Providence and a New Creation

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> "We mustn't question the ways of Providence," said the Rector.
> "Providence?" said the old woman. "Don't yew talk to me about Providence. I've had enough of Providence. First he took my husband, and then he took my 'taters, but there's One above as'll teach him to mend his manners, if he don't look out."
> The Rector was too much distressed to challenge this remarkable piece of theology.
> "We can but trust in God, Mrs. Giddings," he said . . . .
> —Dorothy Sayers, *The Nine Tailors*[1]

A Problematic Legacy

Here is an entry from the diary of Thomas O. Summers (1812-1882), an English immigrant to America who became one of the leading theologians of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and founding head of its publishing house:

> Nashville, February 15, 1872.—On going to the Publishing House this morning I found my office, library, papers, etc., in ashes. About midnight a fire broke out in the bindery, and burned it, my office, the composition and stereotype rooms. My journal, which I had kept for forty years, manuscript works on Retribution, Hymnology, the Church, notes on Scripture, sermons, commonplace-books, autograph letters of the Wesleys, Coke, Asbury, Watson, and other distinguished men, and my library worth thousands of dollars, were all consumed.

Summers concluded the entry thus:

> The Lord would not have permitted so great a calamity to happen to me, if he had

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[1] Dorothy Sayers, *The Nine Tailors* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1962), p. 68.

not intended to overrule it for good; so I submit without murmuring. I take out a new lease of life, and begin the world anew; yet I feel the stroke so keenly.[2]

About two decades before this event, Summers had seen through the press the third American edition of *A Discourse Concerning the Divine Providence*, by the noted seventeenth-century Anglican preacher William Sherlock. Sherlock's book, first published in London in 1694, was the last of a group of influential seventeenth-century treatises on providence—including John Wilkins's *A Discourse Concerning the Beauty of Providence* (1649), Thomas Crane's *Prospect of Providence* (1672), and John Flavel's *Divine Conduct, or the Mystery of Providence* (1678)—that were to nurture Protestant preaching and piety well into the future. Sherlock's *Discourse* went through at least twelve editions in Great Britain by the end of the eighteenth century, and had also appeared on the European continent in French and German translations. Crossing the Atlantic, it was published several times in North America, mainly under Methodist auspices, between 1823 and 1890. An edition published in Pittsburgh in 1848 carried "recommendatory notices" from leading Methodist, Presbyterian, and Episcopal clergy in that city. Summers's preface to the next edition (published in Richmond in 1854 and again in Nashville in 1856) states that this, the most "practical and permanent" of Sherlock's works, "still holds its value as a text-book on this subject. . . . [W]e hope that this volume, now put among our standard works, may obtain a wide circulation, and find a place in all our family libraries, as well as those of our Sunday-schools and other institutions."[3] A brief unsigned review in the *Methodist Quarterly Review* in April 1854 states: "This is an old book, but of imperishable value. Nothing has yet superseded or equalled it in the particular field which it occupies. All our people should read it for its clear, Scriptural exposition of a subject so deeply and perpetually connected with human happiness."[4]

A copy of the 1856 edition now in Bridwell Library, Southern Methodist University carries at the bottom of the last page a pencilled notation made by an unidentified (presumably Southern) reader during the final winter of the American Civil War: "Jan. 25th 1865 I finished 1st reading of this book — Thank the Lord for the doctrine of Providence."

Accounts of divine providence have normally functioned in the Christian tradition to address the question: How are we to understand theologically what goes on? That is, how are we to understand events in their "God-relatedness"? The question itself is inescapable, given what James A. Sanders has called the "monotheizing dynamic" in the literature that makes up the Jewish and Christian Bibles—the pursuit, in that literature, of a vision of "the Integrity of Reality," and of patterns and practices of human life that are in keeping with that integrity.[5] For communities of faith that take that literature as canonical, everything that happens must somehow cohere, and everything that happens must be placed somehow in relation to the reality,

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[2] Quoted in O.P. Fitzgerald, *Dr. Summers: A Life-Study* (Nashville: Southern Methodist Publishing House, 1884), p. 270.

