

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

"Holy, Holy, Holy Lord, God of Power and Might"

I

There can be little doubt, as Paul Tillich observed some thirty years ago, that power has been taken from the concept of God. To be sure, the language of worship and prayer has continued to reflect, or at least to intimate, an experience of God's power in our midst. We should hold tenaciously to these confessional experiences. They both transcend and ground the reasons we may later give for a living faith. But power has still been slipping from the idea of God.

The reasons for this development are various. They seem traceable first to the rise of modern science and then to the critical philosophy which tried to reassess the new culture science was shaping. Early modern science became increasingly sceptical of the value of causal language and turned instead to the correlation of experimental data that could be mathematically quantified so as to predict, under certain circumstances, the outcome of physical processes. Physical science continues, of course, to use a language of cause and effect in its ordinary, first level discourse, but it remains largely hesitant about the explanatory value of such talk. In philosophy, similarly, the notion of causality received severe criticism at the hands first of Hume and then especially of Kant, who reduced causality to an a priori category of the understanding and God to a postulate of practical reason. In the rationalism that has prevailed since the Enlightenment, it has seemed more and more a figment of the past that a realistically affirmed God could have actual influence on a created world intended for redemption. Such a God was seen by the atheistic humanism of the nineteenth century as a hostile projection of a fearful race and then by the materialistic hubris of the twentieth century as the vanished ghost of an immature age.

In addition, for the new social sciences the notion of power has had a chameleon's nature, meaning now one thing and now another. The concept has its most frequent and typical usage in politics. There some will argue that power relations are one aspect of political study, while others hold that political science is precisely "the study of the shaping and sharing of power."¹ In the *Politics* Aristotle accounted for all the forms of power he knew by dividing governmental structures into three basic types: monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. But the nature of the power thus organized was not defined with any finality either in Machiavelli's advice to the prince or in Hobbes' description of Leviathan. Max Weber provided a definition that has remained influential in sociology: "'Power' is the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests."² Weber considered the

¹Robert A. Dahl, "Power," *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, Vol. 12 (1968), 405-14, at p. 405.

²*The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. Edited by Talcott Parsons (Glencoe: Free Press [1922] 1957), p. 152.

concept "highly comprehensive," while Talcott Parsons went on to lament its generality and develop a formal definition based on social consensus. Ironic critics like Bertrand de Jouvenel have described power as the Minotaur, an inevitable expansionist complex of egoism and service that is embodied in the engrossing, permanently greedy state.³ Radical thinkers like Steven Lukes have argued for a more social, less individualistic conception of power which recognizes how potential issues are kept out of politics, with observable or only latent conflict, because of the interests of those exercising power at the expense of the real but often suppressed interests of others.⁴

In psychology, the picture is no less obscure. Freud seems not to have dealt with power directly, and "strength" is probably a better translation of *libido* than is "power." Alfred Adler's individual psychology did recognize the power needs in individuals, and Harry Stack Sullivan saw the importance of power, speaking often of "ability and power" together. But Rollo May's popular work goes into greater detail than do any of these classic figures.⁵ With considerable persuasion, he argues that power should be seen positively as the ability to cause or prevent changes among human beings; it thus serves as an effective bridge to others. The analysis depends heavily on Tillich, and at one point May takes the curious position that power, ethically speaking, is neither good nor evil, but simply *is*. Most of all, one wonders how May grounds his confidence in the positive use of power and his hope for the healing of its abuse.

II

And what have the theologians had to say? By way of comparison and contrast, I shall suggest that theology has found itself no longer content with the classical statements of Augustine or Aquinas and that it sees significant shortcomings in such neo-classical approaches as we may find in Barth or Tillich. Nevertheless, it may yet find a way forward through an historically critical conception of God's power, an understanding generated by the historical experience of the Christian community. That experience must be rigorously critical, not only of our sources of knowledge and our ethical criteria, but also of our own exercise of power and the absorption of God's power entirely into our own hands.

Let me simply recall, first, the example of Augustine, whose reflections on God's relation to the world continued throughout his life. In the *De Genesi ad litteram*, one of the great works of his middle age, he gives us a classic exposition on the creative power of God as the cause of the world. "Indeed," he says, "the power of the Creator and His omnipotent and all-swaying strength is for each and every creature the cause of its continued existence; and if this strength were at any time to cease from directing the things which have been created, at one and the same time both their species would cease to be and their whole nature would perish."⁶

For Augustine, God's omnipotence is one with God's Word. In the *De*

³*On Power. Its Nature and the History of Its Growth*. Pref. by D. W. Brogan. Tr. by J. F. Huntington (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1981).

⁴*Power: A Radical View* (London: Macmillan, 1974).

⁵Rollo May, *Power and Innocence. A Search for the Sources of Violence* (New York: Norton, 1972).

⁶*De Genesi ad litteram* IV, xxii, 22.

