

Divine power, justice, and reconciliation

Nico Vorster

North-West University, South Africa

Nico.Vorster@nwu.ac.za

Abstract

This contribution seeks to provide a plausible answer to the question as to whether the biblical concepts of justice and reconciliation are compatible with the notion of an omnipotent God. Justice presupposes conditions of injustice, while reconciliation presupposes situations of enmity. This gives rise to questions about theodicy: If God is an omnipotent and good being, why would he in the first place have allowed a dysfunctional situation where injustice and enmity could enter creation? The question is dealt with in three sections. The first evaluates answers provided by divine self-limitation theory and the opposing *secundae causae* theory. I point out that these theories show serious shortcomings. Section 2 reflects on divine power from a philosophical, theological, and biblical perspective. I argue that omnipotence does not mean that God possesses a capacity to act in logically impossible ways. Moreover, omnipotence is a non-necessary attribute of God. God is not a prisoner of his power but can limit and retake his power whenever he wants to. Section 3 deals with the relation between divine power, justice, and reconciliation. I argue that the topic of divine power must be approached through a trinitarian lens that understands God's attributes in terms of his *ad intra* perichoretic communion which is revealed *ad extra* through the concrete ways in which God deals with us. Seen in this light, the exercise of divine power is intricately related to God's nature as a faithful, loving, and free being who allows for creaturely freedom and who decides to redeem and renew rather than to coerce and obliterate.

Keywords

divine limitation theory; theodicy; omnipotence; justice; reconciliation

Introduction

The Old and New Testament relate God's justice and mercy to the exercise of his liberating power and his capacity to sustain divine order. In the Hebrew Bible, divine order denotes a condition marked by justice, equity, and righteousness (*Sēdeq/ Sēdeqah*). It is brought about by the righteous God's acts of governance (*mišpāt*) that redeems and restores (Kruger 2022:2). In a similar vein, various passages in the New Testament connect God's righteousness (*dikaiosune*) to his power, in particular his ability to liberate the oppressed, redeem the sinful, and overcome disorder (see Jn 16:8, Acts 17:31, Rom 5:17). Apocalyptic New Testament literature depicts God's exercise of justice and mercy in cosmic terms. It envisions a time when God will bring an end to human history and replace cosmic disorder with a state of peace and righteousness through the reconciliation of all things with him (see Col 1:15–20). In Revelation, the final eschatological acts of God are described in vivid language as cataclysmic acts of immense power that bring about a totally new order. On nine occasions it describes God as the πάντοκράτωρ, the One to whom all power belongs (Rev 1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7; 16:14; 19:6; 19:15; 21:22).

If the biblical traditions relate justice and reconciliation to the exercise of divine power, we must ask: what kind of power is at work here? The cosmic justice and infinite reconciliation envisioned in apocalyptic biblical literature seem to require the actions of a Being capable of radically altering reality as we know it, overcoming death and sin and destroying evil. The exercise of such power would defy all natural laws. It would require an exercise of almost unrestricted power. Traditionally, this power of God has been described in the Judaeo-Christian traditions as omnipotence.

But here we run into difficulties. In terms of content, justice and reconciliation seem to resist the idea of omnipotence. Justice presupposes conditions of injustice and reconciliation presupposes situations of enmity. They bring forth the question of theodicy: If God is an omnipotent and good being, why would he have allowed a dysfunctional situation where injustice and enmity could enter creation in the first place? Moreover, an omnipotent being would not experience vulnerability or weakness. And yet the love of God and suffering servanthood of Jesus on the cross are portrayed in the New Testament as vital elements of the doctrine of

reconciliation. We are thus left with a vexing problem: the restoration of justice and reconciliation in a cosmic sense require the exercise of omnipotent power while, conceptually speaking, justice and reconciliation presuppose a dysfunctional situation that seems to be incompatible with the existence of omnipotent power.

