

Infinite Freedom, Creativity, and Love:
The Adventures of a Non-competitive God
Bruce G. Epperly
Lancaster Theological Seminary

I.

“The one who believes in me will do the works that I do and, in fact will do greater works than these.” These words from John 14:12 set the stage for a non-competitive and adventurous understanding of the relationship of divine and human agency and invite persons to expect greater things of themselves as well as greater things from God in the ongoing, dynamic, and symbiotic divine-human call and response. In this passage, rather than over-functioning, controlling, or competing, the teacher Jesus, encourages his followers to claim greater freedom, creativity, and agency in fulfilling God’s mission in the world.

As a constructive and practical theologian, I see these words from John’s Gospel as opening up new theological frontiers in our understanding of the relationship of divine, human, and non-human power and creativity. Healthy theology creatively transforms persons’ lives and expands our vision of possibility and agency. If we take Jesus’ words seriously in the creation of practical and constructive theologies, they will take us from passivity to agency *and* rule-oriented obedience to adventurous partnership in our actions and concepts of divine and human activity.

The vocation of a practical and constructive theologian involves being attentive to the language that persons use to describe their experiences of God’s presence and activity in their lives and in the world. I have found that laypersons and pastors regularly, and unintentionally, express sophisticated theological viewpoints in the course of describing their daily experiences. For example, recently, in response to my affirmation of her

sermon, a seminarian retorted, “Oh, don’t thank me; it was God who did the work. I’m just the instrument.” I playfully countered with, “I thought I saw you leading the service today. I didn’t see God preaching, did you?” In other contexts, seminarians, pastors, and laypersons come to me for spiritual direction, confessing that they are worried that their professional skills or artistic talents are somehow an affront to divine sovereignty and an impediment to realizing God’s plan for their lives. Their concerns reveal the belief that if a creature does something novel, innovative, or unique, then divine agency is threatened and eventually God will intervene to chasten that creature for its prideful behavior.

I believe that John 14:12 describes a very different vision of the interplay of divine and human power and creativity. Rather than emphasizing competition or passivity, John 14:12 invites us to take responsibility for our actions, to be creative, to align themselves with God’s vision for the world, and then to surprise God by bringing new events and possibilities into play by our faithful agency. Jesus invited his followers to exercise their divinely-inspired creativity in order to do even “greater things” than he did. Jesus’ words of affirmation invite us to consider the interplay of divine and creaturely agency in terms of emerging, evolving, and expanding freedom, creativity, and love rather than competition and willfulness.

In the spirit of Jesus’ counsel, open and relational and process-oriented theologies affirm that God’s power and influence in the world is infinite and ever-expanding, although not omnipotent and all-determining. Creaturely freedom does not challenge divine creativity but enables God to do new and creative things. The more healthy and creative freedom creatures embody in their actions, the greater freedom and power God can embody in God’s ongoing activity in the world.

I will contend in the paragraphs that follow that open, relational, and non-competitive visions of divine freedom, agency, and power, first, overcome the theological problems created by the belief that divine agency is all-determining in relationship to creaturely agency and, second, encourage greater creaturely creativity, responsibility, and partnership with God.

II.

I believe that many traditional descriptions of the relationship of divine and creaturely creativity and power are grounded in zero-sum understandings of reality. In game theory, zero sum contests are competitive and win-lose in approach: in a finite universe, there must be a clear winner and loser in every interchange. In economics, this competitive approach asserts that if workers make more, the owner has less, or conversely, the fewer perquisites employees receive, the better off the owner will be. In theology, a zero-sum understanding of divine power and creativity asserts that there is only a limited amount of freedom and creativity in the universe, and metaphysically and theologically speaking, for God to be truly sovereign, God must have all - or should be accorded - all the power and glory. A zero-sum approach to divine agency asserts that any agency that a subject initiates on her own places a limit on the divine ruler's largesse, authority, and power. Any acclaim that the subject receives – or novelty she claims for her own actions – robs God of the glory that ought to be given to the divine potentate. Accordingly, in this scarcity model of divine and human agency, all creaturely initiatives come perilously close to disobedience, willfulness, or idolatry. For example, if creatures are innovative in science, technology, or medicine, they are accused of rebelliously

“playing God,” that is, claiming agency and creativity in determining birth and death that rightly belongs to the Sovereign One.

Zero sum understandings of the relationship of divine and human power are deeply rooted in Christian theology. They are connected with what some theologians, both professional and lay, assume to be most definitive characteristics of God’s nature: **omnipotence**, that is, the belief that God unilaterally determines, or permits directly or indirectly, every event, and creatures can initiate nothing on their own; **omniscience**, the affirmation that God knows everything in advance prior to the creation of the universe, thus, determining in advance what will happen without any authentic creaturely input; **creation ex nihilo**, the assertion that all things in their entirety flow from divine fiat and that nothing new emerges except by God’s will; and **unilateral election and total depravity**, the doctrine that all human endeavor is infected by original sin and we can initiate nothing of value unless it fully reflects God’s pre-ordained plan for us.

