The central thesis of this book is that God uses chance. This appears to carry the implication that God takes risks. This simple statement has repercussions for most parts of theology but here we focus on the central issue. What is required is a theology of risk and this is what the chapter aims to provide. After some theological preliminaries, I commend a view which it is proposed to call critical orthodoxy.

**Does God take risks?**

We live in a society obsessed with risk. Risk assessment and risk management are part of everyday life in business and industry. We are exposed to all manner of hazards, not only to life and limb, but to our comfort and general welfare. The insurance industry has long existed to alleviate the problem by spreading risk but the threat of litigation and crippling damages has heightened awareness of the problem. It is hardly surprising that there should be a ready market for Peter Bernstein’s book *Against the Gods: the Remarkable Story of Risk* (1998). But risk also raises questions for theology. Gregerson (2003b) has taken steps towards a theology of risk and followed this up (Gregerson 2006) with a study which, among

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1 Bernstein’s book also contains much else that would provide useful background reading for this book, about sampling for example.
God, Chance and Purpose

other things, challenges the views of some contemporary sociologists.

All of this work looks at risk from the human side. There is also a God-ward side on which we concentrate in this chapter. The idea that God uses chance poses many problems for theology, and the chief of these, perhaps, is the question mark it places against the sovereignty of God. This challenge has occupied us a great deal in the earlier part of the book, especially in chapter 12. It also lies behind many of the issues discussed in this chapter but I shall keep it in the background as we approach things from a different angle.

If my thesis that God uses chance is accepted, we cannot avoid the consequence that he appears to be taking risks. However, it may not be immediately obvious why this is such a problem. After all, the whole thrust of the argument has been that chance can be used to achieve determinate ends, so we might naturally wonder what risks are being run. To clarify this we need to recall the differing levels of nature and society. Near certainty at one level may be the product of uncertainty lower down, and it is at that lower level that outcomes may have unwanted effects. If it is true that the evolutionary progression to ourselves is the product of chance and necessity, then it is painfully obvious that this is not achieved without waste and suffering along the way. If that is so, God could not avoid taking risks. To get the global picture right, it appears that it may have been necessary to get many of the details wrong. This is our starting point.

Two questions immediately pose themselves. First, is God really a risk taker?, and secondly, why did he create a world in which we are exposed to so many risks? The aim of this chapter is to suggest answers to both questions but first we need to be clearer about what they mean and why they matter.
To say that God is a risk taker means that he takes – or has taken – actions where the outcome was intrinsically uncertain and which might turn out contrary to his intentions. It is immediately clear why this is a serious question for Christians. A God, in the classical mould, who is omnipotent and omniscient, ought not to be at the mercy of his own creation like this. Such a God ought not to need to take risks. Even if, for a moment, we concede that things might occasionally get out of hand, God should surely have the power to get things back on track before any harm is done. Indeed, the language of risk seems to have no place in describing the nature and role of the God of the Bible and Christian orthodoxy.

Such a God does not fare much better if we judge him in relation to the second question. Many of the risks we run lead to immense suffering and damage. Even when we allow for the fact that much of this is self-inflicted, the residue is still capable of supporting a serious charge. Either God deliberately created a world in which there was bound to be much hurt and suffering, or he did not have sufficient control over things to stop them going awry. In the former case we have to question his very nature, and in particular, the Christian claim that his nature is love. In the latter it is his omnipotence that is undermined. Furthermore, if he cannot fully control things, it is difficult to see how he could act effectively in the world and so his providence has to be added to the list of orthodox casualties.

If we take all this into account, the credibility of the whole edifice of Christian orthodoxy begins to look decidedly shaky and there is no lack of critics on hand to drive that fact home to the Christian’s disadvantage. But perhaps there is no cause for alarm after all, for these gloomy prognostications only follow if we give a positive answer to the first question. If God is a risk taker then we may indeed be in trouble, but surely
centuries of Christian theology cannot be so lightly overturned? Should we not take our stand on the certain rock of revelation and dismiss all of this as idle speculation? I think not. And my reasons lie in the fact, which has repeatedly been brought to our attention, that there is much in the scientific picture of the world that seems to be inconsistent with a theology which sees God in detailed charge of every single thing. I have touched upon these matters in earlier chapters but now I tackle them in a more systematic way. Although they are usually dealt with in the context of God’s sovereignty, I wish to discuss them from first principles under what I shall call naive orthodoxy. If we take the new knowledge about the role of chance in the world seriously, we must either revise our view of God or join those who have abandoned him altogether.