The theological debate on divine self-limitation

In the past few decades, various theologians and philosophers either denounced or accepted only in a qualified sense the concept of divine omnipotence. Three factors are responsible for this turn of mind. Firstly, the horrors of World War II led to an ever-increasing awareness of the problem of evil. Post-Holocaust theology, especially in Judaic circles, saw a significant rise in literature about the theodicy question (see Du Randt 2016:7). For many, it became clear that God cannot be considered good and omnipotent at the same time. Secondly, the 20th century has seen the rise of analytical philosophy, which questioned the logical coherency and intelligibility of the notion of absolute power. Analytic philosophers such as J.L. Mackie highlighted the inconsistencies and logical fallacies that plague the notion of absolute power (see Mackie 1955). Lastly, feminist and process theologians have rebelled against the tyrannical, monarchical, and patriarchal connotations attached to the notion of omnipotence (see Youngs 2014:167). Feminism also pointed out the pastoral difficulties that notions of absolute power engender.

In response to these challenges, several theologies of divine self-limitation have emerged. These theories range from divine limitation through the permanent withdrawal of God from creation to divine limitation through God's self-restraint. Hans Jonas' theory is representative of the former. In his much-discussed essay entitled *God after Auschwitz*, Hans Jonas describes God as a "risk taker" who embarks on an adventure by creating something outside himself. In the act of creation, God abandoned absolute power. Relying on the Lurianic Kabbalah's doctrine of *Tzimzum*, Jonas holds that God created all things by inverting his being for the sake of allowing space outside himself where creation can expand. This inversion is permanent and irrevocable. Having contracted his being, God does not intervene in creation but allows for "cosmic autonomy" (see Vogel 1996:26).

From then on, he opened his being for risk-taking and disappointment and he has been waiting with abated breath to see what creation will bring forth.

Jonas firmly rejects the notion of omnipotence. In fact, his essay describes absolute and omnipotent power as a “contradictory, self-destructive and indeed senseless concept” that borders on theological incredulity (Jonas 1987:8). He maintains that absolute power is only possible when there is no object “on which to act” which, in that case, it would in any event be devoid of meaning (1987:8). Power can only be exerted within a relational setting where counterforces play a part (8). As soon as other agents appear on the scene, the exercise of power is inhibited. By permitting creaturely freedom in creation, God emptied himself of absolute power (8). Note that Jonas does not say that God restrains his power. If God simply restrained his power, he surely would have taken it up again, even if only momentarily, to prevent the horror of Auschwitz. No, instead, God had revoked his power. God’s self-limitation is a permanent limitation in being. For Jonas, this explains Auschwitz. God did not intervene at Auschwitz because it was not within his power to do so.

At face value, it seems as if Jonas succeeds in absolving God from complicity in evil. Yet, upon further investigation, one may ask: Why would a good God engage in experiments that have the potential to bring about untold suffering? Are human beings, in Jonas’ view, mere objects in a divine experiment? What solace does an impotent and non-interventionist God bring in a suffering world? Vogel (1996:34–35) rightly notes:

Jonas has forged such a wide divide between the Creator and His creation that he inadvertently presents a version of the very Gnostic dualism he so vehemently opposes. God, the source of all goodness, remains isolated from our appeals for His help, and so creation seems to have been delivered over to the forces of darkness.

In an important sense, then, Jonas’ solution undercuts itself and lapses into the question about theodicy that it started with.

Jürgen Moltmann offers a divine self-limitation theory of restraint rather than permanent withdrawal. Like Jonas, he questions the plausibility of the notion of omnipotence. He holds that an omnipotent being cannot experience weakness, powerlessness, suffering, or love (Moltmann

1974:223). Unlike Jonas, Moltmann avers that God does not efface himself of power at creation but restrains his power to create space within which his creation and humanity can flourish. Like Jonas, Moltmann resorts in *God in creation* (1993) to the Lurianic Kabbalah's *Tzimzum* doctrine. However, he gives the doctrine a Christian twist. Before creation, God was the only Being who existed. Everything was God. But then, driven by his overflowing creative love, God decided to create. He contracted himself to allow for a non-god space where creation and human beings can flourish. In the process of contraction, nothingness, evil, and sin entered some of the space left void by God's presence. However, God is responding to this reality by gradually re-occupying the space of nothingness, sin, and evil through the loving presence of his Spirit. At the eschaton, God will again take full control of all things and transfigure created reality to participate in divine life.

