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Providence

David Fergusson

Though not linguistically prominent in Christian scripture, the theology of providence captures several recurring scriptural themes. These include the order of the cosmos, the wisdom reflected in the natural and social worlds, the direction of the history of Israel and the church, and the coming of Christ into the world. Under the influence of Platonic and Stoic philosophy, Christian theologians borrowed and adapted the language of providence to articulate some key tenets of their faith. Providence was personalized to stress the parental care of God for each individual, and aligned to a divine purpose with eschatological outcomes, albeit with some discernable differences between Greek and Latin approaches, particularly regarding fate and freedom. The later systematization of providence was developed in the Latin West during the Middle Ages, particularly the distinction between primary and secondary causality which sought to explain how a world of contingent causal forces could be viewed as expressing in every respect the will of God. Foregrounded in the Reformed churches, this same teaching was developed into a threefold form of providence in terms of preservation, concurrence, and government. Following the Enlightenment, accounts of providence were inflected to align with natural science, Deism, the nation state, and colonial expansion. With perceived problems around divine determinism, creaturely freedom, the problem of evil, and following shattered narratives of progress, modern theology has sought to revise traditional accounts in a more cautious and chastened manner. Several competing approaches can now be discerned in contemporary confessional studies of divine providence.

Keywords: Causation, Free will, Theodicy, General and special providence, Divine action, Deism, Molinism, Order, Determinism, Kenosis, Open Theism

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1 Introduction

The doctrine of providence is expounded in the writings of all the major theologians of the Christian church and is rooted in each of the main confessional traditions, though there is a paucity of reference to key providential terms in the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament. Providence can also be discerned in other faiths. As a broad and distributed theme in Christian theology, providence refers to the benevolent oversight, provision and purpose of God in directing the natural world, the flow of history, and the circumstances of each individual life. In this article, the sources and classical expressions of providentialism are traced, before turning to some key elements that have been subject to criticism and modern revision.

2 Scriptural roots

The term ‘providence’ (Latin, *providentia*; Greek, πρόνοια) seldom appears in scripture with reference to God’s oversight, provision, or ordering of the world and human affairs. Some development is apparent in the apocryphal or deuterocanonical literature (e.g. Wis 14:3; 3 Macc 4:21; 4 Macc 13:19; 17:22) where the verb, προνοέω and the noun πρόνοια are deployed to describe variously God’s wisdom in creation and God’s rule over history, especially though not exclusively in the history of Israel. In the story of Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac, the Latin Vulgate translates Gen 22:8 as ‘*Deus providebit*’ – God will provide.

In the Greek New Testament, πρόνοια appears only twice, in connection with human rather than divine foresight (Acts 24:2; Rom 13:14). Yet a series of related terms are closely linked to the concept of divine providence, for example the foreknowledge of God (Acts 26:5; Rom 8:20; 11:2; 1 Pet 1:20; 2 Pet 3:17); the ‘counsel’ or ‘purpose’ of God (Acts 2:23; 4:28; 5:38; 13:36; Eph 1:11; Heb 6:17) which denotes a ruling and guiding of history, particularly that of the church; and the ‘plan’ or ‘administration’ of God, suggesting again a wise superintendence and benevolent purpose unfolding in the economy of salvation (Eph 1:10; 3:2, 9; Col 1:25). Taken together, these notions suggest a pervasive providence of God in nature, world history, Israel, Christ, and the church (Elliott 2012).

Within the theology of providence, a distinction has often been maintained between a general and a special (or particular) providence. The former is identified with the order and harmony of the natural world, whereas the latter denotes specific acts of God, such as the parting of the Red Sea or the answering of petitionary prayers. This distinction has been called into question for failing to show how the general serves the special in the providence of God – for example, Karl Barth offers a tighter fit between creation and covenant in an effort to integrate these more closely. In describing creation as the external basis of the covenant, Barth aims to understand the entire cosmos as ordered

to the redeeming work of Christ. Hence the distinction between a general and a special providence in which the latter applies only to a segment of world history will inevitably distort the unity of creation and salvation. In any case, one might ask whether the general/special division adequately captures the diversity of providential actions that can be discerned in scripture.

The regularity and rhythm of nature are attested in several well-known passages in the Hebrew Bible, especially in the covenantal promise to Noah that as long as the Earth endures day will follow night and the seasons will never cease (Gen 8:22). The Psalms likewise celebrate the harmony of nature and the abundance of the Earth (Ps 8; 19; 65; 104; 148). Alongside and closely related to the natural realm is a social order that is also rooted in divine wisdom. When properly regulated, the life of the household and the wider community attest the benefits of God's wisdom. These features of divine providence have sometimes been treated as 'ordinances of creation' though the term may be too static to capture the extent to which social arrangements shift across time. Nevertheless, the flourishing and tranquility that can be achieved when the principles of a just social order are upheld can signify a divine providence that reaches beyond the domain of Israel and the church. This is celebrated in Proverbs.

Yet providence is not confined to these features of creation theology. The birth of Christ at the right time in human history (Gal 4:4) provides another dimension of the divine economy or administration of salvation. In similar vein, Jesus' opening words in Mark refer to the time of fulfilment (Mark 1:14). In Acts, the agency of the Spirit empowers and guides the followers of Jesus, answers their prayers, and bestows gifts for the wellbeing of the church (2:1–13; 8:39; 10:19; 13:4; 16:6). Divine providence also displays an eschatological dimension. If the resurrection of Jesus is the first fruit of God's harvest, then its later produce must be the general resurrection of the dead (1 Cor 15:20–28). Two points may be noted here. First, much of what falls under the rubric of special providence addresses the defects of nature and society. The display of God's wisdom is not comprehensive – this is contested by threatening forces, social disruption, and a failure to observe divine commandments. Some of the wisdom literature (Ecclesiastes and Job) reflects the limitations of our knowledge and pursuit of God's ways. Divine action is often embattled and contested in the history of Israel, so that the outworking of providence takes the form of overcoming the turbulence of natural and historical forces. Second, this brief taxonomy of the forms of divine providence suggests that it is not so much one subset of God's action but a feature of the entire economy of creation and salvation. For this reason, it should be viewed as a distributed theme attaching to all the works of God. The primary form of providence is therefore adjectival or adverbial in its characterization of divine action as unified and directed to the benefit of creatures. For this reason, we should be wary of textbook treatments that confine providence to a subdivision of the doctrine of creation; it

should not be reduced to a single model of divine action or presented merely as a feature of the natural world.