Trinitate, from the same period as the *Literal Commentary on Genesis*, he writes: "Because there is one Word of God, by which all things were made, and which is immutable truth, all things are simultaneously therein, primarily and immutably; and not only those which in this whole creation now are, but also those which have been and those which are to be."⁷ Even more characteristic is Augustine's emphasis on God's will as the uncaused cause of all. Some years later, for example, he writes in *The City of God*: "All things are subject to the will of God, to whom all wills are subject, since they have no power but what He gives them. The cause, therefore, that makes all and is not made itself is God."⁸ In sum, God's creative power is understood as bringing creatures into existence, maintaining, and directing them. But the speculative moment, bearing on the thought of God's power, should not be separated from the confessional moment, the praise of God's power. With the wonder still available to a thinker in late antiquity, Augustine performs the mental experiment of imagining the cessation of God's creative causality, an experiment kept reverent by its accompanying rigor and eloquence:

Since we are other than He, we are not in Him for any other reason except that He caused it, and this is His work, whereby He contains all things . . . And by this disposition, "in Him we live and move and are" (Acts 17:28). Whence it follows that if this His working were withdrawn from things, we should neither live nor move nor be.⁹

St. Thomas also treats God's creative power in a number of works. There is, of course, an extensive treatment in the *De Potentia*, but I shall limit myself here to recalling the trenchant discussion in the *Summa Theologiae*, *Prima Pars*, where Question 25 is "de divina potentia." In the Blackfriar's Edition this question is included in Volume 5 on God's Will and Providence (QQ. 19–26), an understandable arrangement but one that can be quite misleading. St. Thomas maintains here, as elsewhere, that there is no passive potency in God,¹⁰ but that *potentia activa*, the power to do or make, *operative* power, belongs to God supremely.¹¹ "God's activity," he specifies, "is not distinct from his power; each is the divine essence, identical with the divine existence."¹² God's power should not be understood as really distinct from God's knowing and willing "but as conveying a distinct notion to our minds, namely as denoting a principle carrying out what mind directs and the will commands."¹³ "Or you might put it like this: divine knowledge and will as composing an effective principle entail the meaning of power."¹⁴ Thus, for Aquinas, "[God's] will is the cause of all things," but "divine wisdom covers the whole range of power."¹⁵ In this view, understanding and wisdom direct, will commands, and

⁷*De Trinitate* XIV, i, 3.

⁸*De civitate Dei* V, 9, 3. For a discussion of the relation between God's primary causality and the derivative, secondary causality of creatures, see *De Trin.* III, 2–9; chap. 9 uses language very similar to the description of the *rationes seminales* in *De Gen. ad litt.*

⁹*De Gen. ad litt.* IV, xxii, 23.

¹⁰Cf. *Contra Gentiles* I, 16.

¹¹Cf. *Contra Gentiles* II, 7, where St. Thomas says that *potentia activa* is "the principle of acting upon another. . . it is proper to God to be the source of being to other things."

¹²*S. T.* Ia, Qu. 25, art. 1, ad 2.

¹³Qu. 25, art. 1, ad 3.

¹⁴Qu. 25, art. 1, ad 4.

¹⁵Qu. 25, art. 5, c.

power executes; God's *potentia ordinata* in the actual economy of creation is both knowing and loving.¹⁶ Aquinas seeks to balance intellectualism and voluntarism, or, better, to transcend their distinction and to praise the One who is freely and wisely, intelligently and lovingly omnipotent. This is the One of whom it can be said, reflecting Lk 1:37, that "divine power can do everything that is possible,"¹⁷ but also that such omnipotence "is specially manifested in God's sparing and having mercy. . . . Here above all divine omnipotence is discovered, for it lays the first foundation of all good things."¹⁸ Typically, then, when the final article of this question raises the objection that God could not make better things than God does presently make, St. Thomas replies by quoting Eph 3:20: "God is powerful and able to do all things more abundantly than we understand or desire."¹⁹ For all Thomas' effort to order our understanding of God through his appropriation of Aristotle's realism, here he points again beyond active reflection to liturgical confession. His last authoritative text on the issue of God's power is doxological, as was also the first he quoted in Question 25: "Thou art powerful, O God, and thy truth is round about thee."²⁰

Let me turn now to two neo-classical authors from the middle of our century. Both Karl Barth and Paul Tillich place their discussion of God's power at the same point in their systematic expositions as does St. Thomas, Barth in the second volume of his *Church Dogmatics* on *The Doctrine of God*, Tillich in the first volume of his *Systematic Theology* on *Reason and Revelation, Being and God*. The method differs markedly, of course. Barth insists that our understanding of God can occur as response to God's gracious and reconciling revelation of God's reality to and for us. Tillich develops an extensive theological apologetic through his ontological analysis of the questions posed by human existence. But each author first raises the question of power at the same juncture that the Nicene Creed does, in its first article confessing *unum Deum, Patrem omnipotentem*.

In Barth's case, after his chapter on the knowledge of God, he addresses the reality of God and proposes to speak of "the being of God as the One who loves in freedom." The summary thesis proposed for the first section of the treatise is:

God is who He is in the act of His revelation. God seeks and creates fellowship between Himself and us, and therefore He loves us. But He is this loving God without us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in the freedom of the Lord, who has His life from Himself.²¹

The greater part of the discussion is devoted to the perfections of God, a term Barth rightly prefers to "attributes." With respect to the divine loving,

¹⁶Qu. 25, art. 5, ad 1.

¹⁷Qu. 25, art. 3, c.

¹⁸Qu. 25, art. 3, ad 3. (Note that the first sentence in the quotation comes from the Collect for the 10th Sunday after Pentecost.) Cf. Ia, Qu. 21, art. 4, and IIIa, Qu. 53, art. 1, ad 3, with discussion below.

¹⁹Qu. 25, art. 6, sed contra. St. Thomas follows the Vulgate reading: "Deus potest omnia facere abundantius quam petimus aut intelligimus."

²⁰Qu. 25, art. 1, sed contra, quoting Ps 89:8, which the RSV renders: "O Lord God of hosts, who is mighty as thou art, O Lord, with thy faithfulness round about thee?"