Moltmann has been criticised in evangelical circles for developing a divine self-limitation theology that does not have strong biblical roots and that compromises God's sovereign freedom (see Farrow, 1998). He seems to suggest that God's creative actions are driven by necessities within his inner being. Moreover, one might ask whether Moltmann is not making God the author of sin. After all, it is God's self-contraction that provides space for nothingness, evil, and sin to enter.

Process theology's theory of divine self-limitation occupies a third position mid-way between those of Moltmann and Jonas. It maintains that God is active in creation but in a limited way. He is more active than Jonas' God, but less so than Moltmann's, the latter who re-occupies creaturely reality through his Spirit. God's actions are described by process theologians in terms such as "influencing", "guiding" and "luring" (see Dorrien 2008:319). Working from the premise of *creatio continua*, process theologians hold that creation is involved in a becoming characterised by ever-increasing complexity and a self-realisation oriented towards beauty and experience (see Dorrien 2008:317). This entails that God respects the free will of agents and therefore does not force himself onto creatures: nor does he exert his power in coercive ways. Instead, He offers possibilities for creation through the means of persuasion. Ultimately, all things will be drawn towards God, and he will take up memories of creaturely existence in his own eternal being.

In process theology, then, God is not viewed as an all-powerful and omni-causative being, but rather as an eternally good being committed to truth and beauty who in some respects “becomes” with reality. Again, we may ask: What solace does a non-interventionist God with limited powers bring? Another weakness in process theology is the assumption that all things are necessarily developing in a “better” direction towards God, whereas hard scientific facts rather point to increasing overpopulation, social fragmentation, ecological degradation, and pending environmental disaster.

Critics of divine self-limitation theory usually resort to Thomas Aquinas’ *causae secundae* theory (see Van de Beek 2002; Highfield 2002). It was endorsed by the early Reformed tradition, most notably by Calvin (Inst. I.16.1), the Heidelberg Catechism (Sunday 10, answer 28), and the Westminster Confession (III.1). This theory supposes a two-sided universe where God and humanity function on different ontological planes. God operates on the level of first causes while humans operate on the level of secondary ones. God is the ground of causality, the *prima causa*, who created all things and without whom human actions and willing are not possible. He is pure *act*, the cause of causation, the origin of willing. Human actions, on the other hand, are of a secondary nature and are marked by contingency (see Aquinas STI, q.14.2). Secondary causes are never absolute but remain subject to the limitations of creatureliness and the influences of other secondary causes (see Van de Beek 2002:171). Yet, secondary causes are “genuine causes with a nature, spontaneity, manner of work and law of their own” (Bavinck as cited in Chambers 2019:19).¹

Three modern proponents of the *causae secundae* approach who have criticised divine self-limitation theory is Bram Van de Beek, Ron Highfield, and Nathan Chambers. According to these scholars, divine self-limitation theorists err by locating God and humans on the same playing field. God becomes an actor in secondary causation. In doing so, God and humans

1 Aquinas’s theory should not be read as deism. Deists regard God as ‘a cause in time,’ while Aquinas views God as the ‘ground of causation’ (Van de Beek 2002:178). He indeed accommodates the possibility that God can act directly in creation through the performance of miracles and, even if these do not occur, he continues to act because, as the ground of causation, he initiates and empowers all secondary causes (Van de Beek 2002:171, STI, q.8.2, ad3).

are forced into a position where they must cooperate or compete. For Van de Beek, divine power and human power are two totally different things functioning on different ontological planes (Van de Beek 2000:175–176). Highfield (2002:280) and Chambers (2019) both argue that self-limitation theory compromises the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* (God created all things out of nothing). *Creatio ex nihilo* means that the world “adds nothing to God” and that no metaphysical principle can exist alongside God (Highfield 2002:291). As God is the source of all creative actions, the origin of being, he cannot be limited by any eternal principles or inner necessities (see Highfield 2002:297). Chambers (2019:12) claims that divine self-limitation theory works with a “problematic notion of power” which emanates from erroneously locating God and human beings on the same ontological playing field:

For creatures to exercise power, God who had previously “monopolized power” must first abdicate it. Power is something that can be “handed” over, but not exercised together. Rather its exercise implies necessarily “autonomy”.