Earlier generations would have been puzzled by such a claim because, from their perspective, the boot would have been on the other foot. For them science seemed to involve replacing uncertainty with lawfulness, which was readily accommodated to the Bible’s view of an omnipotent God. At the very core of science was the lawfulness of nature typified by Newton’s laws of motion. And have not Christians, including Newton himself, seen this as testifying to the faithfulness and reliability of the God who created it all? In the almost mechanical necessity of the physical world, there seemed to be no place for uncertainty and risk taking. To be sure, this view was essentially deism and posed other problems for the believer, and some ingenuity was needed to see how room could be found for special providences. But the general providence expressed in the laws of nature seemed secure and no one could level a charge of capriciousness at the God to whom science seemed to point.

Times have changed and science has moved on. It is not that the laws of science have turned out to be wrong. They are
as valid as ever they were. But we now see them as a partial
description of an immensely complicated universe in which
chance plays as important a part as necessity. Before we can
begin to reconstruct a credible theology, which is consistent
with our new knowledge, we must recall the different kinds of
uncertainty which we encounter in the world. I have identified
three broad categories: the pure chance which we observe
primarily at the quantum level; accidents which include the
mutations of evolution; and, finally, the uncertainties of human
decision making.

SOME THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE WAY THE WORLD IS

Given that the world is such an uncertain place, we face some
serious questions about the apparently hit-and-miss nature of
some aspects of the creative process. Leaving aside the ques-
tion of the hazards attending the appearance of a habitable
planet, which I have already dealt with, let us focus on the
emergence of life. According to the likes of Stephen J. Gould,
Jacques Monod, Richard Dawkins and others, the appear-
ance of life was a chance happening, depending on accidental
copying errors in the reproductive process. If that was all there
was to it, Gould’s metaphor of the rerun film applies and our
presence is the almost incredible result of a random process.
On this reckoning, it was extremely unlikely that intelligent
human life would have been the outcome. That hardly sounds
like the strategy of a loving God intent on creating beings des-
tined for fellowship with himself for, if it was, it was almost

Jacques Monod’s book (1972 [1970]) is, perhaps, the original and clearest
exposition of the thesis that chance and necessity are both necessary and
sufficient to account for all living things. Dawkins and Gould are but two
of the most widely read authors who have propagated the idea.
certain to fail. However, convergence comes to the rescue by showing that the appearance of sentient beings, not so very different from us, may have been almost certain.

Even if we take the view that the emergence of life on earth was inevitable, there were still enormous risks to be run. Collisions of the earth with meteors or asteroids could have destroyed the fledgling life or so distorted the path of evolution as to close the door to human development (something similar seems to have happened to the dinosaurs). Volcanic eruptions, radical climate changes or devastating diseases could likewise have posed insuperable barriers for the progress of life towards its intended culmination in human beings. ³

Again, even if, against all the odds, human life did become firmly established, the hazards of human history seem to put the whole enterprise at risk. We know from that small segment of society with which we are intimately acquainted, how much often seems to depend on the merest whim. When magnified a millionfold onto a world scale with its recessions, wars and conspiracies, it seems incredible that anyone, even God, could control what was going on. On the face of it, at least, human history does not look like a carefully orchestrated divine drama moving inexorably to its intended end. The threat of global disaster by nuclear war, famine or epidemic is still sufficiently real to give us serious pause for thought.

The dilemma for the theologian is most acute when we come to consider the place of the Incarnation in the scheme of things. Think of all the mishaps which can occur in childhood to nip a promising life in the bud. If, as is claimed, only 50 per cent of children at the time of Jesus reached their tenth

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³ The possibility that a burst of gamma rays might be responsible for a mass extinction 443 million years ago was raised by Mark Buchanan in New Scientist, 30 July 2005.
birthday, the risk of pinning the redemption of the world on a single individual is apparent. Did God have to take these risks? If he did not and Jesus was spared those risks, how can we say that Jesus was truly human? For experiencing risk and being changed by the experience is part of what it means to be human. The doctrine of the full humanity of Jesus seems to preclude the kind of special protection accorded to royal personages and their likes today.

These considerations, and others like them, seem to take us into a very different world from the one addressed by the prophets and New Testament writers of the Bible. It is not easy for those immersed in contemporary culture, in which risk seems so deeply embedded, to take seriously the Christian story as naïve orthodoxy presents it.