3 Ancient philosophy and Christian theology

3.1 Ancient conceptions of providence

Why does the term 'providence' pervade Christian theology? The answer lies in themes borrowed from Platonic and Stoic philosophers by the early theologians of the church (Dragona-Monachou 1994). Evincing a strong theistic strain, Plato's later dialogues suggest a close providential ruling of the world by its architect. God's wisdom is apparent not only in ordering the world but in directing its subsequent course. Like a diligent ruler, God attends to each particular within the divine domain to ensure that these are harmonious and regulated according to the wellbeing of the whole. The Stoics write extensively about providence, viewing it as an immanent principle that governs the whole organic process of nature and history. Conflicting with the Epicurean emphasis on an ultimate randomness in the universe, the Stoics describe an organic law-governed world in which everything is ruled by an immanent reason (*logos*). Each event is located within a chain of causes – everything that happens is governed by fate (Greek, εἰμαρμένη; Latin, *fatum*). Yet this notion is unlike a materialist cause-effect continuum in which mechanical objects operate upon discrete forces. The Stoic view sees all causes as harmoniously connected; a 'sympathy' is displayed that derives from a *logos* (word) or *pneuma* (spirit) informing the entire causal chain and ordering each part in the whole. The natural philosophy of the Stoics offers a spiritual vision in which the entire cosmos is governed by a divine providence (Meyer 2009).

While there are differences amongst the Stoics regarding the extent to which our actions are determined or fated, it is generally assumed that the good life is one in which the individual recognizes and willingly accepts the cosmic order by which we are bound. In this way, the individual can become a microcosm of the whole; by living virtuously, we mirror the harmony of the world around us. Rather than construing this as passive resignation to an imposed fate, we might regard Stoic ethics as a patient acceptance of one's natural condition and a recognition of one's place in a universal scheme (Lloyd 2008: 96). Both Zeno and Chrysippus employ the image of a dog tethered to a cart. The dog can run in tandem with the cart or else it can be dragged to its destination. While the path we follow may be fated, we have a choice of how to adapt ourselves to its course (Rist 1969: 127).

The commitment to providential order in Platonism and Stoicism proved a welcome ally for Christian theologians, both in articulating God's relationship to the world and in combatting Epicurean philosophy with its insistence upon chance and randomness. If not avowedly atheist, the Epicureans believed that the gods had little interest or involvement in human affairs. With its coordination of macro and microscopic order, Stoic thought appeared much

more in tandem with scriptural convictions about divine oversight and rule. Written in the first century CE, Seneca's *De Providentia* asserts a world order which ensures that even adversities serve some wider purpose both for those who suffer and for the human family as a whole (Seneca 1928: 3.1–2). His words adumbrate much later Christian discourse on the subject.

3.2 Early Christian conceptions of providence

3.2.1 Clement of Alexandria

Yet it would be a mistake to view early Christian accounts of providence as simply an importation of Platonic and Stoic ideas. Though undoubtedly influential, these were adapted, modified, and repositioned in a succession of writings. Two emphases set the early Christian works, such as that of Origen and Clement of Alexandria, apart from expressions of providence in pagan philosophy. First, some forms of fatalism are firmly rejected – these are deemed to lead to irresponsible practices and a deleterious trust in astrology. Human freedom and responsibility are instead affirmed alongside an energizing conviction about God's concern for each human person (Louth 2007). Second, there is greater stress placed upon the personal focus of divine providence. The world is not ruled solely by general forces or an indiscriminate determinism. The goodness of God extends to each individual; a parental care is enacted through works of provision, oversight, chastening and mercy. Patristic writers emphasized the extent to which God's care is personally directed to the circumstances of each life – providence is not only for the general good. The eschatological telos of the world was also accentuated with the result that divine providence is perceived always to have this end in view (Bergian 2002). In his *Stromateis*, Clement offers an instructive example. While notions of providence are found across different cultures and nations, this is only properly understood by Christian thinkers with the benefit of divine revelation (Clement of Alexandria 1985: 5.14). God is the invisible and most beautiful ruler of the cosmos, but the implications of this general insight require church teaching. Here providence emerges as a mixed article, accessible in part through natural reason but knowable more fully only through divine revelation.

3.2.2 Theodoret of Cyrus

Already apparent in second-century writers such as Justin Martyr and Theophilus of Antioch, these tendencies are amplified by later reflections on providence. In an early fifth-century work on the subject, Theodoret of Cyrus advances a series of apologetic arguments that anticipate later Enlightenment ruminations on the subject. Divine providence is apparent in the regular movements of the planets, the seasons of the year, the fit of species to environment, and human physiology. Even our buttocks are conveniently designed to provide us with a natural seat. For Theodoret, this ordering

of nature is mirrored by a well-regulated society in which hierarchies are respected in domestic, ecclesiastical, and civic life (Theodoret of Cyrus 1988).

3.2.3 Augustine of Hippo

Providence is also a pervasive theme across the writings of Augustine whether in terms of his own life story, its philosophical complexities, or its historical scope. The besetting problems of providence, particularly those relating to evil and human responsibility, are tackled in ways that significantly shaped subsequent treatments of the subject. In *De Ordine*, he appeals both to reason and revelation to substantiate the claim that the world is well ordered in every respect (Augustine of Hippo 1948). Though not originating in God, manifold evils serve a divine purpose – the hangman, the brothel, and climate catastrophes all contribute to an overall order. In *The City of God*, Augustine offers a more historicized account. The comprehensive scope of God's sovereignty must extend beyond nature to include all history; 'it is beyond incredible that [God] should have willed the kingdoms of men, their dominations and their servitudes, to be outside the range of the laws of his providence' (Augustine of Hippo 1972: 156). The earthly city, even with its violence and lust for power, must serve the city of God. A purpose is everywhere unfolding, foreknown and foreordained by God. Augustine believes that this is consistent with a strong commitment to human responsibility. As foreknown by God, our voluntary actions are not threatened but guaranteed. God can work through human volition as much as natural causes. Our freedom is set within rather than outside divine providence, though this is not the radical freedom of libertarian action but an agency constrained and ruled by divine decision to permit, overrule, and convert our evil wills.

In Augustine, particularly amidst the heat of the Pelagian controversy, a more compatibilist vision of divine determinism and human responsibility emerges. This contrasts with the commitment in the Christian East to the view that some events are genuinely up to us and not to God. Already in Augustine the tendency to reduce if not eliminate the gap between divine permission and divine willing – a key tenet in Orthodox theology – is apparent.

3.2.4 Nemesius, Bishop of Emesa

A useful marker in this divergence between East and West is a late fourth-century work by Nemesius, Bishop of Emesa in Syria, which exercised an important influence upon Maximus the Confessor and John of Damascus (Nemesius 2008). Criticizing the Stoic account of fate, Nemesius stresses both human responsibility and divine foresight. Fate and providence are exclusive notions which resist assimilation one to the other. Following Plato, he insists that some actions are genuinely down to us, though the outcome of their consequences remains under God's control whether by the natural order or by a special providence that may be occasioned by our prayers. Actions which are unjust must be our fault since these cannot be ascribed to God or to fate. The process of deliberation,

together with activities such as praising and blaming, makes little sense without the assumption that our actions are willed and owned by us. Though not marked by a high degree of philosophical sophistication, these Nemesian arguments indicate a direction of travel that was to be followed by later Orthodox theologians.

