Theologians’ efforts to reflect on God's activity in relation to the world informed by contemporary scientific findings can be brought constructively into the realm of health care to mitigate suffering that faith-filled patients and care-givers experience. Key to this effort is understanding God’s relationship to the world, particularly God’s power and control over the world. Recognizing that biblical writers and theologians reflected on God’s power from their understanding of the world, thinking today about this divine attribute requires informing theological discourse with at least broad current scientific findings so it is relevant, helpful, and meaningful for people who are suffering. Toward this end, criteria for constructing models of the God-world relationship are identified, some helpful models are explored, and the benefits of adopting them to explain human suffering are proffered.

I. INTRODUCTION TO COLLABORATIVE EFFORTS
   A. Vatican Observatory - Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences 1987-1998
   B. Church of England since 1987
   C. Modeling Criteria (theologians Tom Rausch, Sallie McFague, and Ian Barbour):
      1. Agreement with the data of the religion--for Christianity based in biblical and traditional theological constructs
      2. Consistent with other ways of knowing about the world--broad scientific findings
      3. Relevant to the times--scientific and highly technical
      4. Helpful for expressing our faith and dealing with suffering and other challenges
      5. Meaningful

II. BASED IN RELIGIOUS FAITH--Criterion #1
   A. Biblical depictions of God’s power
      1. Almighty, most high, mighty one
2. Designer of the Earth
3. Ruler/guide
4. Sustains/preserves/encompasses/holds in hands/cares about and for the world
5. Suffering depicted variously as a punishment for deviating from God’s rule/breaking the covenant, test of faith, discipline

B. Patristic-Medieval depictions of God’s power/control
   1. All mighty with absolute sovereignty over all
   2. Creative, producing many different types of creatures *ex nihilo* that are intended to function according to their natures as endowed by God
   3. Preservative/sustaining of all creation with loving care so able to function harmoniously
   4. Suffering caused by natural phenomena ultimately a mystery because all natural entities are good and should not be disparaged, even things that cause human suffering are actually useful for us (Augustine); perfect universe has all kinds of entities, even those that cause suffering (Aquinas); God brings good out of evil (culpable and non-culpable).

C. Enlightenment-Early Scientific
   1. Designer of the universe with laws governing all
   2. Distant/Clockmaker
   3. Decreasingly sacramental
   4. Suffering--part of scheme of life, integral to the universe God set into motion

III. CONSISTENT WITH SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE WORLD--Criterion #2
A. Biblical from the early agricultural understanding of the world to Greek natural philosophical understanding
B. Patristic-medieval theologians—the world as a divinely-designed, static, and geocentric organism with fixed species, all of which have God-given purposes for existing and acting; teleological structured hierarchically, with humans at the top of the chain of material beings and God outside the created order yet actively present to
it; descriptions of the natural world primarily qualitative rather than quantitative; sacramental view of the world—all natural beings manifest God’s presence and something about God’s character; all entities function as God intends except humans who have free will.

C. **Enlightenment/early Scientific**—understanding of an orderly universe designed by God and operating under fixed laws established by God who distanced the divine self from the universe; sacramental view waned.

D. **Contemporary**—understanding through the lens of quantum physicists, cosmologists, evolutionary and molecular biologists, and ecologists that the natural world appears historically emergent, evolutionary, dynamic, holistic, and open to a future that cannot be predicted with accuracy; biota and abiota are relational, ecologically interdependent, and mutually affected by random occurrences constrained by some basic laws of physics; humans as products of evolution, radically related to everything living and non-living in the universe and especially our planet, and radically dependent upon other species, the air, land, and water for their health and well being economically and socially; scientific findings stimulate theological discourse, prompting new ways of thinking about God, the world, and suffering that occurs in the world amidst considerable joy, goodness, beauty, and harmony.

Provides stimulation for thinking about God as having initiated the cosmological-biological evolutionary process approximately 14 billion years ago, as continuously sustaining the universe in existence as it organizes and develops itself through an interplay of law and chance, producing myriad forces and bodies, and who calls all emerging entities and the entirety of the universe to completion; among bodies are those of intelligent beings who have the capacity to reflect on their place in the universe, to choose to act in ways that are conducive to its fullest possible completion, and to be aware of suffering in the world by humans and other species in the past and present.

Suffering considered a reality in the dynamic development of the world system with human and other species prone to decay and death giving way to
new life and new species; behavior of other animals gives evidence that they suffer intensely (even invertebrates under stress release endorphins and other pain-suppressant chemicals similar to those in human brains).

IV. RELEVANT MODELS OF GOD: WORLD--Criterion #3

A. Anglican Church on God: world as Parent and growing child with risk-allowing and taking, pain, and suffering as part of the growth process.

B. John Hick on God as voluntarily self-limiting, allowing for human freedom, moral growth, lawfulness of nature and suffering as part of the scheme of life.

C. Keith Ward on God the creator of a probabilistic system, generically intending the existence of one with goods that result; suffering explained as an inevitable outcome God does not want as a result of God’s antecedent willing the world system of many possibilities.