**Benefits of a Risky World**

We have assumed, perhaps too readily, that risk is a bad thing and that its ubiquity is an embarrassment to the believer. This is far from the case. In evolution, for example, the almost prodigal variety which nature throws up seems a terrible waste from an economical human perspective, but it confers many benefits. It provides an insurance against the unexpected. For example, by ensuring that there is a wide range of variation among organisms of a particular type, it increases the chance that there will be at least some survivors of any disaster capable of coping with the new situation. This use of chance to counteract the effects of chance is a subtle and surprising feature of nature that has profound implications.

When we move on to human society there opens up a whole new dimension of risk. Risk is not only something which we seek to avoid or to insure ourselves against. It is also something that we seek out, or even create, for ourselves.
Mountaineering, caving or extreme physical sports are not thrust upon us, and though they may cause death or serious injury, there is no lack of people eager to take part, and prizes are awarded to the successful. Likewise, no rational person guided by economic criteria alone would gamble, because the expected gain is never positive. Nevertheless, to many the excitement and suspense when much is at stake seems to make it worth while. The enduring appeal of many games depends on just the right balance of skill and chance. In snooker, for example, there would be little interest at the highest level if chance played no part, and it is a prime function of rule makers to create just that right balance. The rules must favour the skilful but involve enough luck to leave the outcome in doubt and keep interest alive.

Although games might be considered a rather trivial matter to bring into this discussion, we have seen already how illuminating they can be. Games mirror life, and in some cases, perhaps, provide a substitute for the thrills necessary to our wellbeing of which we have been deprived by modern civilisation. The competitive instinct is deeply rooted and seems to be essential for progress. It could be plausibly argued that risk is a necessary ingredient for full human development. It provides the richness and diversity of experience necessary to develop our skills and personalities. This does not mean that the risks are always welcome at the time. We can all look back and identify occasions of great uncertainty which we would have gladly avoided but which are seen, in retrospect, to have contributed to our development. The notion of trial and test in the religious sense, much of which involves facing hazards of various kinds, is familiar enough to Christians. The story of Job springs to mind, as does the temptation of Jesus and his experiences leading to the Cross. The remarks in 1 Peter 1 about faith, like gold, being tested by fire, must have
found many echoes in the experience of the early Church. It is not easy to imagine a world without risk or to know what its absence would imply. At the very least we should now be aware that its abolition might not be wholly beneficial.

**Theological Preliminaries**

I indicated at the beginning of the chapter that chance and uncertainty were widely seen as a threat to what I called naïve orthodoxy. The question now to be considered is whether we can begin to fashion a more critical orthodoxy that comes to terms with the new without abandoning what is essential in the old. I want to suggest that we should welcome the new because its insights are almost wholly beneficial.

As a preliminary step it may help to make some remarks about the nature of belief. First we must reject the *list* approach, according to which orthodoxy consists in assent to a long list of propositions. From this perspective the ‘true’ faith is then that which is held by those who assent to all items on the list. Those of weaker faith place crosses or question marks against some items and are seen as professing a somewhat watered down version of the faith; sects are distinguished by the items on the list to which they attach particular importance.

This is, of course, a caricature but something like it lies behind much of the posturing in religious circles. It follows naturally from what we might term the mathematical or deductive approach to knowledge. According to this, certain truths are held to be given, such as the self-evident axioms of geometry. Theology, like geometry, then consists

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4 Foundationalism is a term often used to describe the equivalent way of reasoning in theology. One starts from certain propositions which are taken as ‘given’, in some sense, and which therefore provide the foundation for the theology that is built on them.
in working out their logical consequences. Propositions can be established as definitely true or false by the processes of logic, and the aforementioned list then consists of those truths which can be deduced from the axioms provided by revelation. We do not need reminding that there is some diversity of view about where the axioms are to be found and what they say.

To my mind, the process of scientific inference provides a better model for theology. Not so much in the process of conjecture and refutation advocated by Popper\(^5\) – though that has its merits – but in the inductive accumulation of knowledge. I have advocated and illustrated this approach in my book *Uncertain Belief* (Bartholomew 1996), arguing that all knowledge is uncertain, in varying degrees.\(^6\) This is a bottom-up approach. It yields nothing to its rivals in the importance it attaches to the treasures of Bible and Church. The ‘faith once delivered to the saints’ is expressed in the record of writings, experience and practice of the Christian community. This is an essential part of the evidence with which the theologian must grapple in trying to construct a coherent account of reality but it is not the whole of the evidence. It must be interpreted.