3.2.5 Maximus the Confessor

Writing in *Ambiguum 10*, Maximus the Confessor testifies to a divine providence that gathers everything into a single harmonious whole (Maximus the Confessor 2014: 10.100–105). We have a natural inclination to trust in providence, particularly in the face of unexpected crises. If we cannot understand in every detail the story that is unfolding, we can still place our faith in God’s wise oversight. In the case of rational agency, however, we must distinguish those things that are willed by ourselves from what is willed by God. The outcome of each choice is bound by an inescapable providential order. Though foreseen, the choice is ours not God’s. This commitment yields a pivotal distinction between divine permission and divine willing. To accommodate creaturely agency and its mistakes, we are led to separate what God allows from what God wills.

3.2.6 John of Damascus

John of Damascus also follows this approach to divine providence. The work of God will use the outcome of creaturely decisions for a foreordained purpose, as in the crucifixion, but it does not include those events that are to be attributed to our free will. Although these come under the sway of providence, we should avoid any direct attribution of divine causality to human choices. A further distinction emerges here between the antecedent and the consequent will of God. The antecedent will of God wills salvation for all, whereas the consequent will of God is more reactive in its response to human choices whether through chastising, disciplining, or punishing. Although what is permitted is foreknown, this is not actively caused by the antecedent will of God. Adopting this position on providence is consonant with the less determinist account of predestination offered by John of Damascus who was familiar with similar debates amongst competing schools of Islamic thought (Louth 2002: 81; Montgomery Watt 1948: 19–29). For the Orthodox tradition, predestination is consequent upon foreknowledge of human choices whereas in the Latin West that ordering is more often reversed with divine foreknowledge reposing upon the primal will of God.

3.3 The emergence of providential theology

While the articulation of providence was an occasional theme in early church theology, its expression generated an interpretive framework that could be developed by later systematic reflection. The providence of God is comprehensive, embracing both nature and history across time and space. With general and particular aspects, it reflects the divine ordering of creation and subsequent forms of divine action. As a mixed doctrine,

providence is accessible to philosophers and to general human intuition, though its full disclosure requires scriptural revelation. Although there are obvious alliances with Platonism and Stoicism, particularly against Epicurean trends, these philosophies of providence are inflected by Christian themes of divine care, redemption of creatures, and eschatological resolution. In addition to this convergence upon common themes, the literature on providence also reflects an awareness of the problems that recur – the explanation of evil in a providentially ordered world, the need to defend voluntary agency and responsibility, and the challenge of holding together divine and creaturely causality.

4 The systematization of providential theology

One of the peculiarities of the theology of providence is that, while it occupied an integral place in the thought of every leading theologian, no *locus classicus* has ever emerged. This may reflect the extent to which providence is a distributed theme. Appearing in different contexts, it could feature within the doctrines of God or creation, these being its preferred location. To speak of a *doctrine* of providence can itself be misleading.

Nevertheless, a standard approach emerged in the Latin West which continued through the Middle Ages into the Reformation. This typically displayed an emphasis upon divine sovereignty, with accompanying features such as double agency, a distinction between primary and secondary causality, and a compatibilism that maintained both human freedom and divine determinism. With his stress upon a maximalist providence, Boethius (c.477–524) exercised a strong influence upon later medieval theology. As the inherent principle ordering all things, fate should be regarded as the instrument of God’s will; ‘the simple and ever-changing plan of events is Providence, and Fate is the ever-changing web, the dispositions in and through time of all the events which God has planned in his simplicity’ (Boethius 1969: 4.6). For Boethius, God’s essence is such that it cannot lack a singular providential foresight and foreordination complete in every detail. This radiates outwards as both the source and ordering principle of everything else.

4.1 Thomas Aquinas

The Boethian approach to providence is reflected in the definition advanced by Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274). All things come under the rule of providence not only according to general principles but in the course followed by each individual entity. Since divine causality is the source and end of everything, there is nothing that can be considered outside the scope of God’s providence even in the sublunary realm. Aquinas’s reasoning here is shaped both by philosophical and scriptural commitments. Quoting Rom 13:1, he asserts that ‘those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.’ His rendering of the Latin Vulgate suggests a wider scope than is usually inferred from the political context of this passage – *quae a Deo sunt, ordinata sunt* (Aquinas 1963: 1a.22.2). In affirming divine providence near the outset of the *Summa*, Aquinas is firmly committed to the view that

nothing happens by chance, that the presence of evil in the world contributes to its overall end, and that the secondary causes which govern contingent entities are rooted in God as the primary cause. Hence the entire system of secondary causes in nature and history is governed by a single, universal plan in the mind of God.

While his commitments to a maximal providence seem to pull Aquinas in a very determinist direction, other elements of his theology stress human responsibility and an interaction between God and creatures which is not captured by a discourse of control. The attention to human freedom, miracles, and the efficacy of prayer offers a more dramatic and biblically inflected account of the divine-human relationship, as does his striking discussion of the friendship of God informed by love. The impression that Aquinas' reading of providence is controlled principally by a philosophical framework can emerge from an exclusive focus on sections from the first part of the *Summa Theologiae*. Yet in the second and third parts, this is balanced by his treatment of the virtues, the incarnation, the sacraments and the Christian life. In relation to freedom, Aquinas argues that God does not override our freedom of action; instead, God causes us to be free, thus making us to be who we are as responsible agents (Davies 1992: 158–184; Posti 2020: 78–102). This account of causality sits between Islamic forms of occasionalism and later Deist approaches. Rather than overriding creaturely causes or making these apparent only, God's action ensures that secondary causes are real and effective. Yet this is more than a mere enabling or initial setting of conditions for autonomous forms of agency. Higher powers tend to order lower powers – the knife causes the bread to be cut, but the hand that moves the knife is the superintendent cause. God, as primary cause, must be understood as actively willing and moving creatures in their exercise of secondary causal powers.

4.2 Primary and secondary causation

Emerging in the Neo-Platonism of Proclus, the distinction between primary and secondary causality already had a long history in Islamic thought from the ninth century (Taylor 2016). The differentiation of forms or levels of causality has several benefits for the theological metaphysician. It protects the integrity of the system of natural causes – these can be described by the methods of the natural sciences and the social historian without reference to the supernatural as one amongst many forces at work. The counter-intuitive assumptions of occasionalism, in which God is the hidden cause of every event to the extent that natural causes are apparent rather than real, can be avoided. Within this scheme, there remains scope for miraculous events which do not cohere with normal patterns of secondary causation – these can be attributed to the particular will of God in respect of their exceptional character. Secondary causes are genuine – they do not deceive us. Primary causality enables the theologian to understand the total system of secondary causes as willed and ruled by God and therefore serving a providential

purpose. The distinction also enables a construction of human freedom to be compatible with a form of divine determinism. The exercise of divine and human agency is neither a competition, nor a zero-sum game. One form of agency does not recede in order that the other may flourish. These work together but at different levels; they are complementary rather than competitive.