D. John Polkinghorne on God’s kenosis/self-limitation, surrendering divine power by creating a world that is genuinely “other” than God but of which God is continuously aware and interacting at the quantum level, inputting information that expresses holistic patterns; suffering results from the world’s selection and discarding of specifics.

E. Arthur Peacocke on God as the choreographer of a dance in which many decisions are determined by the dancers and God as the composer of a still unfinished symphony who is experimenting, improvising and expanding upon the work and expressing intentions though not following an exact predetermined plan; pain and suffering as inevitable emergents from the developmental process of the world with pain energizing while suffering goads action for survival as creatures continually face new problematic situations.

F. Ann Pedersen following Peacocke by modeling God as the leader of a jazz group.

G. Process theologians on God as the leader of a cosmic community who participates in that community creatively and persuasively to inspire the community toward new possibilities of a richer life together; suffering occurs as a result of risks taken by
creation when developing itself and by God when stimulating the world toward more intense development.

H. Paul Davies on God as the designer of a self-organizing process that grows toward complexity, life, and consciousness with both law and chance as part of the design with God endowing matter with diverse potentialities and letting the world create itself without interference; competition, suffering, and death are intrinsic to an evolutionary process with pain an inescapable concomitant of greater sensitivity and awareness, providing a valuable warning of external dangers.

I. Others with continuing emphasis on God’s self-limitation of power, bestowing freedom on the world to self-develop into increasing complexity through an interplay of basic laws of physics and randomness, and occasioning surprising emergents amidst joy and suffering, beauty and pain, goodness and culpable evil on the part of intelligent beings who can make choices about how they function and deal with suffering in the world.

All efforts to provide ways of trying to explain suffering in the world caused by sickness, pain, decay, and death and to recognize suffering as an outcome of the developing system of nature in relative freedom amidst the joy, goodness, beauty, and cooperation that emerges. Freedom includes all natural entities that have emerged over expanding space and extending time, though the past is more determinate of the present and future for entities with lower sentience. Suffering includes all natural entities caused both by natural phenomena and actions by intelligent beings.

V. BENEFITS OF ADOPTING--Criterion #4

A. Positive coping from thinking cogently about God: world--God gifts the world with freedom to develop within constraints from its early beginning. May/should be beneficial for minimizing stress, decreasing and severity of depression all the benefits from coping that Pargament, Koenig, others conclude from their research. Helpful for some who are scientifically informed at least by basic findings and want their
religious faith to be cogent/make sense. Research needed to test the efficacy of this “deeper” theology.

B. Counters negative coping from models that are not helpful:

1. God who is in control, dictating what happens, causing disease for a purpose--no responsibility--defies our knowledge about the world

2. God who interrupts natural processes to cause suffering for one or many but not all--capricious, fickle, unreliable

3. God the “intelligent designer” who supernaturally enters natural processes and causes “life” or ’irreducibly complex” entities to occur because natural processes cannot definitively account for their occurrence.

4. God to whom one’s will must be submitted since whatever happens in the world is part of God’s plan including all the pain and suffering.

5. God who abandons.

6. Punishing God.

7. God as the only solution to suffering to the exclusion of other solutions.

VI. MEANINGFUL–Criterion 5th

Meaningful to some who are informed at least by broad scientific findings and want their faith to be cogent with other ways of knowing about the world. Should not be approached oppressively or argumentatively. Need to center on the patient’s religious faith perspective with clergy helping the patient through problematic or difficult aspects of their understanding of their faith in order to minimize stress due to negative coping while aiding the patient in embracing more cogent ways of thinking about their faith that will facilitate positive coping with suffering.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

DEEP THEOLOGY regarding the God-world relationship goes beyond the surficial manifestations of religious faith/practice that have been tested extensively by social scientists.
Testing is needed to determine the effectiveness of more deep theological constructs for coping with suffering and death when faith is informed by at least broad scientific findings, especially to explain God’s power/control in relation to the world and humans in the world of diverse creatures that also suffer amidst the goodness, beauty, and joy that has emerged over extending time and space.

When understanding the world through a scientific lens, suffering can be recognized as integral to a universe that has been gifted and empowered by God with the freedom to develop itself while God generously offer and supports innumerable possibility to emerge, supports the process in existence while remaining immediately, innermost, and intimately present to it (Thomas Aquinas), encourages the universe with all natural entities therein to be authentically itself/themselves by producing the most good, constantly offers grace to those who have the capacities to open to and accept God’s it to live authentically in relation to God and others to produce the most good, remains humble by allowing the universe with its diverse beings to emerge and function without interference as part of the system that yields waste, decay, destruction, and death as byproducts of the good, joy, and beauty that surfaces, and persists in being patient as the world works itself out while aiming for completion at some point at the end of time.

This approach might appeal to people who profess a religious faith but find expressing it difficult and incoherent in our scientific-technological age. I welcome collaboration with others to test the efficacy of “deep theology” for coping with suffering caused by illness, death, and natural catastrophes.

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