Secundae causae theory emphasizes that God and humans are not alike. God is not subject to human rules, he does not think like us, act like us, or see things like us. Yet the question remains: Does the *secundae causae* argument escape notions of divine self-limitation? Is God’s indirect mediate involvement in secondary causation not in itself a form of divine self-limitation? Thus, one is led back to the original issue of theodicy once more.

From the preceding discussion it should be clear that the notions of divine power presented in divine self-limitation theory and *secundae causae* theory are not entirely satisfying. Thus, before turning to the concepts of justice and reconciliation, I will attempt to provide a plausible philosophical, theological, and biblical perspective on divine power. I deliberately mention the word “plausible” because no exact, clear-cut answers are available. Humans cannot speak on God’s behalf or defend him on his behalf. Our struggles to understand God’s ways are always preliminary and open to revision. On the other hand, plausible answers are needed to make sense of life.

Philosophical, theological, and biblical reflections on divine power

Philosophically speaking, the concept of omnipotence is intricately related to our understanding of that which the exercise of power means and entails. In this regard, I posit the following:

1. Power refers to actions and relations. It is exerted with respect to something or someone.
2. Power operates within the confines of the logically possible. For example, a circle cannot simultaneously be a square. It is not possible to simultaneously bring about mutually exclusive states of affairs.
3. In the case of agents, power involves selecting options and making moral choices by taking into consideration issues such as capacity, situation, desired end, and right and wrong.
4. Power can be exerted in different ways through different means. For example, I could yield power through physical strength, technological innovation, logical persuasion, mental influencing, financial resources, or *ex officio* in terms of authority rendered to me by an institution. Scripture speaks of God exercising his power by creating, making, commanding, conquering, obliterating, punishing, liberating, justifying, persuading, redeeming, guiding, transforming, and transfiguring.

The actional nature of power means that it can be exerted in degrees or restrained. The differences in strength depend on the wishes of the one who exerts the power. In other words, power is a non-necessary attribute. This is true in everyday creaturely contexts. We all encounter situations where we opt not to exert powers we possess. For example: as a parent and guardian, I have the power to decide for my child which school to attend, but I also could decide not to employ my power out of respect for the freedom and autonomy of my child. In other words, the fact that I possess power does not necessarily mean that I *want* to use my power or that I *ought* to use it. Similar dynamics are at play when we speak of God's attributes. God's immortality is one of his absolute and necessary attributes. He cannot die. His eternal nature cannot be limited. His power can, on the other hand, be restrained by Himself. In fact, when we speak of God's mercy and grace, we

automatically assume divine self-restraint. What else is divine mercy than God refraining from exercising his power in punitive ways?

It follows that divine self-restraint regarding the use of power need not be a theological problem. God can restrict or share his power if he wants to do so. Like Karl Barth said, God is not the prisoner of his own power (KD II.1, 587) and, as Gijsbert Van den Brink (1993:180) states, omnipotence does not need to be a matter of absolute necessity. In fact, omnipotence entails that a power bearer has the freedom not to be held captive by power itself. God is a sovereign free being who can enact his powers in any way he sees fit.

At the same time, it is important to note that divine self-limitation in terms of action is something different than divine self-limitation in terms of being. The fact that God decides to limit his exercise of power does not mean that he loses his capacity for absolute power. Nowhere does Scripture speak of God effacing himself from his capacity for absolute power.

As it happens, the biblical traditions experience no difficulty in speaking about divine self-restraint and absolute divine power in the same breath. In no way are the two concepts seen as standing in tension with or as excluding each other. A good example is the priestly creation narrative in Genesis 1:1–2:4. This passage depicts God as an all-powerful being who creates something out of nothing. No eternal principle or power exists alongside God. God simply commands and things happen. At the same time, God limits his own power by delegating power to human beings through the creational mandate (Gen 1:28).

On two occasions in the narrative, God expresses blessing (וּבֵרַךְ). In verse 22 God blesses the birds and sea life and in verse 28 human beings. The speech act of blessing used in these verses are both “directive and declarative” in nature (Tyler 2016:45). On the one hand, God commands sea life, sky life, and humans to act in a particular way but, on the other, the Creator empowers them by providing them with the necessary “operative power” to do what is required. The sea animals, birds, and humans must be fruitful (פֶּרֶה), multiply (רָבָה), and fill (מָל) sea and land. By receiving a divine commission to “carry God’s creative work forward”, they get access to his creative power (Tyler 2016:48).

