by fully reunifying the now embodied Logos with the other persons of the Trinity.

There are many questions still to answer about the identity theory. But we will set them aside for a moment to consider a different aspect of the view I want to develop: the participatory theory of salvation.

⁸ I'm not equating unity with identity, but rather with a deeply intimate metaphysical connection or relationship.

⁹ I am not meaning to claim that God's power enables Them to unify with a person who already exists. Perhaps at a more fundamental level God has a power to fully unify the Logos with any part of physical reality, and God unified the Logos with the physical preconditions that became the embryo that was Jesus. This is compatible with the virgin birth, as God might have intervened to produce those preconditions in the absence of sexual intercourse. We will consider in section three whether miracles of this nature can be reconciled with the Limitation Solution.

1.3 The Participatory Theory of Salvation

There is a big unknown at the heart of Christianity. The orthodox position is that Christ's death and resurrection bring salvation, but there is no orthodox view on *how* that happens. It is not uncommon for people in the West to think that *penal substitution* – the view that Christ brings salvation by taking on the punishment we deserve – is the official Christian view. But this is just one theory, most associated with the protestant reformation, although with a predecessor of sorts in Anselm's philosophy.¹⁰ Christ's atonement is a little bit like quantum mechanics, in that its advocates accept that it works but there is no consensus on what is going in reality to ensure that it works.

The essence of the participatory theory of salvation is that God participates in our nature so that we can participate in God's nature (Bayne & Restall 2008, Collins 2000, MS). As Robin Collins puts it (2000: 8, MS: 2) '[s]alvation consists in an ongoing participation in the life of God as it exists in Christ, as indicated by Jesus' metaphor of the vine and branches (Jn. 15: 5) and Paul's analogy of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12), along with many other New Testament passages, such as John 6: 53-56, Colossians 3: 4, 2 Peter 1: 4, and Hebrews 3: 14.'¹¹ The ultimate aim of creation, on this view, is for created beings to participate in the divine life. Collins (MS: 2) also points out that this 'is basically the same as the Eastern Orthodox understanding of salvation, in which salvation consists of participating in the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4).'

Why is it necessary, in order for this to happen, for God to participate in our form of existence? The problem is that we are rather different to God. On classical theism, God is pure act, radically unlike contingent, created beings. A greater difference than this can hardly be conceived of. Other theists take God to be a conscious mind. But even then, God's form of consciousness is presumably very different to our own. Whereas God's conscious experience is non-physical and does not take place over time – at least not essentially – our conscious experience is arguably essentially temporal and embodied. Without sharing something in common with us, argues Collins, '...God's life would be too alien from ours for this sharing to occur. This is analogous to the fact that a tree branch cannot be grafted into a horse, only another tree; the horse is too alien for it' (Collins MS: 2).

There are of course many questions and objections one might raise to the participatory theory, e.g. how it deals with sin, and whether it fits with scripture. However, this paper is already too large; for those interested in a full defence of the participatory view, I recommend the papers referred to above. It is also worth noting that adopting the participatory view of salvation does not exclude also adopting other views of the atonement, if, for example, one thought the participatory account does not adequately deal with the question of sin.

1.4 Bringing the two hypotheses together

One might think that salvation is achieved by Christ's death and resurrection, rather than his ascension.¹² But, of course, if the resurrection is identical with the ascension, and the resurrection plays a role in securing salvation, it follows that the ascension plays a role in securing salvation. Indeed, there is perhaps scriptural support for the ascension playing such a role. In the last supper

¹⁰ William Lane Craig (2018, 2020) has given an interesting defence of penal substitution in recent times.

¹¹ Collins calls his view the 'incarnational' theory of the atonement, but he takes it to be a form of the participatory theory. The above page numbers are from the drafts on his website, linked to in the bibliography.

¹² What role does the *death* of Jesus play in salvation? On the participatory theory, Christ's dying may be part of his fully participating in the human form of existence. In addition to this, one may want to add another theory of the atonement to account for what was achieved by Christ's death.

monologue in John's gospel, Jesus says, 'It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you' (John 16: 7), indicating that the ascension is essential for the Holy Spirit being present in the world – or perhaps more fully present in the world – arguably an essential component of salvation.

Suppose one adopts a participatory view of salvation: that God secures salvation for us by sharing in our nature. And suppose one thinks the ascension plays an essential role in securing salvation, as per the identity theory. There is a very natural metaphysical proposal for linking these two things together:

The Core Idea – By fully unifying the physicality of the Logos with the Father and the Spirit, God as a whole comes to fully share in our physical nature, and thus allows physical creatures to share in the divine life.

The idea would be that without there being physicality within the unity of the Trinity, God's nature is just too different to ours for us and God to share a common, unified form of existence. It is only when there is physicality – albeit of a radically transformed form – within the inner being of God, that we physical creatures can participate in the divine life, to some extent in this life but more fully in the life to come.