²¹*Church Dogmatics* III/1 (New York: Scribner's, 1957), p. 257.

God, in God's own self and in all God's works, is said to be gracious, merciful and patient, and at the same time holy, righteous and wise. With respect to the divine freedom, God, in God's own life and in all God's works, is One, constant and eternal, and at the same time also omnipresent, omnipotent, and glorious.

Omnipotence is thus understood as a perfection of God's freedom, from which God's love cannot be separated. It is paired with God's constancy. By constancy Barth denotes "first the perfect freedom of God," "by omnipotence the perfect love in which He is free."²² The initial sense of omnipotence is that God "is able to do what He wills,"²³ a statement that is developed gradually until Barth can say "as the final thing about God's omnipotence that we must recognize the omnipotence of divine knowing and willing, the only real divine omnipotence, and the omnipotence of love. It is in this way that God knows and wills, in His love."²⁴ God's power, to paraphrase, is wise and active love, irresistible.

For Barth, omnipotence must be distinguished from unchangeableness, which means "utter powerlessness, complete incapacity, a lack of every possibility, and therefore death."²⁵ Further, God's power is peculiarly God's own, the only real power; it is to be understood as moral and legal possibility, a *potestas*; it is not exhausted in our affirmation and description of God's work; it is the concrete power for God, "as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, to be Himself and to live of and by Himself;"²⁶ it is also "power over everything," "the power of all powers, the power in and over them all."²⁷

The center of Barth's discussion, however, is devoted to the positive characteristics of the divine omnipotence, those that help us to understand the power of God as the power of the divine knowledge and will. Here the main concern is to penetrate the mystery of God's personal, spiritual reality. "God's love for us does not simply mean that He knows us; it means also that He chooses us."²⁸ The positive characteristics of the divine omnipotence are to be found: in the identity of God's knowledge and will with God's essence, in the coextension of God's knowledge and will; in God's knowing and willing concretely all that exists; in God's knowledge and will as the eternally free presupposition of all that is possible and actual.²⁹ Here also Barth demonstrates his view that "the concept of omnipotence occupies a kind of key position for the understanding of all the perfections of the divine freedom and therefore indirectly of all the divine perfections whatsoever—a view which was obviously that of the earliest Christian creeds. It is only retrospectively in the light of the fact that His divine power is the power of His person, His knowledge and will, His judgment and decision, that we can properly explain what is meant by the constancy of His life."³⁰ The final and decisive ground for all that Barth says in

²²*Ibid.*, p. 490.

²³*Ibid.*, p. 522.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 599.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 523.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 532.

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 538.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 548.

²⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 543–97.

³⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 544–45.

the treatise, of course, is the divine revelation and reconciliation which is given "concrete and irrefutable form" in Holy Scripture. "If we consult the biblical witness to God's omnipotence, it emerges at once that the differentiation and relationship between the concepts of God and power . . . are necessary because power is from the very first described as residing in a single hand and revealed as the power of this one hand."³¹ This power alone, for Karl Barth, "evokes our wonder and veneration."³² This power alone has a concrete temporal center in history before which every other power in heaven and on earth must bend the knee, the Lord Jesus Christ who is the power and the wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:24).

Paul Tillich also places a treatment of God's power in the first volume of his *Systematic Theology*. After discussing God as being, living, and creating, he concludes with a consideration of God's relation to creatures in the holiness, power, and love of God as Lord and Father. "God," Tillich says, "is the power of being, resisting and conquering nonbeing."³³ "The confession of the creed concerning 'God the Father almighty' expresses the Christian consciousness that the anxiety of nonbeing is eternally overcome in the divine life. The symbol of omnipotence gives the first and basic answer to the question implied in finitude."³⁴ Theologically interpreting this religious confession, Tillich implicitly agrees with Barth that the divine power should not be entirely identified with actual happenings in time and space. Such an equation of the almighty God with the omniactive God—as in Luther and Calvin—risks suppressing the transcendent element in God's omnipotence.³⁵ Better, then, "to define omnipotence as the power of being which resists nonbeing in all its expressions and which is manifest in the creative process in all its forms."³⁶ Having previously presented God as the "creative ground" of being, Tillich now develops his position further by interpreting omnipotence in its relation to time as eternity, in its relation to space as omnipresence, and in its relation to the subject-object structure of being as omniscience.

These pages on power, together with those following on love, justice and grace, were expanded in Tillich's Firth and Sprunt Lectures, published in 1954 as *Love, Power, and Justice*.³⁷ "Life is being in actuality," he says here, "and love is the moving power of life."³⁸ Love is the drive towards the reunion of what has been separated, power "the possibility of self-affirmation in spite of internal and external negation."³⁹ Thus, "the basic formula of power and the basic formula of love are identical: Separation and Reunion or Being taking

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 600.

³²*Ibid.*, p. 602.

³³*Systematic Theology I* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 272.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 273.

³⁵On Calvin's religious sense for God's power, see most recently James M. Gustafson, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective I* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 163–68. Gustafson has also offered valuable comments on the church and institutional power in *The Church as Moral Decision-Maker* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim, 1970), pp. 156–63.

³⁶*Systematic Theology I*, p. 273.

³⁷*Love, Power and Justice. Ontological Analyses and Ethical Applications* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1954).

³⁸*Ibid.*, p. 25.

³⁹*Ibid.*, p. 40.