4.3 The Reformed tradition: Zwingli and Calvin

The Reformed tradition is often identified with a stronger expression of doctrines of predestination and providence. Though not wholly inaccurate, this characterization can be misleading. The accounts offered by Reformed theologians are structurally similar to those developed in scholastic theology, particularly in the accounts of the late Middle Ages (Posti 2020: 186–193). Indeed, the Reformers themselves would have eschewed any suggestion that they were innovative in this respect; they viewed their work in terms of recovery, particularly with respect to Augustine who is almost invariably cited with approval. Nevertheless, there is a foregrounding of these themes in the Reformed churches which became liturgically and pastorally significant. The overriding sense of divine sovereignty is expressed in part through the language of providence. This is elegantly captured in the oft-quoted words of the Heidelberg Catechism (1563):

Q27 What do you understand by the providence of God?

A. The almighty and ever-present power of God whereby he still upholds, as it were by his own hand, heaven and earth together with all creatures, and rules in such a way that leaves and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and unfruitful years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, and everything else, come to us not by chance but his fatherly hand. (Cochrane 2003: 309)

The political hinterland to this doctrine is found in cities such as Strasbourg and Geneva, where refugees from other parts of Europe sought assurance for their deepest convictions. In this context, an accentuated providentialism (and sense of election) confirmed a faith that, despite the turbulence and upheaval of the times, God's purpose was being steadily enacted in the lives of faithful people. Although in more settled periods this may have been experienced as an oppressive doctrine, it functioned as a powerful testimony of trust in the overarching protection and guidance of God (Naphy 2004: 33). When John Durie, the exiled Reformed preacher, returned from exile to the High Kirk in Edinburgh in 1582, a crowd of around 2,000 followed him up the Royal Mile, reversing the order of regal procession and singing in four-part harmony the metrical version of Psalm 124. The belief that God was on their side proved vital in sustaining faith in times of persecution and uncertainty.

In dealing with providence, Reformed theologians followed much of what had already been developed in the Middle Ages, but emphasized foremost divine determinism and

the rule of God over every single event. Zwingli's *De Providentia* (1530) offers an early Reformed treatment of the subject. Based on a series of sermons, his treatise is populated with references to Plato and Seneca, as well as scripture. An alliance with Platonism and Stoicism is assumed. As the supreme good, God must exercise a providential rule over all things. The alternative is to posit a randomness in the cosmos that lies outside the scope of divine rule. And this unhinging of primary and secondary causality is deemed impossible by virtue of the being of God. To deny a full-scope providentialism, it seems, is to deny God. Zwingli conceded that often we cannot discern a purpose or meaning in what happens. Yet this is the result of our human limitations. The Bible offers examples of how seemingly haphazard events are enfolded into a divine plan. For example, through the fluctuating fortunes of Joseph, God's scheme to protect Israel is finally revealed (Zwingli 1983: 216).

Writing in the final edition of the *Institutes* 1.16–17 in 1559, John Calvin views providence as a necessary corollary of the doctrine of creation. He stresses the microscopic detail of God's rule. Neither a general ordering nor a distant directing, divine providence entails ruling, willing, and guiding at every level. Each event contributes to the purpose of God, though often through a divine over-ruling of creaturely waywardness. Notions such as luck, chance, or fortune have no place in this scheme. What we are tempted to regard as misfortune is instead a mark of divine chastisement or discipline. A lively trust in providence typically generates two virtues – gratitude in the midst of blessing, and patience in times of trouble (Calvin 1960: 183–209).

Calvin's treatment of the subject reiterates several familiar themes. Divine providence cannot be reduced to foreknowledge; an active willing must logically precede foreknowledge, the latter reposing upon the former. The limits of our knowledge are frequently stressed. We do not have direct access to God's secret counsel. Why some things happen must often remain mysterious, though we cannot doubt that there is a reason. Despite the manifestly obvious presence of evils in the world, we should not represent God as the author of these. Here the distinction between primary and secondary causality is usefully employed to exculpate God from direct responsibility for evil. The blame resides with secondary causes, such as human choices, rather than their primary source. The sun causes the corpse to putrefy, yet it is the corpse not the sun that stinks.

The practical force of this doctrine is prominent in Calvin. A belief in providence induces assurance of the parental care of God and a trust that everything will work to fulfil God's purpose. His readers are exhorted to be obedient, patient, and grateful. In doing so, they can be freed from anxiety when facing an unknown future. Disease, persecution and death may come upon us suddenly, but our fears are overcome by the praise of God who works in and through all things.

With the more systematic treatment of the subject in seventeenth-century Reformed orthodoxy, a threefold distinction is developed between preservation (*praeservatio*), concurrence (*concurratio* or *concursum*) and government (*gubernatio*). While not significantly altering the doctrine of providence, these distinctions are intended to elicit a stronger sense of several key elements. To maintain the contingent world in being, the conserving action of God is constantly required; divine preservation thus prevents a theology of creation in which God sets everything up, only then to retire from further activity. Concurrence is not to be understood in terms of a partnership of equals or a mere enablement of voluntary agency, rather in terms of a primal cause working in and through secondary causes, beyond notions of mere permission. Divine government posits a God-world relationship in which each part is ruled or over-ruled to ensure that everything is in accordance with a single divine plan. Within this threefold form of divine providence, other notions can be articulated. Miracles, for example, can be characterized as those special actions of God that do not require intermediate secondary causes for their occurrence. And, within the divine *concursum*, space can be made for a distinction between an active willing and a permissive willing, the latter referring to phenomena such as sin for which God is not to be held directly responsible (Heppe 1950: 251–280).

The Reformed orthodox tradition represents the high point of the doctrine of providence. Drawing upon medieval thought, it continues the foregrounding of the doctrine that emerges in Zwingli, Calvin and their successors. Several positive features merit mention. These include its extensive use of scripture and classical philosophy, the continuity with earlier catholic approaches, the comprehensive scope of its expression, and the attention devoted to its practical settings. Combining intellectual coherence with pastoral assurance, this approach to divine providence has exercised a strong hold on the Christian imagination which continues to this day.

4.4 Critiques of providential theology

4.4.1 Free will

Yet the objections to the classical position, though articulated at earlier times, have seemed increasingly persuasive to modern audiences. The seeming determinism of classical providentialism generates two fundamental problems. The first is the threat posed to human freedom. If our wills are the secondary causes which fulfil the eternal primal will of God, are we as free in our actions as we believe ourselves to be? This nagging objection has some force in relation to our intuitions about freedom. We regard ourselves as being free (at least sometimes) to do otherwise when resolving upon a course of action. In the face of available alternatives, the decision is up to us. This libertarian objection has led some theologians to assume that while God can foreknow our choices, these are not determined by God's primal will. This commitment has often characterized Orthodox, Lutheran, and Wesleyan revisions of the classical Western account. Against

this, the Reformed orthodox view has defended a more compatibilist account of freedom, arguing that voluntary agency is the means by which divine causality is exercised to the extent that the *concursum* is actually what guarantees our freedom thus constructed. The psychological sense of freedom can be accommodated on this account without recourse to some mysterious libertarian additive (van Asselt et al. 2010).