While we're on the subject of the life to come, making sense of this aspect of Christian doctrine requires endowing God with the power to preserve our conscious minds after death. This posit doesn't return us to the problem of evil, as there are no observable evils that this power could prevent. Perhaps ensuring *some form* of afterlife was always an option for God but it was a suboptimal state of being until the resurrection facilitated our sharing in the divine life.¹³

Why is it not enough that one person of the Trinity takes on a physical nature? Are not all three persons of the Trinity fully God? There are of course many different theories of the metaphysics of the Trinity, but, in line with the statements of the Nicene Creed that the Son is eternally begotten of the Father and that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, many hold that the Father is the ultimate source of being. Perhaps it was necessary for the ultimate source and sustainer of the universe, i.e., the Father, to be more similar to us for the impact of this to permeate throughout creation. Or perhaps the impact needed to be mediated through the unified creative action of the whole Trinity, Father acting through the Son and in the unity of the Spirit, with all three participating

¹³ The afterlife is easier to make sense of on a dualist theory of mind and of personal identity, as it only requires endowing God with the power to preserve our non-physical minds after death. Things get trickier if we adopt physicalism and/or animalism about personal identity. There may be options here. Many forms of physicalism are compatible with multiple realisation, and at least some of these views may be compatible with our minds being realised in the physicality of Christ, giving a new and perhaps more literal way of understanding Jesus' metaphor of the vine and the branches or Paul's talk of us being members of the body of Christ. To the extent that an individual shares in the divine life, an animalist could think of death as the loss of one part of the organism, whilst the rest of the organism continues within the divine life. What about life after death for those who died before the resurrection of Jesus? Perhaps a proponent of a psychological continuity theory of personal identity could hold that the memories and the mental states of the pre-resurrection individual continued in the mind of God until they could be realised as a separate individual in the physicality of Christ. Maybe an animalist could modify the view explored in this paper so that we have always partially participated in the being of God – in such a way as to preserve some suboptimal form of posthumous existence – but that this is enriched by the deeper participation in the Divine life ensured by Jesus' resurrection. Or perhaps eternalism about the nature of time could open up more options for making sense of the resurrection later in time securing the continued existence of those who died earlier in time. I leave exploring these possibilities for future work.

in our form of existence only once the physicality of the Logos becomes fully embedded in the unity of the Trinity.

Bringing the participatory theory and the identity theory together in this way can help to address the following big challenge for the identity theory:

If the appearances to the early Christians were mere visions, how did they get the idea that Jesus has *physically* risen from the dead? Many (e.g. Wright 2003) have argued that the Christian belief that a single individual had resurrected in the middle of history was previously completely unknown in Jewish thought. On that basis, one might think that post-crucifixion visions of Jesus would have been more likely to bring about the belief that Jesus is spiritually with God in heaven rather than physically resurrected.

Perhaps we could simply say that God conveyed the physicality of the resurrection to the first Christians through the visions that began on Easter morning. However, we need to be careful that this doesn't return us to the problem of hiddenness. If God is able to put information in human heads, why doesn't God do it more often, making Their existence an undeniable fact?

Spiritual practice standardly presupposes some kind of experience of God or the Divine. I suggest that proponents of the Limitation Solution are confined to attributing to God a capacity to convey a generic awareness of Their presence, such that:

- the strength of that awareness is highly dependent on the frame of mind of the recipient, e.g. those who have engaged in prolonged spiritual practice or have been impacted by deep experiences of beauty are more open to an awareness of the Divine than those whose minds are busy with the hustle and bustle of modern life,
- the content of the resulting experience is vague enough to be highly subject to interpretation, e.g. Christians can interpret their experiences of the Divine as awareness of a loving God, while Zen Buddhist monks interpret their experiences of the Divine as an awareness of emptiness.

In this way, we are able to avoid the problem of hiddenness by explaining why God doesn't prevent all non-resistant non-belief, i.e. non-belief among those who would like to believe (Schellenberg 1993). Some don't believe because their minds are not spiritually advanced enough for God to have much of an impact on their consciousness. And even among those who are spiritually advanced enough to experience God, that experience is too imprecise to ensure that the subject of the experience enjoys a theologically accurate view of the object of the experience.

How did a God of limited powers, unable in general to convey anything more than a vague sense of Their presence, manage to convey to the first Christians that Jesus was alive again in a physical form? According to the participatory theory, the resurrection of Jesus transformed reality, allowing humans to share in the divine life. It is plausible that sharing more in the divine life would enrich our experience of God. I am not proposing that this transformation in the relationship between God and humanity adds any *content* to the human experience of God – that would lead us back to problem of hiddenness – but simply that it deepens and intensifies the generic human experience of the Divine, allowing us to know God in a vastly more profound way. By bringing together the participatory theory and the identity theory, we can propose that what caused the resurrection visions of the first Christians was their coming to participate in the divine life, something made possible through the resurrection of Jesus.

Now, I am not claiming that the resurrection gave access to the divine life only to certain humans. The view outlined above is that God's sharing in physicality allowed *all physical creatures* to share more fully in the divine life. But, just as with the experience of God, it is plausible that this potential to share in the divine life will be deeper and richer when one is in the right state of mind to access it. We can theorise that Jesus prepared his close followers to be in the right state to maximise the impact of this cosmic transformation, and to subsequently help others to do likewise. In this way, we can at least partly explain the rapid rise of Christianity we find depicted in the New Testament, as the first Christians helped others to receive the Holy Spirit that was now available in a radically new way.¹⁴

Even if we grant that this transformation in the relationship between God and humanity could cause radical visions in the first Christians, this doesn't explain how they got the information that *Jesus was alive again in a physical form*. We can explain this by supposing that part of Jesus' preparation of his followers consisting in guiding them and/or shaping them to interpret the visionary experiences which he knew were to come.¹⁵ It says in the gospels that Jesus talked on multiple occasions about his death and resurrection. It also says that the disciples didn't understand what he was telling them. But perhaps Jesus conveyed the message to them in just such a way that, when reality was transformed by the presence of the physical Christ within the unity of the Trinity, the disciples would be uniquely attuned to that new reality and would correctly perceive what was going on.

Of course, Paul was not spiritually tutored by the pre-Easter Christ. However, it is likely that Paul knew something about Christians and their beliefs through his persecution of them. And, as a spiritually attuned individual, he may also have been aware, at first in a peripheral way, of the change in reality Christ had brought about: that access to God had suddenly been opened up in a radically new way. Perhaps it gradually became apparent to Paul that the Christians he was persecuting were speaking and behaving in a way that perfectly resonated with this new creation that it was increasingly impossible to deny, ultimately resulting in the intense Christic visions that marked his conversion.

