



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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The Mysterious Behavior of God, Part 2

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As it turns out, I have struggled over the writing of this paper more than any in a long time. I'm not sure why. I just couldn't seem to get it to "come together" in a way that was satisfactory to me. The problem centered in my effort to make sense out of the reality (as I believe it) that, on the one hand, God is actively involved in our world and our lives, and, on the other, that we humans act in response to our own deciding. Does God control what happens, no matter what we humans decide and do? How is God involved, anyway?

So I have struggled, and, after all my struggling, it may well be that all that I have succeeded in doing is to confirm that reality of the mysterious behavior of God, and my own inability to really understand it. What follows, then, is one version of my struggle to get this paper written.

Part of my struggle in writing this paper centers in my concern that I not be unduly repetitious. I am aware that I have explored this matter in various ways with other writings, particularly the first paper on the mysterious behavior of God [cf Paper 92.3], and the paper titled "Discernment – and the Will of God" [cf Paper 94.5].

In "Discernment – and the Will of God," I explored the concept that discernment – which has to do with seeing, understanding, and deciding – may need to focus more on how I use God's gifts to me as I come to grips with what I do with my life. Much more generally, it appears that people try to discover in a specific way God's will for them.

In the writing, I noted that my decisions closed doors as well as opening them. I pointed out that I can't know what would have happened had I made another decision. That being the case, I can't even know, in any absolute sense, if I have decided what God wants me to decide – or if I have actually discerned God's will. When I decide and act on that decision, I have committed myself to a course of action, and I never know what would have been the outcome had I made another choice. I may speculate, but I never can know. I have no way to know.

I suggested that, since God has given me what I need in order to make responsible decisions and act on them, maybe God's will is more that I use those gifts than that I make a particular decision according to something God has in mind.

I was stimulated to write the paper on discernment when I attended a Spiritual Discernment Week under the direction of Dr. Ben Johnson of Columbia Seminary. When I submitted that paper to him, his response was, "You have made a clear statement, but this isn't the whole story," – which, of course, is true. He sent me an article by Carlo Carretto, "What Does Not Exist: Chance." I infer that it is a chapter in a book, but I do not have the title of the book. In it, Carretto shares a secret – "Chance does not exist." He then said, "The only thing that does exist is God's will." Enlarging upon his subject, he indicates that God wills all things, including evil, darkness, suffering, and physical death. As I understand his writing, Carretto sees it that God is always present in all things and is always in charge. Therefore, he suggests, I can trust God to guide and provide in all things – even "the things of every day." He is very clear. For him, chance

does not exist. It is all God's will. I infer that this is what Ben means when he refers to the whole story.

When I contemplate my understanding of what Carretto has written, I am confronted with a dilemma. I express it in a series of questions. How does God function so that all that happens is God's will without nullifying that we human beings make decisions about ourselves and our lives and then act on them? If all that happens is God's will, what happens when human decisions and actions are different from God's will, what happens when human decisions and actions are different from God's will? Or, is it possible for human decisions to be different from God's will? For instance, if all that happens is God's will, does it follow that even the decisions and actions of humans that are contrary to God's will nonetheless are, in fact, God's will? What about the fact that, inevitably, I made decisions and act on them? What about my responsibility for the outcome of my decisions and actions? Why am I created to make decisions by which I direct and govern my life, and yet what God determines is what happens?

What about fire and flood, searing heat and drought, earthquakes and whirlwinds, disease and deformity, and all the things that wreak havoc and destruction in our lives? Are these all God's will? What about the reality that in our world, what is good for one is bad for another? For instance, someone has pointed out that, while having the grasshopper for dinner is good for the goose, it isn't very good for the grasshopper. A study of life processes clearly indicates that, across the board, in order for one life form to sustain, another must die. I go to the grocery store. Every bit of food there was, at one time, a living, growing life form – the bread, the meat, the fruit, the vegetables (canned, frozen and fresh) – all lived and have given their life so that I may have the goods essential for me to live.

Is this God's will? It must be, since this is how God created it to be.

Let me be quite clear. Even though I raise the questions, I do believe God is involved in all these things that happen in the world and in human life. I am not at all sure that I have figured out with any real clarity how God is involved.

And at the risk of being repetitious, I note some of the other things that I believe.

I believe God created all things. God created our solar system. God created our world within our solar system. God created the living beings that inhabit our world. God created human beings in God's image. God created human beings to function in certain ways, which include that we decide and act on our decisions. I believe God is not an authoritarian or despotic creator. I believe God is not an authoritarian or despotic creator. I believe that God is not waiting to reward the obedient and punish the disobedient. I believe God does not exercise control by showing displeasure and/or anger – nor by trying to be a controller. And yet I believe that, somehow, God is actively involved in God's creation, including this small part of the universe and the lives of us human beings who populate it. How can that be?