4.4.2 The problem of evil

A related difficulty surrounds the persistence of natural and moral evil. In tending to collapse the distinction between permitting and willing, the Western tradition has found it much harder to speak of the ways in which much that happens contravenes the will of God. The petition 'your will be done' appears to suggest that the world is not the way that God intends. This is also apparent in much that the Hebrew Scriptures say about the struggle with God to overcome disobedience, injustice, and surd forces in the cosmos. Here the language of complaint and lament finds its place in the Psalms and Job. Yet the threefold form of divine providence has difficulty accommodating these elements of scripture. Belated attempts to introduce a distinction between the active will and the permissive will of God are well intended, but arguably these flag an inherent weakness in the position. Despite the difficulties attached to the distinction, it seems that Christian theology cannot function without it.

Classical providential theologies also ran into difficulty as the problem of evil emerged as a stock criticism of Christian faith in the Enlightenment. The Lisbon earthquake of 1755 proved to be a hinge event. Voltaire mocked attempts to see this world as the best of all possible scenarios and questioned what possible intention God could have had by visiting such catastrophe upon the people of Lisbon (Israel 2011: 41–55). While different types of explanation were offered around Europe, those that favoured theories of divine chastisement or discipline now seemed to be on the back foot. The facts were too recalcitrant to such speculative explanations. Were the people of Lisbon more wicked than the inhabitants of other cities? Why did the earthquake destroy so many churches and libraries, when shadier parts of the city with their bordellos survived intact? Could God not have been more precise in the direction of this catastrophe? In the apparent absence of satisfactory answers to these questions, many Deist thinkers inclined to more generalized accounts of providence that avoided a meticulous divine control of every single event.

4.4.3 Practical critiques

A series of practical difficulties have also come to the fore in recent discussion. By overloading each event with divine intention and teleological significance, theologians, preachers and apologists were prone to see the status quo as willed by God. This over-determination of events included war, social hierarchies, imperial expansion, free trade, racial characteristics, and even slavery (Fergusson 2018: 110–166). At a more personal

level, Christians, especially Protestants, were inclined to decode the myriad circumstances of their lives to discern the divine purpose that was intended there (Walsham 1998). This could result in a trivialization of providence and a misreading of circumstances. This overspiritualization of the contingent and mundane circumstances could often generate bad pastoral practice. *The Westminster Directory of Public Worship* (1647) advises ministers, when visiting the sick, to ask them to reflect on whether their illness may be the result of some personal defect or wrongdoing that God intends thereby to punish or remedy. This counselling reflects the dominant account of providence in the Reformed tradition, though whether the faithful have generally acceded to it or have 'defected in place' is at least an open question (Wood 2008: 65).

4.5 Molinism

By considering the array of objections that were raised against this default position of the Western tradition, we can better understand the competing options that were advanced. But before doing so, it is worth noting the variant Molinist position which continues to attract attention (Flint 1998; Craig 1999). Deriving from the work of the Spanish Jesuit Luis de Molina in the sixteenth century, this approach distinguishes three forms of divine knowledge. There is God's natural knowledge of necessary truths (e.g. $2+2 = 4$) and there is God's knowledge of what God decrees shall happen (e.g. the fall of Adam and Eve). In addition to these, there is God's middle knowledge of counterfactual possibilities which includes many conditional truths. For example, God knows what would happen in all the possible worlds in which free creatures exercised their libertarian freedom differently. The advantage of this position is that it enables full providential control to be maintained alongside a strong account of creaturely freedom. In choosing this world from amongst all the possible options, God knows exactly what free creatures will do under all the circumstances that will arise. With this knowledge, God can then exercise providence to ensure all the desired outcomes. Yet what we do is genuinely up to us, rather than determined by God. The appeal to middle knowledge ensures that our free acts are protected and that God is no longer cast as the author of sin. God's omniscience, sovereign will, and providential control can all be maintained by the Molinist.

Despite its initial appeal, there are formidable problems facing the exponent of middle knowledge. Does this really protect libertarian freedom? Critics have argued that if one is genuinely free at the moment of decision, then God cannot know how one will act on the basis of all the antecedent conditions. In selecting this world for creating, therefore, God cannot know which of the many possible worlds has been actualized since its initial conditions cannot guarantee future outcomes. It seems that God must await our free decisions to learn which of many possible worlds this one will be, an outcome that will have consequences for the exercise of divine providence. According to this criticism, future conditionals are ungrounded and therefore indeterminate; there is nothing that can

be known until these are actualized (Hasker 2004: 155). A further problem is that God's sovereignty seems to be modified by the need for God to consult an array of possible worlds before selecting one of these. Like an interior decorator flicking through samples of paint colour before making a selection, God is determined by a set of possibilities that are given and presented rather than willed. This loss of sovereignty in the appeal to middle knowledge was already noted in the seventeenth century – God was likened to Jupiter consulting the Fates before deciding what to do (van Asselt 2001: 167).

Owing to these difficulties, a middle knowledge approach to providence tends to be squeezed by the classical view on one side and more revisionist approaches on the other. Either God determines this world more strongly than through an exhaustive middle knowledge or else God's accommodation of human freedom requires a more open approach to the exercise of providence.

5 Providence in modernity

5.1 The Enlightenment

Though the Enlightenment is more religiously complex and variegated than some characterizations suggest, several recurrent features of its providentialism can be readily discerned. These are usefully characterized in Charles Taylor's exposition of 'providential deism' (Taylor 2007: 221–269).

The early modern period had already established some dominant readings of providence, evident in the rationalist philosophies of Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz and in the various forms of Deism. Attention shifted from scriptural revelation to human reason as the dominant source of our knowledge of how God works in the world. Though a belief in miracles was not always abandoned, greater emphasis was given to the natural and moral order of the world as ordained by God. This had much to do with the appearance of Newtonian science (see [the History of Science and Theology](#)), although suspicion of religious enthusiasm and greater doctrinal latitude led many writers to focus on a natural religion that stressed the doctrines of creation and providence as shared by different theological parties. While each event might not in itself reflect a distinctive divine intention, the totality of causes and effects could be viewed as divinely ordained, the surd elements tending to play some positive role in the overall harmony. The prevalence of design arguments for the existence of God during much of this period provides strong confirmation of the confidence invested in general providence.