One might worry that the identity theory makes the resurrection appearances to the first Christians not different in kind to the visions of Jesus enjoyed by many throughout the last two thousand years, up to the present day. One way of responding to this challenge is to accept the implication but argue that it is unproblematic. Dale Allison (2021) has recently argued at length for continuity between the resurrection appearances and Christic visions throughout history.¹⁶ Alternately, one might argue that the Christic visions of those who knew Jesus during his life (and were perhaps spiritually prepared for the resurrection appearances by Jesus himself while he walked the Earth) and/or were spiritually attuned people who lived through the transformation of reality brought about by the resurrection (for whom perhaps the before/after difference was palpably evident) were of a vastly greater intensity to those of later times.

¹⁴ On the view explored here, the Holy Spirit, whilst perhaps always accessible to us to some extent, was much more deeply accessible to us once we were able to share in the Divine life.

¹⁵ What did Jesus know that he couldn't have known through ordinary perception and reasoning? The idea that he was omniscient would lead us back to the problem of evil, as he could have shared crucial scientific truths with his followers. I suggest we posit that, in virtue of his unique status as the embodiment of the Logos, Jesus had a deep understanding of who he was and how he fitted into God's plan.

¹⁶ See Weibe 1998 for a study of contemporary visions of Jesus.

1.5 – Addressing the Challenges

Having outlined, in some detail, a specific interpretation of Christianity, let us turn to how it can address the challenges raising in 1.1.

Beginning with Forward-Looking Problem A, the identity theory has a quite straightforward answer. The risen Jesus didn't stick around on Earth because the risen Jesus was never on Earth in the first place. It also addresses the problem of hiddenness that the resurrection threatens to return us to. We observed above that a resurrected physical body that could be seen and touched could surely have shown itself to thousands more, persuading tens and thousands of Romans and Jews alike of the truth of the resurrection. But if the resurrection appearances were visions that required the recipient to be in the right frame of mind (which fits with the gospel claims, discussed below, that some witnesses of the resurrection doubted or failed to recognise Jesus), ideally with some tutoring from the pre-Easter Jesus, then this makes sense of the fact that, although there were enough witnesses of the resurrection to turbo charge the launch of Christianity, there were not enough to persuade the entire world.

What about Forward-Looking Problem B? If God is *able* to fully unify the Logos with a human person, why hasn't God done it again in the last two thousand years, thereby putting Themselves in a better position to help humanity out? I suggest the best explanation for this is that once the Logos becomes unified with a physical human person – as happens in the conception of Jesus if Christianity is true – that unity is permanent and cannot be undone. This supposition is not logically inevitable, but it also not doesn't greatly add to the complexity of the theory. We can further suppose – again not logically inevitable but not problematically complex – that if the Logos cannot cast aside His unity with a specific physical person, He thereby cannot become unified with a distinct physical person.¹⁷ In other words, although God is capable of becoming a person, this power can be exercised only once.

Moreover, just as sharing in our nature may cause a permanent change in God, our sharing in God's nature may likewise cause a permanent change in us. If all or many human beings – and perhaps the physical universe more generally – now share in the divine nature, it may not be possible to sever the connection, at least not without doing irreparable damage to human beings. And if that connection is rooted in the physical Logos being fully unified with Father and Spirit, then this connection would presumably be broken if the Logos were to once again cease to be fully unified with the other members of the Trinity in order to become another human being.

All of this answers, I hope, Forward-Looking Problem B. We have two simple modifications of the theory which would provide us with good explanations of why God hasn't become incarnate in the last 2000 years: on the first, God is not able to, on the second God has good reason not to. We do need to settle on which we go for, or whether we go for both. Our aim here is merely proof of concept.

What remains is the Backward-looking Problem: Why didn't God become part of creation earlier? If God knows the incarnation is going to be a one-off, then this was God's one chance to communicate with humanity beyond the generic sense of God's existence discussed in 1.4. Perhaps an omniscient being could see that – through complex, chaotic chains of causation beyond the grasp of human minds – becoming incarnate in this person at this time would lead to the rapid expansion of Christianity that subsequently occurred, and to Christianity becoming the official religion of the

¹⁷ As discussed in footnote 9, I am not thinking of the person the Logos unifies with as pre-existing that state of unity.

Roman empire and ultimately the world's biggest religion. In this way, God was able to communicate to a huge number of people a deeper understanding of God's nature, through understanding God in terms of the character and teaching of Jesus, and through identifying God with a poor and powerless human being enduring a cruel and humiliating execution at the hands of a powerful empire.¹⁸

I conclude that this version of Christianity is able to address the challenges raised in 1.1.

2 – The Identity Theory and the New Testament

How well does the identity theory, including its commitment to objective vision theory, fit with what we find about the resurrection in the New Testament? The following discussion builds on the defence of the objective vision theory we find in Dale Allison's recent book *The Resurrection of Jesus*. Allison references many Biblical scholars (Enslin 1921: 60-73, Goppelt 1981: 246, Pannenberg 1977: 91-3, 1994: 354-5, Stuhlmacher 2018: 197-8) who have argued that the early Christians equated the resurrection and the ascension. For what it's worth, the thesis that the early Christians held the identity theory is not a fringe view. My aim in the following will not be to conclusively argue that the New Testament fits better with the identity theory, but more modestly that a reasonable case can be made to fit the identity theory with the claims of the New Testament.