[3] William Sherlock, D.D., *A Discourse Concerning the Divine Providence*, third American edition (Nashville: E. Stevenson & F. A. Owen, Agents, for the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1856), pp. 2-3.

[4] *Methodist Quarterly Review* 8/2 (April 1854): 307.

[5] James A. Sanders, *Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), pp. 56-60.

will, and work of God.

The question is not merely speculative. To ask how God is related to what goes on is also to ask how we are to relate ourselves to it, and, through it, to God. Like other genuinely theological questions, this one is thoroughly existential and eminently practical. Its existentiality and practicality emerge most strongly when our sense of "the integrity of reality" is being put to the test, whether in our personal lives or in some broader context.

The simplest, most elegant procedure for answering the question might appear to be to ascribe everything that happens to the will of God, and then to find ways to reconcile such ascription with what the community otherwise holds to be true of God. This has in fact been the favored procedure throughout Christian history, at least at the level of officially sanctioned teaching and its theological elaboration. It was an especially attractive, indeed virtually compelling, procedure at that level during the long period of Western Christian history when some version of Christianity was the established religion of the State, and when notions of divine sovereignty and human imperial sovereignty were fatefully assimilated to one another.[6] In the doctrinal expositions of this entire period, a set of assumptions about divinity derived largely from Greco-Roman philosophy tended to function as "control beliefs" effectively ruling out the idea that anything would or could be other than as God intends it.[7] Everything that happens in time is the unfolding of an eternal design. If there is genuine human freedom (as nearly all Christian writers would affirm), it is a freedom whose exercise is entirely in God's hands. Whether God is said to determine our free choices, or rather to know what those choices will be and to incorporate them into the divine plan, in either case all things proceed according to the divine will, in every particular.

The core of this outlook is probably Stoic in origin.[8] Students of the New Testament know that Stoicism was present in Christian thought from its beginnings; it was part of the Hellenistic culture in which Jesus himself lived, and there are apparent allusions to Stoic maxims and ideas in the letters of Paul. Its influence became stronger as Christianity moved into the upper levels of Roman society, and writers schooled in classical thought became the chief interpreters of and apologists for the Christian faith. Stoic themes and concepts were so much a part of the mental furniture of the ancient world that their assimilation into Christian thought and writing was largely unconscious. The Stoic concept of providence appears—indeed, is taken for granted in its main lines—in such early writers as Origen. The concept was shortly to take on new importance with the imperial sanction of the church under Constantine: it provided a point of contact with pagan high culture as well as with more popular ideas, and enabled Christian

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[6] While some form of Christianity is still the established or State-supported religion in some countries, in most relevant respects this period is at an end, though we are still contending with its legacy.

[7] John E. Sanders, "God As Personal," *The Grace of God, The Will of Man*, edited by Clark H. Pinnock (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1989), pp. 168-173, and (with much fuller biblical exegesis) John E. Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), p. 69. Sanders takes the idea of "control beliefs" from Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976).

[8] In Gerard Verbeke's apt summary, Stoicism as a widespread religious philosophy offered a doctrine of "internal liberation," accessible equally to everyone regardless of gender, social status, or other outward circumstances. The course of events is fixed, governed by divine reason. Our freedom is realized not in contending with our circumstances, but rather in transcending them (with their apparent evils), achieving an indifference to them. Gerard Verbeke, *The Presence of Stoicism in Medieval Thought* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1983), pp. 2-3. In Christian adaptations of Stoicism, the goal was usually more positively stated in terms of harmony with the divine will, or union with God.   The definitive study of the traces of Stoicism in early Western Christianity is Marcia L. Colish, *The Stoic Tradition from Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages*, volume 2, *Stoicism in Christian Latin Thought Through the Sixth Century* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1985).

apologists to develop accounts of reality that served the now-harmonized interests of church and empire.[9] It continued to serve that function well into the modern period.[10]