Ironically, unilateral and zero-sum understandings of divine power and influence actually limit the scope of God’s agency in the world by suggesting that reality is a closed system in which there are limits to divine and cosmic energy, creativity, and novelty. In a closed, deterministic, and competitive system, characteristic of traditional understandings of omnipotence and omniscience, divine power and knowledge are finite and unchanging, rather than constantly growing. How else can it be, if everything is determined in advance by an eternal and timeless divine fiat! If, metaphysically or theological speaking, the creature does “more,” God has “less” in terms of glory and power. In a zero-sum world, the omnipotent God must live eternally with God’s timeless decisions and cannot, in principle, do anything God has not previously decided. Such a

god is not free to take alternative paths in relationship to the world. Unable to do anything novel to alter the events God has eternally determined, God and the world are stuck in a perpetual “Groundhog Day!”

This competitive, zero sum approach to divine-human relatedness has obvious ethical and behavioral implications. Creatures are most faithful to God when they passively follow what God has willed apart from any input of their own. Coloring outside the lines or challenging traditional practices of the reigning religious or social order is viewed in terms of willful disobedience and sinful pride against God and the leaders God has ordained. Passive obedience is encouraged, while creative adventures of ideas and practice in scientific exploration, literature, theology, or justice-seeking are discouraged as threatening to the prerogatives of God or God’s representatives. Faithful believers don’t deviate from the clearly demarcated boundaries of divine authority, whether the lines have been established by literal understandings of scripture, ecclesiastical practices, liturgical rites, understandings of gender or sexuality, or the edicts of temporal rulers. God has, as Rick Warren asserts, determined the most important events of our lives without our input, so why would we dare to do anything innovative on our own! Faithful Christians simply play the roles and recite the lines that have already been determined in advance by God’s unchanging and timeless vision, thus contributing nothing new to the universe that might interfere with the working out of God’s eternal plan.

To summarize, a zero-sum or scarcity model of resources, creativity, and energy, renders God’s agency, power, and freedom less innovative than non-competitive understandings of divine agency. Further, zero sum visions of divine agency also create a

dualism between God and the world in which divine love is subordinated to divine power. Ironically, a deity whose agency determines everything in advance has fewer creative options and less ability to give and receive love than one whose power and freedom is embodied in a potentially infinite number of ever-changing relationships with creation.

III.

Open and relational and process-oriented theologies take another path in understanding the interplay of divine and creaturely power, agency, and creativity: God's power can be understood as infinite, self-surpassing, ever-creative, constantly-emerging, and non-competitive. From a process perspective, creaturely creativity and freedom express and expand God's own freedom and creativity. Divine power is present in all things, not as an omnipotent and domineering external force, but as loving and creative wisdom whose goal is for us to do "greater things" as we exercise our creativity in ways that contribute to God's own evolving experience and creativity. In contrast to zero sum approaches, this model is grounded in an ever-evolving and increasingly-abundant open system and open source understandings of divine-creaturely creativity, agency, and partnership. We live in an energetic universe, and new energies and possibilities are constantly emerging in the divine-creaturely symbiosis. When we do new things, God is also able to do new things, and vice versa.

From this perspective, God is infinite though not omnipotent in creativity and power. In the words of Charles Hartshorne, while we cannot conceive of a being greater than God in terms of sensitivity of experience, creative power, and sustaining presence,

the God we envisage is constantly self-surpassing in terms of relationship and influence.¹ As the “most moved mover,” as Hartshorne notes, God is constantly growing and evolving in creativity, agency, and innovation along with the world. Most subject to the influence of the world, God is also the most creative and influential force in the universe. There is no conceivable limit to the expression of divine power and creativity in relationship with the ongoing creativity of the creaturely world at the micro or macro, creaturely or galactic levels, of reality.

Creaturely freedom places a limit on particular expressions of divine power insofar as creatures are agents in their own right and are able to choose alternatives to the divine possibilities made available to them. Although God’s agency is prior ontologically in relationship to creaturely agency, a non-competitive God does not begrudge creatures when they shape, as unique centers of experience and creativity, God’s vision of possibilities for them. Our creativity, even if it does not conform fully to God’s ideals for a particular moment of experience, is not a fall from grace, but an opportunity for novel expressions of divine and creaturely creativity. Creaturely agency often leads to pain and suffering, but God is infinitely inventive in lovingly and non-coercively responding to both the negative and positive impact of creaturely agency.

A non-competitive and creative God values creativity and adventure more than obedience and conformity. Through the presentation of novel lures or possibilities, God encourages creaturely initiative and invites us to color outside the lines as contributory to God’s own creativity and beauty of experience.

¹ Charles Hartshorne, *Anselm’s Discovery: An Examination of the Ontological Proof of God’s Existence* (Chicago: Open Court, 1991).