We can begin by noting the following tension in the New Testament. On the one hand, in his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul put himself on the list of people who the risen Jesus appeared to, following those appearances which are also referred to in the gospels (as well as some others). On the other hand, when we turn to the gospels and the Acts of the Apostles, the appearance of Jesus to Paul (as depicted in Acts) seems of a different kind to the appearances of Jesus to Peter and the disciples (as depicted in the gospels), in that *prima facie* the former seems more like a visionary experience and the latter seem more like sensory perceptions of a body that can be seen and touched. This is by no means a straightforward contradiction and there are a variety of ways to resolve it. One way of resolving the tension is by holding that the appearances in the gospels, despite superficial impressions, are more like the visionary appearance to Paul in Acts. This is precisely what the identity theory says.¹⁹

The identity theory also fits well with what Paul says about the resurrection in so far as Paul asserts that the resurrected body is physical but a radically transformed form of physicality:

...you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed...It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body...the last Adam [i.e. Christ] became a life-giving spirit. (1 Corinthians 15: 42-45).

The analogy of the seed and the plant suggests continuity but also radical transformation. On the identity theory, the risen Christ is constituted of the same physical stuff as the Jesus who walked the Earth, but that physical stuff has been changed into a radically different form.

¹⁸ I am not claiming that we have independent reason to think that the time of Jesus was the optimal time for God to become incarnate. But if there is some evidence in support of the truth of Christianity, and the proposition that the time of Jesus was the optimal time for God to become incarnate forms part of the most consistent and plausible version of Christianity, then this may give us some grounds for accepting that proposition as part of the package. It is beyond the focus of this paper whether there is evidence in support of the truth of Christianity.

¹⁹ Allison (2021: Ch. 9, n. 55) points that this argument was already established in the 19th century: Weisse 1838: 272-92; Schenkel 1869: 318, and Weizsäcker 1894: 1, 1-19. To be clear, I am not saying this is the only way of resolving the tension, merely that it is an option.

What about the resurrection appearances as they are depicted in the gospels? There are a number of features of the gospel appearances which arguably fit better with the objective vision theory, of which the identity theory is one form. There are no appearances in (the original version of) Mark's Gospel, but it is a striking feature of the appearances in the other three gospels that each contains a case of people not recognising Jesus, or doubting that he is there. In John's gospel, Mary Magdalene initially takes Jesus to be the gardener. The two people on the road to Emmaus walk and talk with Jesus without knowing who he is, only recognising him when they finally sit down to eat and he breaks the bread. At the end of Matthew's Gospel Jesus appears to the eleven disciples on a mountain in Galilee, and we are told 'they worshipped him but some doubted.' It's hard to make sense of not recognising, or doubting the existence of, someone you know quite well if they're there in front of you with light bouncing off their body and entering your eyes. But if these were visionary experiences, which the followers of Jesus were tuning in and out of, and experiencing in slightly different ways, then the doubting and failure to recognise Jesus makes perfect sense. We might imagine the resurrection experiences as a bit like a magic eye painting: when you get it, it's definitely there, but you have to squint in the right way.²⁰

There are some other features that arguably fit better with the thesis that the resurrection appearances were visions. Consider the climax of the story of the two meeting Jesus on the road to Emmaus, in which the two disciples recognise Jesus and at that moment he suddenly disappears. On the standard view in which Jesus is physically present with the pair on the road to Emmaus, Jesus presumably chose to suddenly disappear at the instant the bread was broken. This seems needlessly enigmatic, even pretentious behaviour; like a conjurer vanishing in a puff of smoke at the climax of the act. But on the view that these were visions that the first Christians were tuning in and out of, suddenly losing sight of Jesus makes perfect sense.

To take another example, when Jesus first appears to the disciples in John's gospel, he breathes on them, in order to give them the Holy Spirit. On the thesis that the resurrection appearances were not visions, are we to suppose that literally expelling oxygen onto the faces of the disciples was essential to giving them the Holy Spirit? That doesn't seem plausible, whether or not the risen Jesus is omnipotent. But in that case, Jesus chose to convey the Holy Spirit by breathing on them, presumably for symbolic effect. As with the sudden disappearance, this seems needlessly theatrical, when presumably the disciples would just want to talk to Jesus in a human way, maybe embrace him as Mary Magdalene tried to do slightly earlier in the gospel. However, on the objective vision theory, it is more plausible that these visionary experiences might have involved a sense of being breathed on by Jesus.

Finally, Dale Allison has pointed out to me in correspondence that Matthew 28 and John 20 contain elements that seem to suggest that the resurrection event consisted of Jesus dematerialising. The former has Jesus vacating the tomb before the stone is rolled away, seeming to have escaped through the rock; the latter describes how the grave clothes have been left (as does Luke 24 in less detail). Whilst this is not inconsistent with the traditional view that Jesus appeared as a physical body that can be seen and touched, and can eat food, this traditional view is forced to add more complexity: that Jesus dematerialised but then periodically rematerialized, presumably with

²⁰ Wright's view (2003: 608-15) that the resurrected Jesus was *transphysical* may help somewhat. But if this is a transphysical body that looked like pre-resurrection Jesus, and that light bounces off, we still face a puzzle making sense of these stories of doubt. Allison discusses Wright's view on transphysicality in chapter 9 of his 2021.

miraculously created clothes. The identity theory offers a simpler story: the initial dematerialisation was permanent and Jesus was thereafter experienced in visions.²¹

So much for aspects of the gospel appearance which fit well with the objective vision theory and/or identity theory, what about those aspects which don't seem to fit so well? At least on a surface level, some of the sharpest tensions are in Luke's Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, both written by the same author who I shall refer to as 'Luke.' In Luke's depiction of the first appearance to the disciples, Jesus goes out of his way to convey his physicality, inviting the disciples to 'touch and see' that he has flesh, and asking for fish which he promptly eats in front of them. Taken at face value, what is being conveyed here is inconsistent with the objective vision theory. Moreover, Luke depicts the resurrection as happening at an earlier time to the ascension, contra the claim of the identity theory that these were one and the same event.