\(^5\) Karl Popper started from the idea that, though one could never determine with certainty what was true, it was sometimes possible to be certain about what was not true. Science should thus proceed by a process of falsification. For example, one could never be certain that all crows were black but the proposition would be falsified if a single crow were to be observed which was not black.

\(^6\) Richard Swinburne pioneered the inductive approach in theology using Bayes’ theorem. The first edition of his book *The Existence of God*, published in 1979, was a landmark publication in this field, though, for reasons set out in Bartholomew (1996), I did not think the application of the method was wholly convincing. The second edition, published in 2004, was described by the publisher as ‘the definitive version for posterity’. In the preface the author acknowledges that his ‘critics are ‘many’ and that they ‘have provided much help’ but it is not clear what form that help took.
by reference to the knowledge from all sources including, especially, science.

Pictures may help to make the distinction between the deductive and inductive approaches to belief clearer. The approach of deductive theology is like the house built on the solid rock of certain truth. As long as the foundation remains sound, the elaborate edifice above stands firm and secure. But if the integrity of the foundation is compromised, cracks begin to appear and although appearances can be maintained for a while by papering them over, the pretence cannot be kept up indefinitely.

What about the inductive approach? Is that like the house built on sand, as it will seem to many? In a way it is, but a better analogy is the picture of a railway built across a bog which was used on the cover of *Uncertain Belief*. When George Stephenson built the Manchester and Liverpool Railway he had to cross Chat Moss. The obvious way of building the line would have been to sink piles onto solid rock beneath and support the line in that way – but no such foundation could be found. So he floated the line across on a bed of heather lashed to hurdles. The weight was thereby distributed so widely that even such a frail foundation as boggy ground could support it. The strength, in this case, was derived from the mutual support of the interlocking hurdles, none of which was excessively loaded. I think it is better to regard the basis of belief in these terms. Although no single element will bear much weight if looked at in isolation – as many critics have shown only too well – the combined strength is immense. It is the cumulative and interdependent effect of all the fragments of evidence which ultimately provides the securest foundation.

One important consequence is that the near certainties only begin to emerge when we stand back and look at the whole
picture. In many of the details we shall be mistaken without always being able to tell which. It is in the common strands that run through time and across diverse cultures that the essential core is to be discerned. To take his words only slightly out of context, John Wesley put it rather well when in his sermon on the catholic spirit, he said:

No man can be assured that all his opinions taken together are true.

Nay every thinking man knows that they are not... He knows, in the general, that he himself is mistaken; Although in what particulars he mistakes, he does not, perhaps he cannot know.

We can take the analogy with scientific method one step further. It suggests how we may expect doctrine to develop as knowledge advances. Science typically progresses not by replacing old knowledge by new, but rather the old finds its place in the new as a special case or an approximation. Newton’s laws of motion are no less true today than in the seventeenth century. They are implicit within relativity theory as an approximation valid in the normal range of human perception. Although quantum theory was designed to deal with the world of the very small, it is consistent with the mechanics of the human-sized world. The new in each case includes the old but has a wider range of validity, encompassing the very large, the very small or the very fast. Similarly in theology, the old orthodoxy will remain, but will now be seen as part of a fuller truth valid over a wider range of time and culture.

We have seen this happen already with the doctrine of creation. Originally formulated in terms of the small world of the Mediterranean basin and a primitive cosmology, it has developed as our scientific horizons have extended. It is now an altogether greater thing and the God to whom it points is thereby magnified. The God whose space is measured in light
years is immeasurably more magnificent than the tribal deity of the early parts of the Old Testament.

Much the same could be said of evolution, though here there are added complications arising from the resurgence of creationism and the advent of the Intelligent Design movement, whose claims were examined in chapter 7. The process of understanding here is still growing and subject to lively debate, especially in the United States of America.

Often new developments in human thought, such as the evolution of life, have been seen as threatening to belief because of what they appear to deny. Only as we become accustomed to them and fully absorb their implications do we begin to see that our understanding of God and his world has been enlarged. The doctrine is not diminished but greatly enriched. The new orthodoxy is richer, not poorer, as a result.

THE THEOLOGY OF RISK

Can the threat to God’s sovereignty, apparently posed by risk taking in all spheres, be treated in the same way as in creation and evolution? Can a world in which chance seems so threatening to our understanding of God really turn out to be friendly to a more critical orthodoxy? If it turns out that we can claim that the world of chance and theology are compatible, can we go further and claim that our understanding of God has been deepened and enriched by the new knowledge? In the remainder of this chapter I hope to show, in outline at least, that we can.