Non-Being into itself."⁴⁰ In maintaining this very positive doctrine on power, Tillich holds that it realizes itself through force and compulsion but denies that it is identical with either. Force is the strength any reality has in itself and in its outward effects. Compulsion (or coercion) is the exercise of such force on a living being endowed with its own spontaneity. Power can use them well or ill in the inevitable meeting and conflict of power with power. The final criterion for the proper use of force and compulsion is summarized as *justice*, "the form in which the power of being actualizes itself in the encounter of power with power,"⁴¹ the claim of being that the parties involved in power relations each receive their due and above all that in human relations another person always be acknowledged as a person.

Tillich argues that these ontological statements on love, power, and justice are verified inasmuch as they help to solve the basic ethical problems of love, power, and justice. In the sphere of personal relations, he sees justice as the dominant theme; in the sphere of social institutions, power; and in the realm of the holy, love. "But all three principles are effective in each sphere,"⁴² and so he recognizes the individual's rightful exercise of power in personal relations; the need for social groups to structure power in ways that can be both acknowledged and enforced; and ultimately, God as the source of a power which is one with justice and love. If love and justice are predicated of God symbolically but really, so too is power. In terms reminiscent of Barth he writes: "In the religious experience the power of God provokes the feeling of being in the hand of a power which cannot be conquered by any other power."⁴³ In ontological terms, "the power of God is that He overcomes estrangement, not that He prevents it; that He takes it, symbolically speaking, upon Himself, not that He remains in a dead identity with Himself."⁴⁴ The specifically Christian symbol for this event is the cross of Christ, which Tillich raises for his readers late in the pages of this study, just before his concluding pages on love, power, and justice in the holy community. There, anticipating the fulfilled Kingdom of God, the *agapē* dimension of love penetrates its *libido*, *erōs*, and *philia* dimensions to lift them beyond the ambiguities of their self-centering; spiritual power surrenders compulsion and lifts power beyond the ambiguities of its dynamic realization; and "justification by grace elevates justice beyond the ambiguities of its abstract and calculating nature."⁴⁵

Some years later, in the third volume of the *Systematic Theology*, Tillich was to develop these themes at greater length. Volume One had introduced the notion of Spirit as the ultimate unity of both power and meaning. It identified the Trinitarian principles as: first, the divine depth of power in the Godhead; second, the divine *logos* which unites meaningful structure with creativity; and third, the Spirit which is the actualization of the other two principles. These principles are the *presuppositions* for a Christian doctrine of God. Having treated Christology in his second volume, Tillich now gives a completed doctrinal structure to his system. He insists again that "a new understanding of the

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁴²*Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁴³*Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 112-13.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 116.

term 'spirit' as a dimension of life is a theological necessity."⁴⁶ In greater detail Tillich develops earlier themes such as the necessity of centered power for historically effective action and the ineluctability of compulsion as a condition for the existence of power. He criticizes "the transcendental attitude toward politics, social ethics, and history" and argues for an understanding of the symbol Kingdom of God "as a dynamic power on earth."⁴⁷ But nothing so well characterizes his attitude, to my mind, as the insistence on the unity of life-power and life in meanings. "For power which has lost meaning also loses itself as power."⁴⁸ But true power, power divine in its essential nature, has meaning always with it and will always resist through time "the disintegrating consequences of the ambiguity of power."⁴⁹ This confidence enabled Tillich, scarcely the most doxological of theologians, nevertheless to claim as he ended his great work that it "transcends a merely anthropocentric as well as a merely cosmocentric theology and expresses a theocentric vision of the meaning of existence."⁵⁰

III

If we step back now to assess these positions and their contributions to our understanding of God's power, we may note certain constants. In the first place, none of the theologians discussed identifies God's power with God's agency in the world. God is indeed graciously active in the creation, *able* to do what God wisely wills, but this activity does not exhaust what God may do. Second, each of them affirms, more or less explicitly, that God's creative and redemptive power is one with God's knowledge and will; there is a fundamental caution against the imbalance of any exaggerated voluntarism or intellectualism. Third, witness to God's power has ethical implications for the understanding of reality in general and of the Christian life in particular. Fourth, a doxological element may be read at least implicitly in each of the treatments. The power of God experienced and confessed in the course of life evokes first praise and only thereafter reflection; sacramental word and rite, we might say with David Power, disclose God's power more primordially than any effort to systematize it.

There are, of course, significant differences as well. For Augustine, God brings into being a creation destined for union with God, but the modalities of God's causality remain relatively undeveloped. For Aquinas, God's power is also creative, operative power, and it is shown above all in mercy and forgiveness. Aquinas even develops Augustine's occasional reference to the causality of Christ's death and resurrection by saying they have a kind of efficient and exemplary causality on the life of the faithful.⁵¹ Compared to these classical

⁴⁶*Systematic Theology* III (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 22.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, p. 356.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, p. 340.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, p. 385.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, p. 422.

⁵¹For a brief selection of texts with commentary, see Bruce Vawter, "Resurrection and Redemption," in Leo J. O'Donovan (ed.), *Word and Mystery: Biblical Essays on the Person and Mission of Christ* (Glen Rock; Newman, 1968), pp. 235-38. On the more general question of primary and secondary causality, cf. Bernard Lonergan, *Grace and Freedom* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), chap. 4, and Lonergan's *Collection* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), chap. 3.

theologians, Barth and Tillich are influenced each in his own way by the modern critique of causality and by social conceptions of power. They are characteristically more dialectical in their thought, with Barth ascribing the dimensions of the world to God's own life and Tillich asserting a permanent victory of being over nonbeing in God. Barth speaks primarily of the historical power of a freely loving God who irresistibly creates fellowship with humanity. Tillich conducts an ontological analysis of the power of being over nonbeing which is then subsumed within his Trinitarian system. For Barth, power in its finite forms is evil in itself, and God alone possesses it truly. For Tillich, power is ambiguous in its historical manifestations but good in itself and destined for eschatological transformation.