IV.

In regards to the nature and purpose of divine agency, Christianity has always asserted that Jesus the Christ reveals God's attitude toward humankind and the non-human world. I believe that Jesus' ministry reflects and embodies the values of a non-competitive God, described in John 14:12. The gospel narratives suggest, for example, that Jesus encouraged partnership rather than unilateral relationships with those who came to him in their quest for healing. Jesus entered into dialogue with them, often asking life-transforming questions that would move them from passivity to agency: "What do you want me to do for you?" he asks sight-impaired Bartimaeus. "Do you want to be made well?" he queries a paralyzed man who had waited for nearly forty years at the healing pool in Jerusalem. The majority of the healing stories reflect the dynamic interplay of divine-human call and response in which the divine call is met with creaturely faith, which then inspires a greater outpouring of divine healing energy.²

Jesus encouraged creativity, novelty, and questioning of traditional approaches to religion as a reflection of the novelty of God's coming realm. Jesus supported agency and creativity among his earliest disciples. He did not micromanage, but prepared them to carry on his ministry on their own. This same non-competitive vision of divine and human agency is found in the Christology of Jesus' first followers. The apostle Paul captured this relational understanding of power in Philippians 2, in which Jesus' sovereignty is defined in terms of *kenosis*, or letting go of unilateral power. Creaturely adoration is inspired by Christ's non-competitive partnership and identification with creaturely experience.

² For a process-oriented interpretation of the healings of Jesus, see Bruce Epperly, *God's Touch: Faith, Wholeness, and the Healing Miracles of Jesus* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2002).

V.

Non-competitive images of divine power and freedom embody the Johannine affirmation that “God is love.” Expansive in nature, divine and human love encourages greater freedom, creativity, and agency in the life of the beloved. A non-competitive God, like the healthiest of parents or companions, delights in creaturely freedom and creativity moment by moment and in the course of a lifetime, and the “more” the creature achieves in terms of agency and creativity, the “more” power, freedom, and creativity God can express in God’s relationship with the world. A relational, non-competitive, and freedom-sharing God can always do new things, respond to surprises, and imagine innovative possibilities.

In a truly open and relational universe, God cannot do everything God envisages in each moment or according to an exactly predetermined timetable. Rather, the pathway of divine possibilities and the realization of the divine vision are often circuitous like our own. Limitations on divine agency, emerging from the dynamic interplay of divine and creaturely creativity, are, nevertheless, the womb of possibility from which novel forms of creativity emerge for us and God. Divine freedom, like human freedom, does not ultimately mean “getting your own way,” but the ability to respond lovingly, creatively, and innovatively to every circumstance. In the give and take of relationships, a God who does new things in relationship to creaturely choices possesses greater freedom and resourcefulness than a God who meets no resistance in God’s exercise of freedom.

Without denying the significance of parental images of God in religious experience and theological reflection, non-competitive images of divine and creaturely freedom, power, and creativity challenge us to explore alternative images of God, for

example, the image of God as the immanent Spirit of Life, understood in terms of spirit-mind-body relationships. Holistic images of human existence, characteristic of mind-body medicine, view the mind or spirit as present throughout the body, influencing organs, cells, and the physical organism as a whole. Conversely, the mind/spirit receives lively energy and new possibilities from its interdependent relationship with the body. While mind/spirit and body differ in intensity and breadth of experience and creativity, they are not opposed to one another but are constantly evolving in creative and synergistic interaction. From this perspective, the universe as the “body” of the Divine Spirit of Life serves as God’s intimate and everlasting creative companion whose agency gives rise to new expressions of divine creativity and love. Like the spirit/mind moving within the human body, the divine mind/spirit moves creatively throughout the universe, utilizing creaturely creativity as the medium of divine innovation and adventure.

VI.

I want to conclude by noting that in regards to issues related to ethics and authority, non-competitive visions of God, in contrast to zero-sum images of the relationship of divine and creaturely agency, model interdependent and creative decision-making in which cooperation and agency are encouraged at every level of life. A relational, non-competitive God seeks a democracy of revelation and creative transformation in human life. God does not seek to control creaturely freedom but lovingly influences creaturely freedom in ways that enhance beauty, creativity, and love among creatures. Accordingly, such a God supports many channels of revelation, authority, and creativity, and not just one ecclesiastical, political, or relational expression.

No *a priori* limit is placed on positive and life-affirming expressions of creaturely agency in relationship to God or our political and ecclesiastical leaders. In affirming our freedom and responsible agency, we claim our role as God's responsible and creative companions in shaping the future and healing the world.

Bruce Epperly is Professor of Practical Theology and Director of Continuing Education at Lancaster Theological Seminary. He is the author of sixteen books, including Holy Adventure: 41 Days of Audacious Living and Tending to the Holy: The Practice of the Presence of God in Ministry. He may be contacted at bepperly@lancasterseminary.edu.