So we return to my opening question: ‘Is God a risk taker?’ In the light of my discussion this question has to be worded more carefully because we have to distinguish between ultimate goals and short-term deviations. We have seen that
determinate ends may be achieved as the result of averaging many random effects or by the interactions within the process. This means that the end of the process may be virtually certain, even though the path to that end is not determined. Is it sufficient to preserve our understanding of God’s greatness that he, as it were, gets there in the end – or that he must never put a foot wrong? It seems to me that it is the end that matters and if deviations towards that end deliver side benefits, the net result may be gain.

To begin with creation, suppose someone claims – as many have – that the probability of a life-bearing planet on which something like ourselves would emerge is so small that no God could have used such a risky procedure to create it. According to my earlier analysis, this is simply not true. Maybe God’s purposes did not require it to be on this particular planet at this particular epoch that we made our appearance. Perhaps there are innumerable other places where it could have happened. Provided only that the number of possible times and locations was sufficiently large, the chance of ultimate success could, as we have seen, be made very close to certainty.

If we move on to the evolution of life on earth we have seen that this, too, may not have been such a risky undertaking as Overman and his kind have supposed. There is the possibility that life might have been almost certain to arise in the conditions of the primeval earth. Apart from the chemical evidence there is Kauffman’s work on self-replication, which suggests, even if it does not yet prove, that autocatalytic processes are capable of producing self-replicating entities. But once life got under way for whatever reason, the phenomenon of convergence seems likely to have severely limited the number of possible outcomes, making sentient beings like us almost inevitable. God is not bound by our notions of economy and it enhances rather than diminishes our place in the scheme of
things to know that it took a universe as big as this to bring us into being. The risk of ultimate failure which God took would then be negligible. As Stuart Kauffman puts it, we are ‘at home in the universe’.  

But if the merest hint of a residual risk leaves us feeling uncomfortable, perhaps we should reflect that if God is greater than anything we can conceive, it might be the case that any enterprise worthy of his nature would have to push at the very limits of what is possible.

More worrying, perhaps, are the historical risks, most notably of the Incarnation. If the redemption of humankind required the ultimate conflict between good and evil expressed in the Cross and Resurrection, and if this could not be guaranteed under normal conditions of human existence, where does that leave us? The position is only slightly eased if we allow that the final conflict might have resolved itself in a variety of equally effective ways. It raises the unanswerable question of whether there could have been as many attempts as necessary. There seems to me to be no overwhelming theological objection to such an idea but we should not take this option too eagerly as there are other alternatives. There is the important principle of likelihood inference (or inference to the best explanation, in the language of philosophers) which I have used before and which comes into play again. I have also dealt with it at some length in two earlier books (Bartholomew 1984 and 1996) so will not go into details now but only note that it has wider applications. If we had made reasonable calculations prior to the

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7 This is the title of Kauffman (1995) which was the ‘popular’ version of Kauffman (1993). The title was designed to convey the core idea of the earlier book that life may have been an almost inevitable outcome of the complexity of the primeval world. Self-organisation was the key principle at work.
birth of Jesus we would doubtless have concluded that the Incarnation was an extremely risky event. But we do not stand at that point. We have to consider the question with all the information available to us now – and that includes our own existence. That fact has to be brought into the argument. The likelihood principle used says that we should judge contending hypotheses by the probabilities they assign to the actual outcomes, not those which might have occurred but did not. Therefore any hypothesis which gives a relatively high probability to the occurrence of a ‘successful’ incarnation is to be preferred to one which does not. Those probabilities which, calculated in advance of the event and much favoured by scientists untutored in statistical inference, give extremely small probabilities to life and historical happenings should therefore be rejected in favour of any hypotheses which make them more likely. The relevance of this argument to the risks of the Incarnation is that since all the things which might have thrown it off course did not, in fact, happen then we should favour hypotheses which do not make it appear so risky. I do not pretend that this is easy, because of the need to affirm the full humanity of Christ, but it should cause us to exercise caution in rushing to conclusions. Any suggestion that we might go beyond likelihood inference and use a Bayesian analysis runs into the insuperable problem of enumerating the contending hypotheses and assigning prior probabilities to them.