Do these two great theologians of our century satisfy our need for a new conception of God's power, or do they teach us to look for it more carefully? They are too wise to forget the example of Augustine or Aquinas before the majesty and all-inclusiveness of God's reality. But are they historical and critical enough? Barth has the great benefit of religious depth and eloquence, but nowhere in his lengthy treatise on God's power does he advert to the changed modern notion of causality or to the political and social realities of power. Tillich is persuasive in demanding an apologetic moment *within* the dialogue between the gospel message and the human situation, but one wonders whether the biblical history of God's new covenant with the world grounds his system or merely confirms it. One wonders as well whether his method of correlation sufficiently attends to the social circumstances either of our human questions or of the theological responses to them. Do these theologians really satisfy our questions about the human abuse of power and God's redress of that abuse, our questions about human manipulation or exploitation of power and God's new way for it, even our questions about the differences between mechanical power that forces and compels and personal power that renews and fulfills?

To be sure, several current theological movements are attempting answers to these questions, and a number of them have been discussed at this convention. Process theologians have long distinguished between power as compulsion and power as persuasion. Political theologians urge us to learn the power of God by standing with the powerless, renewing the experience of a powerless Jesus to whom God was nowhere closer than on the cross. South American theologians call for a redress of power relations on a supposedly Christian continent where idols have replaced a liberating God. A great evangelical theologian has called us beyond the argument between atheism and theism, to the recognition of the mystery of God as a history of suffering love.

But power as an aspect both of God's divine life and of our own troubled time plays either an equivocal or a very negative role in most of these authors, and so I wish in the rest of this section to suggest how we might speak today of God's power in history.⁵² First, I shall postulate several basic statements about power; agreeing with John Coleman, I try to frame each of them in relational rather than substantive terms. Then I shall indicate how they can be partially verified in certain permanent tensions of our world; to the extent that the state-

⁵²It may be recalled that Karl Rahner's classical essay, "The Theology of Power," in *Theological Investigations* 4 (New York: Seabury, 1974) pp. 391-409, restricted itself to theses on power as "physical force," which Rahner does not by any means consider the only form of power.

ments can be verified in this way, they are analogously applicable both to God's power and to power in time. In the final section of the paper we shall ask by way of conclusion whether my proposal is an appropriate contemporary interpretation of the biblical record, which is the primary norm for all our theology.

As a first, primarily subjective statement on the meaning of power, let me suggest that it is the effective ability to carry out a project, whether an individual's or a group's. Our projects may be initiated by ourselves or, more profoundly, recognized as invitations. But without power, life projects founder—even if some intellectuals continue to entertain the illusion that a purely reflective "influence" can take power's place.⁵³ Carrying out a project, we know well, may be done at the expense of others. But it may also, we are right to hope, be done in cooperation with them. It will always be relational, but whether it is effective *against resistance* or *in concert* with others will depend not only on circumstances and the diversity of interest but also on the wisdom of the power in question.⁵⁴ To be sure, our usual experience is that power is projected ambiguously at best and conflictually as a rule. But is there not a call, distantly heard or suspected, to transcend and transform both the ambiguity and the conflict? Is there not an instinct at the center of life which urges us to believe that love, not selfishness, may be the final principle of power? Taken in this sense, power as effective project-ing still needs fuller theological justification, but I think it is a concept analogously applicable to both time and eternity.

A second, primarily objective statement on power is that it is the expansive and comprehensive vigor of reality which seeks both to incorporate others and to intensify its relations with them. Such expansive comprehensiveness is most evident in living intelligence. Clearly the expansive quality of power in its objective relations may take on the Minotaur's visage so eloquently criticized by Bertrand de Jouvenel. Likewise, it can comprehend others by coercing them. For all the abuses that can be externally observed, however, the lesson of reality's objectively dynamic character is that fullest achievement occurs where unitive relations further differentiate the related members, whether at the familial, the larger social, or the international levels. "L'union différencie," insisted Teilhard de Chardin. The power to stand *out* may compete with but also contribute to the power to stand *in*. Despite the bitter memories of personal and social animosities, we are right to assert that neither hatred nor war, however frequently occurring, is strictly speaking *necessary*. The full grounding for this side of power as inclusive, comprehensive life remains to be named, but here too I think it may be said to be a concept analogously applicable both to human life and to God's.

A third statement on power's meaning is that it is the directed capacity everything real has to be itself by giving of itself. For human beings, this means that our power is truest whenever we accept our humanity by recognizing it as gift and exercise our humanity by sharing it freely. This statement, I know, risks tautology. I believe it is nevertheless illuminating—not by unearthing a new fact about power but rather by discerning a new depth to it. We may learn

⁵³Cf. Rollo May, *op. cit.*, pp. 102–05.

⁵⁴It is one of Hannah Arendt's central theses in her book *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970) that "power springs up whenever people get together and act in concert . . ." (p. 52).

from nature that only the seed falling into the ground can bear the wheat. We may learn from human experience that the self-forgetting parent is the one who gives a child freedom. So too, and in a final way that is really the first way, we may learn from God's story with us that a powerful love can be surpassing wise in its generosity—and will even suffer to redeem us.