5.1.1 Deism

Although 'Deism' is an imprecise term that does not reflect a single philosophical position or leading authority, it signifies the extent to which creation and providence remained hallmark doctrines for many who attracted the appellation. While it could range from a

scarcely concealed scepticism to a more orthodox theology still in touch with key Christian tenets, in its various manifestations Deism revealed both an anthropocentric turn and a historical optimism. As Taylor notes, instead of the glory of God, attention now subtly shifts to human happiness (Taylor 2007: 242). Divine providence was discerned in societal progress, increased knowledge of the world, and economic advancement. Social cohesion was promoted by greater doctrinal latitude. Different forms of Christianity were now to be protected – with their convergence on a set of shared moral values these could together contribute to a civilized order. As the religious wars of the seventeenth century gave way to times of greater tolerance and prosperity, so divine providence was discerned in material and spiritual development.

5.1.2 Progress and development

A sense of being on ‘the right side of history’ permeates the providential stories of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, though these are often qualified and nuanced in important ways. In his 1784 essay ‘Idea for universal history with a cosmopolitan aim’, Kant offers a hopeful prognosis in which the baleful effects of selfish aims and destructive outcomes eventually persuade human beings to abide by the rule of law (Rorty and Schmidt 2009: 9–23). Through an experience of competition and war, nation states are also compelled to enter into a just system of international order. This developmental process is described by Genevieve Lloyd as a secularized version of Augustine’s city of God. The earthly city is now the sole focus of attention, but the vision of its future is bright even amidst sin and evil (Lloyd 2009). Yet the dangerous tendency in such developmental visions is always to over-interpret the significance of some historical moment. While Kant deplores conquest by force, he fails to advance the case against slavery, despite his philosophy having available resources for the task. He assumes that in some racial groups human potential has undergone greater development – even within Europe, he suggests, particular forms of organization appear to have been preferentially selected. Implicit here is the claim that providential forces have generated a particular civilization which exercises a hegemony to the advantage of all. This includes some notorious remarks about ‘the white race’ manifesting the greatest perfections (Eze 1997: 63).

In Hegel’s philosophy of history there is an overwhelming sense of providence though this should be read as an immanent process achieved at great cost, rather than a directed management of each event for a particular purpose. Only with the benefit of hindsight can we discern progress in human history – the owl of Minerva, he says, takes her flight at dusk (Hegel 1953: 13 [first published 1821]). History must be interpreted holistically, its disparate elements being viewed as a unified whole in which Spirit is self-expressed and realized. A pattern emerges from ‘the slaughter bench of history’, to use Hegel’s term. Selfish ambitions and violence take their destructive toll, but these produce some advances, although they may not be evident at the time.

5.2 Providence in political and scientific discourse

Throughout the nineteenth century, Western culture was permeated with providential notions in the discourse of national politics, economics, empire, and missionary expansion. During the American civil war, both sides could interpret their cause in providential language – for abolitionists, the break-up of the union was seen as divine chastisement for a great evil; in the south, the conservation of an established tradition was perceived as a divine mission (Guyatt 2007: 256). The rapid spread of the British Empire occasioned an opportunity for evangelism in India – this too was interpreted in providential language (Brown 2008: 37). The colonization of distant lands enabled the spread of Christian civilization, which was claimed by the colonizers to be to the benefit of all. A similar confidence was placed in the outcomes of free trade. Whether or not this was Adam Smith's actual intention, his 'invisible hand' passages about the societal benefits of market forces could be accommodated by natural theology (Oslington 2011), while the wider forces of commerce and Christianity could readily be schematized in terms of divine providence (Stanley 1983).

What is shocking about this literature, at least to a contemporary reader, is both the *extent* of providential discourse and the *confidence* of earlier generations in the West that they had been singled out as its instruments. A useful benchmark is the fin-de-siècle series of Gifford Lectures of A. B. Bruce in 1896–1898 on *The Providential Order of the World* (see Bruce 1905). Noting that divine providence seems to favour smaller nations for greater purposes – Israel, Greece, Rome, and the British Isles are cited – he argues for the benefits brought by established racial differences and the importance of avoiding inter-marriage, at least for a time. Citing Bagehot in support of a doctrine of 'temporary separation' he writes, 'The good of the whole is ever the ultimate aim, but for that very reason the parts must for a season be detached from the whole. Premature mixture yields a bastard universalism which means degeneracy rather than progress' (Bruce 1905: 294). In fairness to Bruce, his account is insistent that divine election is for the benefit of all, and that arrogance and belittling of other people are to be avoided; an emphasis upon human solidarity and universal benefit must always accompany forms of historical exceptionalism. Yet, in defending this position, he reveals the obvious dangers of a slanted providentialism which draws a straight line from the natural and historical status quo to conclusions about divine intentionality.

The confidence of the age in God's providence may explain in part why theologians could accommodate with equanimity the Darwinian account of evolution soon after the appearance of *The Origin of Species* (1859). The older Paleyan natural theology had assumed a divine clockmaker who ensured that all the interlocking parts would function for the wellbeing of the whole. Species were created in a state of organized complexity and placed according to their best fit with the environment. But instead of this divine teleology,

Darwin's theory sought to explain organized complexity and adaptation by the hypothesis of a long process involving physiological variations and selection of the fittest. Diversity within and across species over vast periods of time could be accounted for by this theory of evolution, rather than a sequence of divine interpositions. Despite some anxieties around human distinctiveness, theologians such as Frederick Temple and Aubrey Moore cautiously welcomed the results of Darwinian science (Brooke 1991: 275–320). Evolution could be posited as a constitutive element of the created order. God had made an evolving world, capable of immense variety and changing life forms, and culminating in intelligent conscious creatures. As with history, a providential narrative could be constructed from the story of nature. An evolving universe with emergent complexity could be viewed not in terms of waste and randomness, but as a work of kaleidoscopic beauty reflecting the mind of its creator (Fergusson 2009).

6 What happened to providence?

6.1 The twentieth-century crisis of providence

Writing on the cusp of the twentieth century, A. B. Bruce displayed all the old confidence of the Victorian era in the providence of God – Christianity was spreading inexorably across the world; the sun never set on the empire; the pace of economic growth and social improvement at home continued unabated; and education and spiritual enlightenment were no longer the province of a few. Yet this sense of assurance was soon to be shattered by the experience of the Great War. Fought by the Christian nations of Europe, which all simultaneously believed that it had God on its side, the war with all its attendant horrors made confident assertions of divine providence in human progress difficult if not impossible to sustain. Then when the Spanish flu carried off even more victims as the war ended, attempts to explain this providentially were thin on the ground. The discourse, it seems, had largely been abandoned if not altogether forgotten. Attempts to re-affirm providence became less frequent, more cautious, and sombre in treating of a theme that had earlier been a default setting for much public and private discourse. Confessional approaches continued to be presented along Thomist and Reformed lines (Garrigou-Lagrange 1937; Berkouwer 1962), but with due attention to the mystery and complexity of providence in a culture increasingly conscious of the fragility of civilization – its steady upward trajectory could no longer be assumed. Amidst incomprehension, 'the more surely does [God] lead [the saints] urging them on in their upward course into a land where, as St John of the Cross says, the beaten track has disappeared' (Garrigou-Lagrange 1937: 204).