Interestingly, God's blessings are directly related to flourishing. God wants creatures to be what they can be. The Creator allows them space and directs them to realize themselves. Here, creaturely autonomy and integrity are not merely granted but explicitly encouraged. God's blessing of human beings follows right after verse 27 and describes them as being created in his image. If we read the references to the *imago Dei* in verse 27 together with the command in verse 28 to subdue and have dominium (רדה, כבש), we could safely state that the *imago* refers to a personal I–Thou relationship between God and human beings.

In the case of human beings, more than mere creaturely self-realisation seems to be at stake. Humans are created to stand in a relationship with God. Theologically speaking, God's entrance into a relation with human beings implies that he willingly creates space for humanity. The power delegated to human beings are described in strong terms: וְכַבֵּשׁ וְרָדָה.² Humans are given the opportunity to lead a life marked by agency, decision-making, and governance to the extent where the well-being of God's creation depends on human cooperation (see Van der Kooi & Van den Brink, 2017:210 and Youngs 2014:175). Indeed, God's own well-being depends on the response of his creatures. Genesis 6:5–8 describe in vivid detail how human sin caused God "regret".

Thus far, we have established that divine self-limitation and divine omnipotence are not necessarily mutually exclusive concepts. The God who created *ex nihilo* is also the God who delegated power by giving the creational mandate. But even if we accept the theological validity of the notion of divine self-limitation, we are still faced with the haunting moral question: Why did God not retake his absolute power to intervene at Auschwitz? At the beginning we stated that justice and reconciliation lead into the theodicy question. In what follows, I will argue that these

2 The verbs used in Genesis 1:28 to describe human dominium have generated considerable debate about eco-ethical issues. Some argue that these verses are undergirded by a problematic hierarchical and anthropocentric worldview that shows indifference towards the environment. I do not want to get into the debate at this point, apart from saying that these words are uttered within a context where the goodness of creation is affirmed and where human beings are called to be stewards of God who created all things. That said, these verses have been interpreted through the centuries in ways that cannot be construed as environmentally friendly.

concepts, quite ironically, also provides us with tools to better understand the nature of divine power.

Justice, reconciliation, and the moral question about divine intervention

Simply saying that God restrains his power for the sake of relationships and human free-will does not resolve the question of evil and horror. Surely the events at Auschwitz were horrible enough for an all-powerful and good God to rescind his decision of self-restraint, even if only temporarily, to stop the evildoers.

In my view, this is where the issue of divine choice of power and logical possibility comes in. As stated earlier, absolute power does not mean that God can act in logically impossible ways. With logical impossibility I mean that mutually exclusive states of affairs cannot exist at the same time, such as a circle simultaneously being a square. If God was able to act in logically impossible ways by simultaneously bringing about mutually exclusive states of affairs such as granting an agent freedom and obliterating the agents' freedom at the same time, he would be an inconstant being. The biblical traditions do not speak of God's power in these absurd ways. These kinds of absurdities arise when divine power is interpreted in terms of a generic Greek-Hellenistic substantialist ontology that abstracts God's attributes from God's nature and Personhood. All sorts of speculative questions are then entertained, and as we know, logical constructions can take one to strange places.

Speaking about divine power in the way scripture does, means that the attribute of divine power must be interpreted through a trinitarian lens that understands God's power in terms of the perichoretic communion between God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. A substantialist ontology thus must make way for a relational ontology (see Deetlefs 2022). The doctrine of the Trinity is after all central to the Christian faith and the attributes of God are always the attributes of the triune God (Deetlefs 2022:2, 3). A relational understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity holds that God's attributes is understood in terms of his *ad intra* perichoretic communion which is revealed *ad extra* through the concrete ways in which God deals with

us. Seen in this light, the exercise of divine power is intricately related to God's nature as a faithful, loving, and free being. This is the parameters within which Scripture deals with the issue. As Barth (1957:532) rightly observed, God's power is not some generic attribute, but a specific type of power closely associated with what He wills, and wish to will, in terms of his nature as a loving and sovereign God. Thus, God himself is the criterion of what power is:

God is the criterion of all genuine possibilities. And in the actualisation of all genuine possibilities, God is the criterion of all genuine actualities ... It can be said that God can do "everything" only if the "can" is understood to mean that He Himself in His capacity to be Himself is the standard of what is possible (1957:532–533).