One way of characterising the difference between the likelihood approach and the frequentist approach of Neyman and Pearson is by reference to the stage in the process at which probabilities are calculated. If we wait until the data are available we consider the probabilities which a range of hypotheses would assign to those data. In the frequentist approach we calculate the probabilities of the different outcomes which are possible before they happen.
The next risk to consider is the one which God took in creating a world where there would be autonomous beings capable of exercising their own will and acting contrary to their maker’s intentions. In this case the very notion of free will implies a risk, but again we have to distinguish the local and individual effect from the global and collective. The Law of Large Numbers may, again, determine long-term outcomes, not in spite of, but because of the exercise of individual freedom. When to this we add the positive gains for human development, the flexibility and adaptability that require the world to be a risky place, the case may have been overwhelming for doing it this way, even supposing that there was any choice in the matter.

But does the world need to be such a risky place given the immense amount of suffering which this seems to entail? In responding it is customary to distinguish ‘natural’ suffering from that which can be laid at the door of humankind. We are only now beginning to recognise the long-term and far-reaching damage that can be done by the human race. Nowadays we not only have to put the harm that one does to another on the human side of the ledger but increasingly it is becoming clear that the many so-called natural disasters, involving climate and ecology, are the (often unwitting) consequences of human greed and ambition. Nevertheless much remains in the realm of accident which cannot obviously be blamed on anyone. However, having abandoned the deterministic world-view, we cannot lay the blame directly on God either – a view for which there is good scriptural warrant (in Luke 13. 2–4; John 9. 3, for example). This is a considerable help because it provides us with an answer to the oft-posed question: ‘Why me?’ The paradoxical answer is ‘For no reason whatsoever’; the suffering is not a targeted response on the part of God to some specific misdemeanour. This is a very positive
benefit for theology. We are familiar with the moral difference between having direct responsibility for some heinous act and a more general responsibility. For example, we do not accuse the Prime Minister of being personally responsible for every personal misfortune which results from government legislation. He and his government are, of course, responsible in a general sense, as God is, but the moral implications are not the same.

So we are left with the conundrum with which we started. We have to explain why there is so much suffering in the world. Even if it is not totally avoidable could not the all-powerful, all-knowing God of naïve orthodoxy have made a better job of it? I strongly suspect, for reasons set out above, that the answer is a categorical no. The possibility of a world capable of supporting free individuals, tested and tempered by the uncertainties of life and destined for union in Christ seems to demand risk on the grand scale. Leibniz may have been right after all when saying that this was the best of all possible worlds. That is impossible to know, of course, but I have already given grounds for believing that complexity, which is essential to life, cannot exist without the potential for accident. There is certainly no ground for believing that any God worthy of the name could do better. We simply have no basis for such a conclusion, having no idea whether other worlds might be possible. I suspect the chief constraining factor responsible for this conclusion is the need to allow for free will. We value our free will above almost everything; our human dignity depends upon it and it is that which sets us apart from the rest of creation. But if we as individuals are free, then so is everyone else, and that means the risks created by their behaviour, foolish or otherwise, are unavoidable. To forego risk is to forego freedom; risk is the price we pay for our freedom.
The real question then is not why God chose to create this world but why he should have created anything at all. That is a big question for another day but in approaching it we might start by asking ourselves whether we would have preferred not to have existed. What we do know is that God did not exclude himself, in Jesus, from the human consequences of his choice to create this universe.

A CRITICAL ORTHODOXY

The path we have followed gives us the bones of a critical orthodoxy appropriate for an uncertain world. If my argument is correct, the threats to God’s omnipotence, omniscience and providence are mistaken; the answer to the question ‘Is God a risk taker?’ is a qualified yes. This answer is not only in relation to his prime objective but in many of the secondary events and outcomes along the way. God’s omnipotence thus remains intact because total control is simply not possible and God cannot do what is logically impossible. However our view of the matter is greatly enlarged when we glimpse the ingenuity in the interplay of chance and necessity. His way of working involves far greater subtlety than the crude mechanical analogy of naïve orthodoxy.

My response to the second question is that accidents are an inevitable consequence of there being a world sufficiently complex for life to exist. Hence suffering is unavoidable. God’s omniscience is unchallenged because, although he knows all that can be known about the good and bad, the original act of creation carried with it certain implications which must have been recognised and could not be altered now without self-contradiction. God could and did take upon himself, in Jesus, the consequences of his decision to create in the first place.
His providence is to be seen in the rich potential with which the creation is endowed. The future is not wholly predestined and hence is open to a measure of determination by God and ourselves. God’s purposes are achieved as we align our actions with his will and, perhaps, also by his direct action.

All of this paints a picture on a canvas of breathtaking proportions beside which naïve orthodoxy, with which we started, appears unworthy of the God which nature and scripture reveals to us.