By the 1960s, Langdon Gilkey could describe providence as the forgotten step-child of modern theology (Gilkey 1963), though this perhaps takes insufficient notice of several attempts to rehabilitate traditional accounts, as well as the emergence of process theology which adopted a very different approach. The early twentieth-century crisis led to a

fork in the road for providential theologies. Two routes can be discerned, though there are ways of connecting these. One option was to maintain the traditional account while acknowledging with much greater caution that the providential will of God cannot be identified too closely with personal circumstances or political fortunes. While upholding a strong account of divine rule, a chastened account could then stress the persistence of evil and the need to recognize that the purposes of God frequently elude our ken. If the teaching of Jesus is our guide, then we might better seek the presence and activity of God on the underside of history rather than its upside, amongst the losers instead of the winners. In doing so, we can maintain a meticulous account of providence but in a much more cautious register.

6.2 Karl Barth

This was the route taken by Karl Barth in his extensive Christocentric treatment of providence in *Church Dogmatics* III/3 (Barth 1960). Arguing against the intrusion of philosophical theory, Barth criticizes Stoic influences in the tradition, insisting that providence should derive only from a faith in Jesus Christ. Two trends in providential theology are deplored – a fatalism which threatens creaturely freedom and a speculative tendency in which the will of God is too readily discerned in every event. Although vigorously maintaining the Reformed view that God’s rule is sovereign and comprehensive – somewhat to the dissatisfaction of his critics, he defends the threefold form of providence in seemingly traditional terms – Barth is reluctant to over-speculate about where the hand of God can be perceived other than in Jesus Christ. His signs of providence are limited to the survival of scripture, the Jewish people, and the church, together with the way in which each human life is delimited by birth and death (Barth 1960; Fergusson 2018: 271–289). Yet Barth offers a rehabilitation of the traditional account of providence in which human freedom is steadfastly affirmed over against earlier fatalist tendencies. This has proved appealing to theologians wishing to adhere to a strong account of providence while conceding the need for a shift of emphasis (White 2015).

6.3 Revisionism of traditional providence theologies

An alternative approach makes more substantive adjustments to traditional teaching, recognizing that it has been found pastorally oppressive (Wood 2008: 65) and intellectually flawed in relation to its determinism and the failure to distinguish divine permission from divine willing. With a stronger concentration on creaturely freedom, divine-human cooperation, and themes of resistance and redemption, a revised account of providence can be attempted. This has been the preferred option of process theology, of several Anglican theologians, and more recently of open theism (Hasker 2004); it may also be implicit in many of the liberation and contextual theologies that seek to mobilize Christian

communities against different forms of injustice (Cone 1986: 86). To view this option as a cluster of positions is better than attempting to construct it as a single monolithic view.

J. R. Lucas (1976) advocates an improvised version of divine providence which is reactive but always successful by virtue of God's love, patience, and resourcefulness. God does not have one best plan, but an infinity of plans capable of accommodating our mistakes. Lucas (1989) is ready to adopt both divine temporality and an abridged account of omniscience in order to secure the coherence of his position. But these departures from classical theism are presented as gains in retrieving a more scripturally adequate account of divine-human relations. Passages that refer to God's change of mind or conditionality in dealing with human beings are read, *pace* Calvin, not as metaphorical accommodations to our human mode of understanding but as genuine depictions of divine reactivity. Lucas offers the more personal analogy of the Persian carpet maker who can accommodate the mistakes of apprentice children in weaving a new design through a seemingly inexhaustible creativity (Lucas 1976: 39). A similar accommodation of libertarian freedom is also evident in Swinburne's adjustment of the traditional account of omniscience. God's foreknowledge cannot include an infallible awareness of the outcome of free decisions. To this extent, human freedom entails that divine foreknowledge is not incorrigible (Swinburne 1998: 133); we add to the stock of God's true beliefs only as and when we make these decisions.

6.4 Open theism

The recent movement known as 'open theism' has developed this approach, mainly within evangelical circles (Hasker 2004; Sanders 1998). Several strands of this more relational understanding of divine providence can readily be identified. The stress on human freedom is paramount to the extent that some outcomes are genuinely up to us. God may influence and cooperate with us in manifold ways, but the act of faith is one in which we freely assent to God. This is our decision, not God's. One consequence of this is that the construction of divine omniscience has to accommodate the openness of the future. Given creaturely freedom, the future is indeterminate; there is nothing yet available to be known, even by God. So divine providence must find its way in a world (ordained by God) that is neither wholly knowable nor controllable.

Here open theism can make a virtue out of a necessity. A world characterized by creaturely autonomy and indeterminacy is part of the divine design. In the act of creation, God lets the world be. In this context, the concept of kenosis is sometimes employed. In conferring freedom and openness upon an evolving world, God resolves not to determine everything that happens by an act of primal will. There is a stepping back from a maximal providence that decrees each event. Yet, for the open theist, this does not signal a reversion to Deism. God remains deeply involved in the life of the world but in modes

of action that respect the conditions of creation. Hence instead of determinism, there is influence, interaction, improvisation, and other forms of divine activity intended to partner creatures rather than control them. It is also argued that this makes better sense of the Bible, divine suffering, and the lives of the faithful. God is depicted in the stories of scripture as engaging in multiple forms of interaction with God's people. Some biblical scholars have inclined to this approach, recognizing that it captures the more relational and anthropopathic imagery of scripture than classical theism does (Fretheim 2005). In the practice of petitionary prayer, we assume that we make requests of God, seek guidance and inspiration, and orient ourselves under God's direction towards the future (Tiessen 2000). To present this as the unfolding of what is already decreed and fixed in every detail seems to make a charade of our lives as we move into the future. As an accompaniment to the divine involvement in creation, the doctrine of God's timelessness is also abandoned in favour of a temporal God who can work in, with, and through the creation. Finally, in its eschatological focus, open theism seeks to avoid the apparent unfairness of predestined outcomes by positing a salvation that is the result of our free assent to the work of God's grace in our lives. What is on offer here is not so much the revisioning of divine providence but a different theological scheme.

Though it reflects multiple historical and contemporary influences, much notable work in open theism has originated from within analytic philosophy of religion (Fergusson 2021). At the same time, its exponents have typically sought to distance themselves from process thought which is generally adjudged more heterodox in its doctrinal revisionism, particularly with respect to divine omnipotence and eschatological outcomes. Within open theism, there remains a strong account of divine action, of creation out of nothing, and a robust eschatology. In relation to theodicy, it offers some possible gains. Evil is the necessary by-product of a creation that possesses the stability and law-like structure necessary for creatures to exercise their freedom responsibly. We need a predictable but not wholly pliable world in which to grow and develop. The possibilities of sin and accident cannot be excluded from such a creation. How far this can be pressed into a theodicy is not always clear, but most open theists seem to assume that this is a better response to the problem of evil than anything available on the classical account (Oord 2016).