The way of this love, however, must be revealed; it must appear to us. In our search to discover the true depths of life's power we must be ready to meet God in a way we would never have imagined simply by ourselves—the way of the cross which seems so abysmally impotent and yet proves most potent of all. If power as the capacity to be united in sharing oneself is analogously applicable to God's love and our own, it is still clear that God alone can convince us that such self-giving and even suffering love redeems, that it has the irresistible power to *do* something lasting for life. The lesson of selfless love's power is that death has no finality; put positively, the lesson is that love has a power which is effective even, and especially, in suffering. This is the power of love to meet and overcome what most threatens life. It is identical neither with love nor with the life process as a whole; but it *is* what love can do for life, and what love needs wisdom to do well.

Let us consider now how these conceptions of power may each be verified, partially and indirectly, in certain permanent tensions or polarities of temporal existence. Since we are dealing with *God's* power in the world, the verification of our assertions can be at best partial and indirect. But since it is indeed power *for the world*, some verification is required if our faith is to make sense. In no case are we speaking of a God of the gaps who fills in what is lacking to the world's process. Rather, each polarity exemplifies God's invitation that we enter more deeply into the process of life it describes. Precisely insofar as we find ourselves called closer to reality in its conflicts as well as in its joys, we may hope to find that God is the ultimate and powerful authority in the world. If we can work with God's power here, witness to it, and worship the God whose loving plans transcend all our best efforts and all our imaginings, then we will be cooperating with true power, confirming the hopes of our fellow human beings, and learning to celebrate the genuine liberation of power.

The first tension is between nature and history. A genuinely theological conception of power cannot chose between these two realms, relegating God's power simply to one or the other. But neither can a responsible politics neglect power in nature because of the preoccupations of power in social relations. In the inescapable dialectic between our natural environment and the history enacted in it, our power to carry out personal and social projects is conditioned by forces of nature which should not be regarded merely as resistance to our plans. Likewise, the expansionary tendencies of human culture and technology, however wisely conceived, should never assume that nature is mere material to be handled as *homo faber* chooses. Further, in the sharing of self which is another face of power, there are natural realities which personal and social history must continue to respect, if we are to maintain the delicate balance of embodied self-transcendence which constitutes human life.⁵⁵ Only partly subject to our power, the permanent dialectic of nature and history intimates a transcendent power which alone can resolve it finally.

⁵⁵Cf. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, Tr. by John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1980), pp. 734–36.

The second dialectical tension to which I refer occurs between individual and community. The years before and after World War II heard many warnings against totalitarianism, with frequent appeals for responsible individuality. Today, however, we seem to stand in need of rediscovering a world-wide sense of solidarity.⁵⁶ We shudder before the implications of the bureaucratic individualism of which Robert Bellah has spoken to us so forcefully. Here again a truly theological conception of power must guide us between extremes. The subjective project of power should aim always at the empowerment of others as well as at the realization of self. The objective vigor of power must learn sensitivity to individual differences even as it drives towards more effective social organization. Love that has the power to suffer redemptively can *deny* itself authentically only to the extent that it *joins* itself to Christ. Thus, although we have some power to fashion our individual lives as participation in genuine communities, the permanence of this temporal dialectic appeals for a resolution by eternal power.

Closely related to the second polarity is the third, the tension between maturity and discipleship. In an uncertain age marked by great anxiety and even inner panic, it is indispensable for the Christian community to recall that the power to be ourselves is not overthrown but given a new ground by the Gospel. Similarly, the integration of human community and the life of the witnessing Church are each empowered by one and the same Spirit, calling us always beyond the integrations we achieve to the fuller discipleship which then again raises new questions for our integration. To abandon our efforts to be human would be to lose the greatest riches that can be laid at our Master's feet. The power to suffer redemptively exists in the continual dialectic of becoming oneself and becoming a disciple, of becoming a human community and becoming—yes, let us be bold enough to repeat it—a “universal sacrament of salvation.”⁵⁷ We struggle to be, as Richard McBrien reminded us, “a sacrament of community,” and yet we sense ineluctably that only a divine power can finally establish us in a place of peace where we each will have our own name, while also sharing one fully human name.

The fourth pattern to which I point is one that may surprise. It is the contrast between comedy and tragedy. Is there really a permanent tension here? I suspect so, despite the theater of the ordinary person to whom attention must be paid and our loss of a sense for the heroic. Comedy's lightened expectations for the future coupled with tragedy's regard for the grievous fall of the great person seem to comprise ineradicable dimensions of our conscious and unconscious life, at least in the West. And power plays a role in both. Saving mirth as well as anxious compassion befit the prospects of power, and neither one nor the other alone comprehends our Gospel. Before the projects and accomplishments and self-sacrifices of power we must know how to affirm a larger, benevolent order but also how to suffer in it. We need more, of course—imagination for another kind of dramatic action to which I shall turn in a moment. But the unpredictable alternation of comic and tragic rhythms may at least suggest the power of a presence whose provident care and compassionate wisdom could accompany all our time.

⁵⁶Cf. my article “The Pasch of Christ: Our Courage in Time,” *TS* 42 (1981), 353–72.

⁵⁷Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, art. 48.