The biblical notions of justice and reconciliation point to the fact that God wills to redeem rather than to coerce and obliterate. God is not a tyrant. Even as He is totally capable of obliterating all resistance, he chose not to, but intervened instead at Golgotha in a redemptive fashion by facilitating a new human condition. The biblical traditions depict God's journey with humanity and struggle with evil as arduous and characterized by ebbs and flows. This is not because God is impotent, but because he chose the arduous path that leads to redemption and life.

When one speaks of God's redeeming power, one is referring to God's grace. Instead of obliterating sinful human beings, the triune God shows mercy by creating in Christ a roadmap of renewal for the sinner from evil to good. Humans are given space to repent and change. We might ask: Where would the world have been without opportunities for rehabilitation and transformation? Repentance, truth telling, confession of sins, and restorative acts often bring more solace to victims than vindictive forms of punishment. They create new horizons, while vengeful justice simply destroys.

God's redeeming power in Christ flows over in the regenerative power of the Spirit that justifies and sanctifies. Justification and reconciliation are the means that God chooses to exert redemptive power and to unite us with Christ. Following the theocentric Lutheran and Reformed understandings of justification and sanctification, I argue that these are initiated and

enacted in us by God. We cannot earn our own righteousness. In the words of Van der Kooi and Van den Brink (2017:666): “The suffering and death of Christ come as a benefit to me in the form of forgiveness, while the perfect life that Jesus lived is attributed to me as righteousness.”

The donative content of each of the two concepts points to the fact that God’s exercise of power is inextricably connected to his constancy and loving goodness. In his goodness, God decides to subvert traditional patterns of reward and punishment and upend cycles of vengeance. His grace remains a constant source to which we can return and upon which we draw (see Van der Kooi & Van den Brink 2017:690).

God’s gracious turning towards us inevitably leads to restored relationships with fellow human beings who are created in his image. By extending love, mercy, and forgiveness to all people, believers contribute to the formation of new societies and communities. But God’s redeeming power is not simply about renewal and renovation. It moves on to the eschaton and to the perfecting of his original intentions for creation (see van der Kooi & Van den Brink 2017:654).

The eschaton is at its core concerned with God’s reign and the justification of those who have experienced innocent suffering. Apocalyptic literature addresses the theodicy question from the perspective of the end. Here God’s power is depicted in cosmic terms. A time is envisioned when he will again demonstrate the absolute power that he had revealed at the beginning of creation when he created *ex nihilo*. This vision is grounded in the cross and resurrection of Christ and a belief in the omnipotent abilities of God. It refuses to accept that the last word has been spoken on horrific events in history, and it insists that God will eventually eradicate all powers of sin and evil in a “cosmic settlement” at the end of times (see van der Kooi & Van den Brink 2017:744, Mt 25). This settlement will go hand in hand with the consoling of those who experienced suffering (Rev 21:4).

Conclusion

This article asked whether the concepts of justice and reconciliation are compatible with the notion of omnipotence. I argued that God is not a prisoner of his own power, and that divine self-limitation is a recurrent

theme in Scripture. God's allowance of creaturely freedom and his exercise of mercy and grace point to his divine choice to restrain divine power for the sake of creaturely integrity and mutual fellowship with humanity. This is a free moral decision taken by God and is not grounded in any external compulsion or innate necessity. At the same time, God's self-restriction does not mean that he empties his being of divine power. He remains the almighty God who created all things *ex nihilo*. He can exert his full power whenever he wants to. This position leads to the moral question: If God simply restrains his absolute power, why did he not retake his absolute power to prevent horrific events in history? The most plausible answer, as based on biblical traditions, is that God is a merciful God who chose to redeem and renew rather than to coerce and obliterate. Justification and reconciliation are the instruments He uses to address evil. They point to a use of power aligned with God's inherent goodness. However, God's patience should not be confused with indifference or weakness. If apocalyptic literature is anything to go by, God will once again reveal his absolute power at the eschaton in a "cosmic settlement" when he will destroy the power of evil and sin once and for all.

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