6.5 Critiques of open theism

Open theism has prompted intense and frequently hostile debates that have sometimes resulted in excommunication from evangelical circles, though patient dialogue has also proved possible (Hall and Sanders 2003). Leaving aside its obvious departure from key elements of the classical tradition, we can identify the following problems. If God lacks complete foreknowledge of human choices, in what ways can providence be effectively exercised? Here the open theist can claim that God knows a great deal about the future by virtue of an awareness of antecedent conditions, of causal regularities and of human

character. Although this does not amount to full omniscience in the traditional sense, God has sufficient knowledge of the world to influence it effectively. This answer appears sufficient, but upon closer interrogation its coherence can be challenged. Firstly, if God knows pretty much everything about us and is only rarely surprised by our free choices, then the overall position is not much different from the classical view with respect to the exercise of providence. Secondly, it can be argued that divine permission and divine willing must be closely connected to the extent that what God permits are circumstances that God does not prevent. Here some form of divine concurrence and double agency begins to re-emerge though there may be ways in which this can be distinguished from the classical view (Fergusson 2018: 217–240), although on this construction the differences appear less stark.

Alternatively, if God's foreknowledge is significantly curtailed by the openness of the future, then we might ask how much control can God really exercise, particularly if God is ontologically bound by kenotic constraints (Oord 2016). Might God in the end be powerless to realize God's primary intention? This is probably the most unnerving feature of open theism for its critics. Instead of affirming key aspects of faith and trust in God, it seems to undermine these by weakening God's capacities and generating human anxiety as to the eventual future. Can we really be sure that all will be well, if the conditions governing God's action are restricted in this way? Coupled with its sharp departure from a centuries-old tradition of providential theology, the claims of open theism appear too disconcerting for its critics. Some have argued that a slide towards a more radical process theology is all but inevitable within this paradigm. From a theological perspective, one might wonder whether its model of a divine-human partnership is too symmetrical, perhaps even anthropomorphic, thus threatening the core conviction that we are saved and transformed only by the mystery of an all-prevailing love. For many theologians, these problems remain unresolved.

6.6 Divine action

The issue of whether scripture supports revisionist positions rather than the traditional view has drawn several biblical scholars into the debate (Fretheim 2005). It can be argued that the multiple forms of divine action in scripture are not reducible to one single model, whether of control, of activating middle knowledge, or of entering into a partnership with free creatures. In the interests of a more adequate account of the God-world relationship, the modes of God's action need to be narrated and clearly distinguished. Accounts of divine action also suffer from an abstract quality or the search for the Grail of the 'causal joint'. Little attention is devoted to the actual uses of providentialism in the history of Christian theology and the practices of the church. William Abraham has challenged this narrowing of focus by seeking a richer account more fully informed by doctrinal convictions

that ‘reach for the full wealth of divine action showered upon us in the Son and in the Holy Spirit’ (Abraham 2018: 155).

The theology of providence is intertwined with recent debates around the nature of divine action. If the primary/secondary distinction cannot be maintained in its traditional form, then some other account of God’s agency is required to describe how providence is exercised. Attempts to identify a ‘causal joint’ have been attempted by writers drawing upon models from quantum mechanics and chaos theory (Polkinghorne 1989). Although these have not commanded widespread support, they suggest ways in which a non-deterministic universe might offer scope for divine action without disrupting natural causality. Other accounts have sought to modify double agency so as to speak of ways in which divine action accompanies each and every causal event though in a less deterministic fashion (Fergusson 2018: 217–240).

6.7 Orthodox providential theologies

A surprising feature of many revisionist approaches is how often they overlook their affinities with classical Orthodox theology which has long maintained a strong emphasis upon human freedom together with a commitment to divine providence and foreknowledge. The claim that some things are genuinely down to us, rather than God, was a central theme in the resistance of much Greek theology to the fatalism of the Stoics (Louth 2007). Fate was denied rather than incorporated into the theology of providence in contradistinction to the Latin West under the influence of Boethius. Less fearful of the spectre of Pelagianism, Orthodox theologians have continued to develop a robust account of creaturely freedom while noting the ways in which this is circumscribed by divine providence. Our freedom to choose is inalienable, though God’s providence will always overrule the outcomes. Within this framework, a stronger distinction can be maintained between divine permission and divine willing, while yet adhering to divine foreknowledge (Hart 2009).

These themes remain evident in the recent dogmatic work of Orthodox writers. For Staniloae, divine providence both preserves and guides – God’s work is dynamic and never wholly static. Yet it works with human freedom in a cooperative mode. Providence is adapted to human choices, making use of what is good and overruling what is evil. ‘God does not work alone, but in collaboration with human action’ (Staniloae 2000: 193). Criticizing the causal determinism of Thomism, Bulgakov argues for a more personal and interactive account of divine and human agency (Bulgakov 2002: 193–250). The intra-mundane providential action of God is differentiated from the sovereign act of creation. Creatures, especially human persons, are made by God to receive grace not passively but in responsive freedom; ‘the freedom of the person remains inviolable and impenetrable even for God’ (Bulgakov 2002: 226). Bulgakov steers a course between a Deism in which

God and world are disjoined and a pantheism in which these are confused. The space that is created for freedom is described in kenotic terms. God limits God's own self in the act of creation but with a view to participating in the world and drawing it upwards into union (deification) with the divine being. Such connecting of divine sovereignty with creaturely freedom recalls the classical Greek tradition in John of Damascus and Maximus the Confessor. Closer interaction with this approach might enable Thomist and Reformed theologians to better appreciate the ecumenical diversity that has long persisted in the theology of providence.

6.8 Personal belief

Finally, greater consideration has recently been devoted to the question of how one arrives at a lively belief in providence. This signals a welcome overcoming of the modern curricular divisions between systematic and practical theology. Eleanore Stump has made a pertinent contribution in her identification of a personal knowledge that is enabled only in encounters, relationships, and first-person narratives. This is set apart from the more standard and impersonal form of knowledge represented in analytic philosophy (Stump 2010: 40–63). The personal knowledge that arises in relational contexts cannot be obtained except from its being lived and appropriated in a practical setting. This is of relevance to providentialism. Why would one believe in the efficacy of God's providence? It seems hard to deduce this from a more detached natural theology, notwithstanding earlier attempts to do so. But as a practical orientation informed by prayer and scripture, a cautious but hopeful commitment to providence can make sense of one's life in relation to the world, to other people, and to God.

6.9 The future of providence

The attention dedicated to the theology of providence in the present century reflects a renewed focus on the first article. No longer the 'forgotten stepchild of modern theology' (Gilkey 1963), providence has once again been recognized as a vital corollary of the Christian doctrine of creation, though shorn of the triumphalism of earlier epochs. As we have seen, its scope cannot be restricted to the order of the world or indeed to the doctrine of creation. A directionality and care, often described in parental terms, characterizes Christian discourse about God, the world and human existence. To this extent, providence remains a central and perhaps indispensable category for describing the relationship of God to everything that is not God.

Attributions

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