How can a proponent of the identity theory (one form of the objective vision theory) respond? Clearly, Luke is claiming that the resurrection was physical. However, the fact that Jesus's demonstrations of his physicality are so 'in your face' – was Jesus' first priority upon appearing to his beloved and grieving disciples really to eat some fish? – makes it reasonable to suppose that what Luke is telling us is not a description of what actually happened, but is rather just his way of expressing the crucial point that the resurrection was physical not spiritual. Luke may have been concerned with opposing gnostic traditions of his time, according to which Christ's resurrection was merely spiritual.

Allison (2021: Ch. 9, 'Spirits and Angels') points out that much modern scholarship regards the more physical aspects of the resurrection stories as late and apologetical on these grounds. He also (ibid: Ch. 9, 'Comparing Stories') suggests that the women touching the feet of the risen Jesus that we find in Matthew 28 may be similarly explained as an apologetic form of opposition to a purely spiritual resurrection, as ghosts were commonly thought not to have feet. To the extent that the function of these passages is to assert the physicality of the resurrection, the identity theory concurs, as it too takes the resurrection to be physical.²² To remind the reader, I'm not claiming that the above viewpoint in New Testament scholarship is obligatory but merely that it is reasonable.

In terms of the ascension, it is to say the least far from clear that there is a tradition behind Luke's description, as opposed to it being Luke's free composition. The period of '40 days and 40 nights' occurs a great deal throughout the bible, including of course in reference to the time Jesus spent in the desert at the beginning of his ministry, which makes it plausible that Luke choose this time period because of its biblical resonance rather than because eye witnesses of the resurrection counted the days the risen Jesus was around and passed this information on. More generally, it is reasonable to speculate that Luke may have been filling in details as best he could imagine how things happened. He took the resurrection to be physical, which he conceived of as a body walking the earth, but he also believed that Jesus is now with God in heaven. He thus inferred that at some point the body must have floated up to heaven.

This speculation is bolstered by the fact that we have some grounds for thinking that Luke's description of the ascension is not conveying literal fact:

²¹ By 'dematerialisation,' I don't mean ceasing to be *physical* but rather ceasing to be solid matter that could be seen and touched.

²² One could have a view that identified the resurrection and the ascension but took them both to be non-physical, but that would be different to what I am calling 'the identity theory.'

1. Luke's two depictions of the ascension – the first in Luke's Gospel and the second in Acts of the Apostles – contradict each other in terms of the time lapse between the resurrection and the ascension. To be clear, this does not imply that Luke is mistaken. Given how blatant this contradiction is, he presumably knew it was there, which suggests that he wasn't intending to convey what actually happened with the kind of accuracy of detail we'd expect from a modern newspaper report. But this does at least imply some lack of correspondence between surface-level representation in Luke's writings and what actually happened.
2. In the Acts of the Apostles, the ascension is described as Jesus being 'lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight'; in Luke's Gospel, it says he was 'carried up into heaven.' If we take these descriptions at face value, such that Jesus is floating off into the sky, then they are in sharp tension with what we now understand about cosmology, namely that heaven is not a location in the sky. So either Luke is just wrong about what happened, or this is another example of a lack of correspondence between surface-level representation and what actually happened.
3. Gerhard Lohfink (1971) provides further support for the non-historicity of Luke's ascension through comparison with Greco-Roman ascension scenes.²³

I conclude therefore, that it's reasonable to suppose that the aspects of Luke's gospel that superficially conflict with the identity theory do not convey literal history.

There are also tensions between the identity theory and John's gospel. One might worry that Thomas's invitation to put his fingers in the wounds of Christ is inconsistent with the objective vision theory. However, the text does not actually say whether or not Thomas did this. Perhaps it is implied; however, as Allison (ibid: Ch. 9: 'Spirits and Angels') points out, many visionary experiences described in contemporary literature do involve seeming to touch a deceased person who is appearing to the person having the experience.

The biggest tension from John's gospel lies in the final resurrection appearance, in which Jesus cooks breakfast for the disciples on beach. This really is hard to construe as a visionary experience. However, this final appearance is located in the epilogue of John's gospel, which many scholars believe to be a later addition to the text (ibid: Ch. 9, 'Comparing Stories', n 40), partly because the prior chapter seems to be drawing the gospel to a close:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

We then get another chapter depicting a resurrection appearance. At the climax of this appearance, Jesus indicates to Peter that he will martyred (something which would have already happened when the gospel was written). Peter then queries Jesus about what will happen to the 'beloved disciple', a character who features at various points earlier in the gospel. The text continues:

Jesus said to him, 'If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!' So the rumour spread in the community that this disciple would not die. Yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but, 'If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?' This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true.

²³ I'm grateful for Dale Allison for pointing out to me Lohfink's work on this.

There is a very plausible explanation for the above:

John's gospel is based, at least in part, on the testimony of a long-lived follower of Jesus – the 'beloved disciple' – whether that means the beloved disciple personally wrote it, or whether it was written by a follower or community of followers of the beloved disciple. On account of this disciple's long life, a belief arises, perhaps among the beloved disciple's followers or even of the beloved disciple himself, that he is going to remain alive until Jesus returns. After the completion of the bulk of John's gospel, however, the beloved disciple dies without Jesus having returned, and at this point the epilogue is added to explain away the embarrassment of this conviction turning out to be false.

A case can be made, then, for thinking:

- The bulk of John's gospel is closely connected to eye-witness testimony of an intimate follower of Jesus.
- The epilogue of John's gospel was written after this eyewitness had died, with the aim of explaining away an inconvenient truth.