A final tension remains to be considered, however, one that will also serve us as transition. Let me identify it not with the traditional pairing of action and passion but with terms that may include a greater sense of social urgency. We live, namely, in an irreducible tension between the demands of reform and the imperative of patience. There are conditions in our world which cannot be allowed to continue—the accumulation of nuclear weapons of annihilating power, for example. Nevertheless, we may not identify ourselves wholly with any of these necessities of justice. A genuinely free community knows the heresy of fanaticism. And so we seek to walk a terrible way, knowing that resignation has often seemed a greater temptation for the Christian community than has overcommitment. Here, it seems to me, the lesson of true power becomes most personal, including many of those that have gone before. For here the example of Christ and his community in the Spirit shows us the power of God manifest through unswerving fidelity to the message of the Kingdom; it shows us God's power as undeniable force for the healing and renewal of life, even to the point of being miraculous; but Christ's example also shows us God's power in a readiness to accept the cross rather than compel temporary glory. God's power is present in both acting and in suffering, through patience and reform, for the sake of a mutuality of life that lies beyond both. Here once again, precisely in the ineradicable dialectic of personal commitment and critical distance, our history is opened out to a power that never loses itself in giving of itself, that remains always mysteriously greater the nearer it comes to us.

IV

In each of these tensions, natural or physical power is related to personal power as the lower to the higher.⁵⁸ There is a certain subjection of mechanical force to free intelligence, which can use and misuse force, and generally does both. In each of these and other dimensions of life the biblical path is one that enters more deeply into the tensions of power in the hopes of passing through them to a fulfillment that God alone can guarantee. The Gospel's path of power is paschal, teaching us that on many occasions the apparent surrender of power may be the most powerful act of all. The creative and saving power of love empowers life by covenanting with its freedom rather than by compelling it. The creative, saving power of God is a covenanting power whose full extent finally emerges only with the enactment of the paschal mystery. There the God who has power to give birth to our world shows us the way to live in it and what its goal may be. Then we are able truly to say that to God above all belong the depth and breadth and shared life of power to which our three earlier statements referred.

Is this a possible reading of the biblical witness? In seeking some understanding of God's power in contemporary terms, are we faithful to our primary norm? With all too brief a summary, let me conclude by indicating why I think that is the case.

In the Old Testament we may consider first its most ancient poems. In the Song of Moses (Ex 15:1–21) as well as in the Song of Hannah (1 Sam 2:1–10), God does battle for Israel and has the power to save, a power shared with the people especially through the anointed of the Lord. Daniel's Song in 2 Sam

⁵⁸Cf. Karl Rahner, *art. cit.*, p. 399.

22 (=Ps 18) likewise extols the God who is "my strong refuge and has made my way safe" (v.33).⁵⁹ In Psalms 62, 68, 77, and 89, the historical presentation of God's intervention for Israel recedes to some extent as the mythic background comes forward.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, the central image for God's saving power remains that of the divine warrior.⁶¹ In the "Isaiah Apocalypse," again with reminiscences of Canaanite mythology, we have an eschatological statement of the Lord's victory over death and the people's rejoicing on the holy mountain (Is 25:6-12); it is later taken up in the final pages of the New Testament (Rev 21:4, 22:20). Deutero-Isaiah fuses history and myth in magnificent poetic proclamations of the Lord's creative redemption, as in the Ode to the Arm of Yahweh which begins at Is 51:9.⁶² Whereas earlier the world's creation was presupposed by Israel's confession of its powerful God, creative power and redemptive power are now identified as inseparable dimensions of God's one saving activity for the world.

Other vivid scenes may be found elsewhere in the Old Testament, indicating that Israel's God alone has the power to act triumphantly on behalf of the people.⁶³ Yet the full way of this power is not revealed until the New Testament, when it is recognized, in the proclamation of the Kingdom and the story of Jesus, as the power to save the world for eternal union with God.

Paul explicitly develops a paschal understanding of power. He can speak equally of the Gospel (Rom 1:16) or of the word of the cross (1 Cor 1:18) as the power of God for salvation. He knows the two-fold creative and judging, eschatological powers of God (*dunamis poiētikē*, *dunamis basilikē*) and couples the two in speaking of God as the one "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" (Rom 4:17). More specifically, of course, he identifies the crucified Christ as "the power and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor 1:24), the one who has been "designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead" (Rom 1:4). The irrevocable manifestation of God's power occurs in the raising of Jesus from the death of the cross, so that he now "lives by the power of God" (2 Cor 13:4; cf. 1 Cor 6:14).⁶⁴ All who believe in him are called to share in that power (*ibid.*). Paul's moving personal response is well known: he counts all else as dross if only he may gain Christ and be found in him, "that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead" (Phil 3:10-11). The author of Ephesians returns significantly to these themes. The great hymn of chapter 1 praises God's immeasurable power in those who believe, a power founded in the raising of Christ (Eph 1:16-23). The concluding prayer of chapter 3 develops the notion of the Spirit which strengthens believers, that Christ might dwell in them and his surpassing love be known (Eph 3:14-21).

Centering his theology on the paschal mystery, Paul speaks of the Holy

⁵⁹Although the text is difficult, the general meaning is clear.

⁶⁰In Ps 62, v. 11 especially; Ps 77, vv. 13-15; Ps 89, vv. 5-8; among the prophets, cf. Hab 3.

⁶¹Cf. Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in History of Religion of Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1973), chap. 5.

⁶²Cf. Ps 98:2-3 on God's *future* triumph.

⁶³See, for example, the scene of Elijah on Mt. Carmel in 1 Kg 18:17-46.

⁶⁴Cf. Rom 6:4 and Gal 1:1; also, Acts 2:24; Heb 7:16; Jn 14:30, 16:33.