If I am going to resolve my dilemma, I believe that I need to see both God and God's will differently. In some ways, I was trying to do this when I wrote the Paper, "The Mysterious Behavior of God," No. 3 of the 1992 Series of BURNEY'S PAPERS. I was responding to the question, "How does God behave among us?" I concluded that God is involved in my life, for that matter, in all of God's creation. I concluded, also, that I was not always clear as to how God is involved, and that it is all right for the behavior of God to be mysterious. I really don't have to understand all about it.

I do believe, as I stated earlier, that God is involved in all creation, and in all that happens. The universe is God's creation. So is this world and all its life forms, as well as how they work. I am aware that, if I search diligently enough, I can trace cause and effect in anything that happens – including seeing how my own and others' decisions have bearing upon the outcome of things in which I am involved.

Let's suppose that I am involved in a minor fender-bender automobile accident. I could say, "Oh, it just happened," and drop the matter. If I chose to take the time to do it, I could trace a whole series of decisions that put me at that place at that time, so that I was involved in the accident. Likewise, if I took the time or were able to do it, I could trace a whole series of decisions on the part of the driver of the other car, and others, that led to his being at that place at that particular time. It occurs to me that, in one use of the concept of will, God neither willed that the accident happen, nor willed that it not happen. And yet, if I go with what Carretto has said, God's will was involved. This has to do with the behavior of God that continues to be a mystery to me.

I do believe God's will was involved. I believe that it was God's will for each person to decide. I believe, further, that it was God's will that each person decide according to that person's beliefs, understandings, and responses to the situation. I believe, further, that it is God's will that each person, having decided, be responsible, and accept responsibility for decisions made and acted on.

It isn't so much, then, that God decides what is going to happen, but that God decides about the order of things – including the decision-making process on the part of creatures – and then things happen in response to those decisions.

It just so happens (is it the will of God?) that I am writing this paper just after the severe floods in California at the beginning of 1995, and the earthquake that appears to have devastated a section of Japan. In a manner of speaking, I can say that these events are God's will. I mean by that that God has structured the earth and how it functions. Therefore, devastating though they may be, it is not really difficult to determine what happens that there are floods and earthquakes. When certain combinations occur, the rains come, and the earthquakes shake the earth. That is simply how it is in response to how God has put it all together.

I see, further, that I do not decide about floods and earthquakes. I do decide about me – where I am, and what I do. Hence, I decide that I want to live on the flood plains where the fertile soil is deep and where crops grow abundantly. By that process, I decide

to be where the floods may occur. Therefore, when the floods come, I can expect that my buildings, my fertile fields, and even my life may be destroyed. Since God has put it together in this way, God's behavior in this regard isn't mysterious.

However, I can't blame God for what happens to me in the situation. Nor can I expect God to step in in some way and keep the destruction from taking place. After all, I know the risks, and I'm the one who decides to be where the floods could overwhelm me. It is obvious, therefore, that I participate in what happens in my life. My decisions and actions influenced the outcome. That being the case, I continue to struggle with trying to find an answer to my questions, "How is God involved, anyway? How does God stay in control without setting my decisions aside, and without cancelling me out?"

I don't really know, and it occurs to me that, if I did, then God's behavior wouldn't be mysterious to me.

I think the real problem is that I find it very difficult to release myself from a lifelong belief that God decides about and directs the details of what happens. Especially in events that I don't understand – like the traumas and troubles of life – it seems easier to believe it is God's doing.

When I release myself from that lifelong belief, I put in its place (as I wrote earlier) that God put it all together and so it works as it does. I am well aware that I do not understand the intricacies and details of how it all works, nor do I understand all the ways that God stays involved.

It is as if I were the chief executive officer of a tremendous international corporation, and that ultimate power to decide and implement were in my hands and were my responsibility. In the final analysis, what happens would be in the hands of all those who are involved in the work of the corporation at every level. I would not expect them to disclaim their responsibility anymore than I would expect them to disclaim mine. If I were doing my job, they would have both the equipment and the opportunity to do theirs.

I wouldn't expect those under me to know all that I did to enable the corporation to run smoothly. Rather, they would know that their work was essential, and that they could trust me to do mine, and that, together, we would run the corporation.

I don't know all that God does, nor how God does it. I do know – can know – what I do and how I do it. So, certain behavior of God is a mystery to me. That God does it is not.

Carretto shares a secret. "Chance does not exist. The only thing that does exist is God's will." And I believe that it is God's will that I, also, with full responsibility, use my will to determine how I live my life.

After all, I am created in the image of God.