This does not mean this final resurrection appearance didn't happen at all. Perhaps this passage represents a genuine resurrection appearance the beloved disciple recounted during his life, but was altered by the beloved disciple's followers after he died in order to explain away his unexpected death. However, once we accept that the account was altered, we cannot be confident that the original version involved Jesus cooking breakfast, the aspect most in tension with the objective vision theory.

We might even make a case that John's Gospel depicts the ascension as occurring before the first appearance to the disciples, which would fit better with the identity theory than the standard view as depicted in Luke's writings. The basis for this case would be that in the first resurrection appearance to the disciples Jesus is depicted as conveying the Holy Spirit to the disciples, having previously said – as noted above – that he would only send the Holy Spirit once he 'goes away,' which plausibly refers to the ascension.

What about the conversations the risen Jesus has with those he appears to, perhaps most notably the extended conversation had with the two companions on the road to Emmaus? How does a God of limited power convey enough propositional information in a vision to have a detailed conversation? The easiest option for the Christian proponent of the Limitation Solution would be to hold that detailed conversations in resurrection appearances are embellishments on the original stories (Schmiedel 1903: 4063-4; Brown 1973: 107-8; Vögtle 1975: 107-8; Allison 2021: Ch 9, n 40). Alternately, one could perhaps hold that the special connection formed between the pre-Easter Jesus and certain of his followers allowed some detailed communication between the risen Jesus and those followers, of a kind which ceased to be possible once that generation died out. My preference would be the former option, on grounds of parsimony.

To be clear, what definitely *is* part of the proposal is *group resurrection experiences*, with numerous individuals attuned to the same real phenomenon (just not necessarily involving conversations). Many have pointed out that such group experiences are challenges to hallucination theories of the resurrection experiences, leading non-Christian scholars like Bart Ehrman (2014) to be skeptical of them. But group resurrection experiences are not a problem for *objective* vision theories of the resurrection experiences, which involve the early Christians latching to an objective reality, just not one they are perceiving with their ordinary senses.

Given that Paul didn't know the pre-Easter Jesus, and thus lacked any special connection which may (or may not) have facilitated detailed communication with the risen Jesus, how was the risen Jesus able to convey to Paul a mission to preach to the gentiles? Paul's visionary experiences of the risen Christ conveyed to him the incredible revelation that God was now unconditionally accessible to all, that 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3: 28); extraordinarily progressive sentiments for the time. We can suppose that Paul correctly interpreted these truths as entailing an imperative to extend the Christian movement beyond the limits of Judaism. None of this requires that the risen Jesus was able to put specific propositions in Paul's head. We can rather suppose that Paul was simply a spiritually attuned person able to discern how the connection with God available to all humans had been transformed.

Not everyone will be impressed by the case I have made above, and for some Christians the tensions with, say, Luke's gospel will be enough to reject the identity theory. However, a proponent of the Limitation Solution is unlikely to be a biblical inerrantist, as a God of limited power is unlikely to be able to ensure that every bit of what eventually became the bible is entirely accurate. Indeed, a God who did have the ability to directly control the writings of individuals would surely be able to make Their presence better known, thus undermining the Limitation Solution to the problem of hiddenness.

There are various considerations to be weighed, and I am not suggesting that there is no cost to the form of Christianity outlined here. But perhaps some Christians unhappy with more traditional solutions to the problem of evil will feel the advantage of circumnavigating the problem is worth the cost of taking certain parts of Luke's writings to be inaccurate (or at least there not being a perfect correspondence between the surface-level description and what actually happened). At least, I hope there's some value in articulating this option.²⁴

Finally, I want to suggest a good fit between the identity theory and what Jesus himself says about the resurrection of the dead. In all three synoptic gospels we find the story of the Sadducees – who didn't believe in the resurrection of the dead – challenging Jesus with the example of a woman who is widowed and remarried seven times: 'In the resurrection, then whose wife of the seven will she be? For all of them had married her' (Matthew 22: 28). Jesus responds that 'in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven' (Matthew 22: 30). On the surface, Jesus is simply asserting that resurrected people won't be married, and presumably won't have sex (will they have genitals or gender?). If that's all there is to this story, it arguably lacks the depth we find in so much of what the gospels report of Jesus' words. Could there be a deeper message if we dig a little beneath the surface?

Perhaps the fundamental error of the Sadducees is that they are imagining resurrected life as just a continuity of the form of existence we currently enjoy – walking around, eating, having sex, etc – whereas resurrected life is a radically transformed mode of existence, beyond what we are now able to conceive of. This does not mean swinging to the other extreme of the purely spiritual life after death of the Gnostics. On the identity theory, the resurrected person is made of physical stuff, but that physical stuff is changed into a radically different form. This arguably fits with the deep message of this biblical passage: the life to come is physical, but it's not like anything you can imagine.²⁵

²⁴ Max Baker-Hyatt has shared with me in conversation that, whilst he is inclined to belief in an omnipotent God, he values the existence of this option as a backup.

²⁵ For some discussion of the early church on this passage, see Lehtipuu 2015.

I conclude that the view explored here can be defended on biblical grounds.

3 – Other Miracles

What about other miracles? The bible contains many descriptions of miracles in addition to the incarnation and the resurrection. Jesus himself performs many miracles, from incredible healings to turning water into wine. Through Moses, God parted the Red Sea to allow the Israelites to cross. And many Christians believe that God intervenes right up to the present day, perhaps partly as the result of petitionary prayer. If God has the power to perform all of these incredible feats, the problem of evil threatens again. Why doesn't God use these incredible powers to reduce more of the suffering we find in the world? As previously, we are considering a proponent of the Limitation Solution dissatisfied with extant theodicies or skeptical theism.