Spirit chiefly through his teaching on charisms. For the evangelists, however, who present the prophetic ministry of Jesus as well as his death and resurrection, God's power in Jesus includes the Spirit in significant ways. Recalling here only two of the gospels, we may note that in John all the signs worked by Jesus culminate in the great sign of his passing over to the Father. This passing over, as Brian McDermott profoundly reminded us, is not only *passage* through death to eternal life but the *penetration* of suffering for eternal life. When Jesus is lifted up, then he will have the power to draw all human beings to him.⁶⁵ Possessing the Spirit as his own, Jesus in the Farewell Discourses tells the disciples that after his departure from them he will send another Counsellor, the Spirit of truth who will teach them all things, the full meaning of Jesus' life for them (Jn 14:16-17, 26; 16:4b-15). Believers in Jesus will then do works like his, and even greater works (Jn 14:12). Thus will the Spirit glorify Jesus, declaring to the disciples all that belongs to him in the days to come (Jn 16:13-15). The Spirit may thus be said to be the power of the abiding presence of Jesus, seen now no longer face to face but through the world which he has won for God. This Spirit Jesus breathes upon the disciples when he appears to them on the day of his resurrection (Jn 20:19-23). Here the gift of the Spirit is at once the condition of peace among the disciples and their mission to the world (v.21). The harmony of their common life is inseparable from its opening out to all God's world.

In Luke, on the other hand, Jesus is not so much the possessor of the Spirit as he is possessed by the Spirit, "a prophet mighty in deed and word" (Lk 24:19; cf. Acts 7:22). Conceived by "the power of the Most High" which overshadows his mother Mary (Lk 1:35), Jesus appears as the one of whom it is above all true that "with God nothing will be impossible" (Lk 1:37). Led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted (Lk 4:1-2), he then returns "in the power of the Spirit into Galilee" (Lk 4:14). On teaching in the synagogue at Nazareth from the text of Isaiah, "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me . . .," he is rejected by the people of his own country (Lk 4:16-30). But elsewhere the authority of his teaching evokes astonishment (Lk 4:32; cf. Mk 1:22 and Mt 7:28-29).⁶⁶ He manifests authority and power over unclean spirits as well (Lk 4:36). In Luke's Gospel Jesus lives and prays and undergoes his passion in the power of the Holy Spirit, but the whole course of his mission is directed toward the pouring forth of that Spirit on the earth. Appearing to his disciples on Easter evening, he commissions them as his witnesses to all nations, instructing them, however, to stay in Jerusalem "until you are clothed with power from on high" (Lk 24:49). In Luke's historicized account, this investiture occurs on the day of Pentecost when "a mighty wind" and "tongues as of fire" describe to some extent the power with which the new community is created by the Spirit coming upon it (Acts 2:1-12; cf. Acts 1:8). With "the promise of the Father" (Lk 24:49; Acts 1:4) thus fulfilled in their midst, the followers of Christ can now speak confidently and persuasively to all the people of the earth about "the mighty works of God" (Acts 2:11). Characteristically, Peter concludes his first apostolic sermon by assuring the representatives of all who hear him that now

⁶⁵Cf. Jn 3:14-15; 8:28, 12:32-34.

⁶⁶Cf. Mk 6:2-3; Mt 13:53-58; Jn 7:46; and, for later discussions of Jesus' authority, Lk 20:1-8 and parallels.

indeed "whoever calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Acts 2:21).

The power of God, to speak in explicitly Trinitarian terms,⁶⁷ initiates a world of grace and carries out the process of its redemption toward the fullness of union which belongs to God forever. In God, the project of power and its plan are eternally united in love; what God can do is to give all of God's self in love. But the eternally complete is only fragmentary in time. In the world's course, through both nature and history, individual and communal life, maturation and conversion, comedy and tragedy, patience and reform, in the world's course through these and other inevitable tensions of existence, we experience alternating achievement and surrender, mastery and yielding, living and dying. Only the paschal mystery convinces us finally that this path is more than fate, that it is indeed our way to pass over to eternal life. Only the God who is one in Word and Spirit can accomplish that mystery in time for the eternity of us all. It is the one God who creates and redeems and sanctifies us. But the one God who creates the world carries out its redemption through the power of God's Word and fulfills it in the shared unity of the Holy Spirit. It is God as Father who initiates, God as Son who is the way, and God as Spirit who joins us with our way to the One who calls and awaits us.

Where can we find truly meaningful power for life? How can we discover that the humanity we share with Jesus is something of infinite value? Once these questions are put, we have already begun the pilgrim journey, for we are being led to recognize and follow a human life which has appeared as unconditionally loved and lovable. Here, what Scripture and Creed call Holy Spirit enables our discovery; what Scripture and Creed call Jesus Christ is the human way to the genuine depth and possibility of life; what Scripture and Creed call God the Father is the faithful and mighty One assuring us that we shall finally discover on this way God's self—and our own. The triune God of biblical faith is ever indeed before us and with us and within us.⁶⁸ But this coming God is also the One whose empowerment of the world's life is expressed through all the world, and embraces it all. God's original and expressive and loving power makes possible the fulfillment of what God alone can promise. God's power is one, and yet it is also distinct in its creation and renewal of reality, in its expression of reality's truth and way, in its embrace of reality even through the awful test of death. This, it seems to me, is what we may call the Gospel in regard to God's power, what we may teach and live and worship in the presence of the "Holy, Holy, Holy Lord, God of power and might."

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⁶⁷In what follows I have been influenced by the Trinitarian theology of Karl Rahner and Eberhard Jüngel but have tried to develop my own formulations for the theme at hand.

⁶⁸Cf. Juan Luis Segundo, *Our Idea of God* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1974), chap. 1.