An interesting strategy for accounting for this broader class of miracles can be found in the work of Thomas Oord, a theologian who is also trying to reconcile Christianity with a God of limited power.²⁶ In what follows I will explore Oord's views, before going on to give my own reactions.

According to Oord, God's self-giving nature renders God unable to interrupt the lawlike regularities derived from divine giving. Entities, both animate and inanimate, are expressing their nature, enjoying the capacities and forms of being God has given them, and God cannot override this. In this way, Oord explains why God does not perform miracles more often to prevent the dreadful suffering we see so much of in the world. This is a form of the Limitation Solution.²⁷

At the same time, Oord does want to make sense of the dramatic miracles we find in both Old and New Testaments. How to square this circle? Oord offers three strategies:

1. Randomness Strategy: God takes advantage of randomness in nature, e.g. the randomness we find in quantum mechanics, to offer entities novel forms of being or possibilities of action. Whilst God can't override the ways in which entities are expressing the forms of being entities already have, God can gift things new forms of being, in such a way that – providing the entities in question express those new forms of being – extraordinary events occur, perhaps including the parting of the Red Sea.
2. Indirect Strategy: Rather than directly impacting the inanimate world, God calls free humans to do things which God knows through finely tuned chains of causation (think butterfly effect) create extraordinary happenings. In other words, God instructs person X to do such and such, person Y to do so and so, in just the right way such that – simply through the operation of the standard laws of nature – some extraordinary event will result. Perhaps God knew that the precise displacement of air molecules resulting from moving certain people to certain locations – through setting off just the right chain of causation – would cause the Red Sea to part at just the right moment.
3. Right Place-Right Time Strategy: Rather than interfering in the inanimate world at all (either directly or indirectly), God calls free humans to get in the right place to take advantage of rare, extraordinary happenings which were going to happen anyway just through the

²⁶ Oord 2015: Ch. 8.

²⁷ I'm not totally persuaded by Oord's view that God's self-giving nature explains, even in part, these limitations. The fact that a parent compels their child by pushing them out of the way of a car that's about to hit them is consistent with the parent's having self-giving love towards the child. Likewise, God's overriding the free activities of creatures seems consistent with God's having a loving and self-giving nature. I'm inclined to think we may just have to accept God's limitations as brute fact. In any case, Oord's broader strategy discussed here is consistent with taking God's limitations as brute.

operation of the standard laws of nature. Perhaps God knew that a freak chain of causation was going to part the Red Sea at a particular moment, and so God called Moses to bring the Ancient Israelites to its shores at precisely the right time.

Oord's solutions are ingenious. But here are some worries:

Response to the Randomness Strategy: In terms of the first strategy, whilst *some* – not all – interpretations of quantum mechanics do involve an element of randomness, such interpretations also entail *objective probabilities* as to what is going to happen at any given moment. There may be, for example, an 80% probability that an electron is going to be observed at a given location.²⁸ In the light of this, the details of Oord's first strategy need to be filled in a little. Is the claim that whenever there is *any* quantum mechanical chance that a certain event E could happen, God is able to supplement new forms of being to encourage E to occur? That would make God too powerful, as for an incredibly wide range of outcomes, there is *some* (maybe very low) quantum mechanical chance of that outcome taking place. For example, there is some chance my body will pass right through the chair I'm sitting on right now. Allowing God to realise all such possibilities would make God practically omnipotent and hence return us to the problem of evil. Alternately, Oord might say that if the quantum mechanical chance of a certain event E is above a certain level, say, 80%, God can introduce new forms of being to encourage E to occur. However, whichever level Oord chooses it's going to look somewhat arbitrary that the cut off is at that precise level. Hence, Oord's quantum strategy faces a dilemma: either God is too powerful, or the strategy involves a problematic element of arbitrariness.²⁹

Responding to Indirect & Right Time/Right Place Strategies: I foresee a couple of problems with the second and third strategies, both rooted in the background assumption of these strategies that God can communicate with people. The first problem with this assumption is that it raises the worry of why God doesn't communicate more often, to make her existence more evident, or to share scientific or practical knowledge that would improve our lives. The second, more subtle problem, is that God's placing messages in our heads is surely going to involve making physical changes in our brains.³⁰ In this case, it looks like God *is* going to have to directly intervene in physical reality – our brains – which brings us back to the problems with the first strategy. How much of a quantum mechanical chance of happening does a certain brain event need to have in order for God to be able to bring it about? In this sense, the latter two strategies are dependent on the first strategy.³¹

²⁸ Oord describes his randomness strategy as God using 'spontaneous and random events at various levels of existence,' not just the quantum level (ibid: 208). However, assuming higher-levels supervene on the quantum level, the objective probabilities at the quantum level will determine, for any token macro-level event E, the objective probability of E occurring. Hence to extend Oord's strategy to higher levels requires strong emergence, the option we will discuss presently.

²⁹ Any view that puts a fundamental constraint on God's powers is arguably going to introduce some arbitrariness, which detracts from the simplicity of the theory, but we should try to limit this. My own theory I refer to in footnote 5 reduces the arbitrariness of physics, by giving a deeper explanation of the values of the constants, whereas associating God's powers of intervention with an exact quantum mechanical probability *adds* an arbitrary element over and above what we find in physics. Ultimately the worry about arbitrariness reflects a deeper concern with simplicity, which is always a matter of degree.

³⁰ Even if dualism is true, if God's communications result in changes in our behaviour, this is going to have impacts on the objective probabilities that would result from the standard predictions of quantum mechanics.

³¹ The view outlined in section 1 already involved God having the capacity to convey to us a generic awareness of Their presence. This will presumably also make changes in the physical world – e.g. when it leads someone to say 'I can feel the presence of the Divine.' This may result in deviations from the standard predictions of quantum mechanics, given that these impacts will presumably alter the objective probabilities that would have

Given these challenges, moving forward with this approach may require adopting a form of *strong emergentism*, on which new fundamental causal powers emerge at higher levels of complexity. A way of making the strong emergentist position vivid may be to think about Laplace's Demon, the hypothetical super-intelligence dreamt up by the 19th century French physicist Pierre-Simone Laplace. Laplace's demon has complete knowledge of the micro-level physical state of the universe all the equations of fundamental physics at a given moment, and also knows all of the correct equations of true and fundamental physics. Could Laplace's demon predict what is going to happen at the next moment, or at least the probability of what is going to happen, assuming quantum mechanics is deterministic?

An opponent of strong emergence is likely to say yes, as the causal powers of fundamental micro-level physical entities completely fix the causal evolution of the universe. But proponents of strong emergence, because they think that the causal evolution of the universe is partly fixed by fundamental causal powers, will hold that the predictions of Laplace's demon will get things a bit wrong. For example, it could be that my capacity to exercise free will is strongly emergent, such that when I exercise free will the particles in my brain end up being in different places than they would have been if they were only subject to the causal power of particles and fields. To be clear, this is just an example, and complex systems may have strongly emergent causal powers that don't involve the exercise of free agency.

If certain strongly emergent causal powers are somewhat indeterminate, leaving certain options open, this might allow the possibility of the Response to Randomness strategy outlined above. Whilst the indeterminacy of quantum mechanics is too broad – at least if God is able to do anything with a quantum mechanical chance of happening – it could be that the indeterminacy left by the strongly emergent causal powers of certain complex systems is more constrained. If God is able to act within such a constrained space of possibility, maybe this allows for some limited divine intervention. Even a very constrained power of influence, manipulated in just the right way at different times by an omniscient being, may ultimately result in big impacts, in something like the way we have become familiar with through chaos theory.

Moreover, according to Christianity, Jesus was metaphysically unique in being God incarnate. Perhaps the strongly emergent causal powers of this particular human being, because he was God incarnate, were a little bit less constrained. This points to how Jesus might have been able to perform many extraordinary miracles, but without making it the case that Jesus could perform such miracles whenever he wanted: it would depend on what possibilities the strongly emergent laws left open at any given time. This could explain why, for example, during his biological lifetime Jesus didn't prevent

obtained without divine intervention. However, crucially, it doesn't require us to specify how probable an event must be for God to be able to bring it about, and so we avoid this additional element of arbitrariness. The idea is that God is always able to convey a general awareness of Their presence, but how much of an impact that awareness has is dependent on the specific of the person, as outlined in 1.4. More generally, any divine intervention, even those considered in section 1, will presumably result in deviations from the standard predictions of quantum mechanics, given that these impacts will presumably alter the objective probabilities that would have obtained without divine intervention. If one were just sticking to the view outlined in section 1, one could interpret the probabilities that emerge from the Born rule as conditional on the absence of divine intervention. Once one accepts some form of strong emergence, as we are about to explore in this section, one rejects the idea that fundamental physics is running the show anyway.

more suffering or spread the gospel message throughout the world himself by miraculously travelling to other continents.³²

Clearly, this is very speculative. Even if there is strong emergence, which is hotly debated, there is no broadly accepted view on the nature of strong emergent causal powers. There is no empirical or philosophical reason to suppose that strongly emergent causal powers, if they exist, will involve just the right kind of indeterminacy that could facilitate (if God is able to exploit such indeterminacy) certain miraculous events without getting us back to the problem of evil. On the other hand, provided one does not think we have strong empirical evidence against strong emergence, I would suggest that nothing we know about the world rules out a God of limited powers who is able to occasionally intervene in the world.

Whether it ends up being rational for a proponent of the Limitation Solution to believe in this broader class of miracles, or indeed to believe in any aspect of the hypothesis explored in this paper, will depend on whether there is an evidential basis for believing in such things. Assessing the positive evidential case for miracles and/or the truth Christianity is beyond the scope of this paper. What I will say, however, is that if the possibility of miracles beyond the incarnation and the resurrection depends on a highly speculative form of strong emergence that we currently have no evidence for, then this will significantly lower the probability of there being such miracles. It is therefore significant if we can secure an account of the incarnation and the resurrection which does not commit the proponent of the Limitation Solution to these kinds of speculative additions to science.

It is also worth noting that many contemporary philosophers of religion think that faith is not actually a matter of belief, but rather of some less confident attitude, such as hope, trust, or acceptance (Howard-Snyder 2016, McKaughan 2018). On such 'non-doxastic' conceptions of faith, the probability of propositions one has faith in may not need to be very high. For some, this may be compatible with faith in all of the miracles discussed in this essay. Others may choose to have faith only in the incarnation and the resurrection, which are after all the core of Christian faith.

Conclusion

The problem of evil is perhaps the biggest challenge to any theistic religion, including Christianity. The Limitation Solution offers a way of circumnavigating this challenge altogether. I have outlined a form of Christianity consistent with the Limitation Solution and its motivations, one that I hope is not too complex or inelegant. This does not give us reason to think Christianity is true, but it perhaps removes the strongest reason to think that Christianity is false.

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³² On the participatory view, the incarnation does continue in a sense, as humans participate in the divine life. And according to traditional Christianity, the Church is the Body of Christ. We could hold that more divine intervention is made possible in so far as humans participate more fully in the divine life, rendering our strongly emergent causal powers a little bit less constrained. On the other hand, it's reasonable to suppose that the constraints were significantly less for Jesus, given that he was fully God. As discussed in the text, inevitably the exact nature of the constraints in any of these cases must remain speculative.

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