Other philosophical traditions, both Platonic and Aristotelian, are more prominent than Stoicism in Boethius' *The Consolation of Philosophy*, but these are to some degree "Stoicized" (as one commentator puts it[11]). In this, perhaps the most influential treatise on providence in the Western Christian tradition, distinctively Christian elements are either entirely lacking or are so subtle as to evade most readers—a fact that has created a certain amount of debate over the centuries as to whether the author was indeed a Christian (and, if so, what kind of Christian) at the time of its writing.[12] In writings on providence in this tradition, however, the control exercised by the classical philosophical conceptuality is typical, however abundant the scriptural references may be, and to whatever particular confessional heritage the writers may belong. We would, perhaps, not be surprised to find the Calvinist Thomas Crane writing, "If contingents were without the bridle of Providence, God should be some petty lord, not an absolute and universal governor over the world."[13] But it is no less obvious to Crane's contemporary, the "Arminian" Anglican William Sherlock, that "the absolute government of all things must be in [God's] hands, or else something might be done which he would not have done."[14] From the *De Ordine* of Augustine and the *Consolation of Philosophy* of Boethius to these classic seventeenth-century Protestant expositions of the doctrine of providence and their later imitations, the tenor of these treatments is unrelentingly optimistic. Everything comes

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[9] See Averil Cameron, "Divine Providence in Late Antiquity," *Predicting the Future*, edited by Leo Howe and Alan Wain (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 118-143. These efforts faced strong resistance. Cameron writes that "the idea of Christian providence constituted a totalising explanation, a kind of theory of everything" (p. 121), and ordinary people tended, then as now, to suspect such neat schemes and to be rather more eclectic in their approaches to life's problems. Although providence was strongly promoted by the authorities of church and empire together, there is abundant evidence of massive "defection" from the idea, e.g. in the continuing popularity of the notion of fortune.

[10] "In 1649 Wilkins published *A Discourse Concerning the Beauty of Providence*, one of his most popular sermons, and the one that, of all his writings, sheds most light on his reaction to the events of the 1640's. The sermon was intended to comfort those who had been adversely affected by the events of the past few years. It was essentially a plea to accept the recent upheavals in Church and State because they had been ordered by God. Although Wilkins says nothing of King and Parliament, or Anglican, Presbyterian, and Independent, it is not difficult to see that he was displeased with the direction events had taken, and that the discourse was written to help others accept a world gone awry. The doctrine of Providence made men cheerful and thankful in times of mercy; in times of suffering it should make them patient and submissive. The doctrine of Providence, as propagated by Wilkins, had many affinities with Stoicism, and was a favorite of those influenced by Roman thought. Wilkins particularly admired the Stoics and was constantly citing 'the divine' Seneca. Of all Wilkins's early writings on religious matters, the sermon on Providence most resembles the later works in its emphasis on the role of reason and natural theology, and its reliance on classical rather than Biblical tradition." Barbara Shapiro, *John Wilkins, 1614-1672: An Intellectual Biography*, pp. 69-70.

[11] Marcia Colish, pp. 266-290. "The *Consolation* reflects Boethius' belief that classical philosophy contains an authentic wisdom fully compatible with patristic theology and his own Christian faith. The elements involved are combined so thoroughly in Boethius' mind that the specification of their similarities and differences is no longer important for him" (p. 280).

[12] On this debate and on the content of the *Consolation* generally, see the studies collected in *Boethius*, edited by Manfred Fuhrmann and Joachim Gruber (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1984), especially Ernst Hoffmann, "Griechische Philosophie und christliches Dogma bei Boethius" (pp. 278-285).

[13] T.C. [Thomas Crane], *Isagoge ad Dei Providentiam, or, A Prospect of Divine Providence* (London: Edward Brewster, 1672), p.47 (orthography modernized). John Wesley knew and cited this work, and abridged it for his *Christian Library*. There is, incidentally, no record of Wesley's having read Sherlock's discourse on providence; Sherlock may have been too Latitudinarian for his taste.

[14] Sherlock, p. 36.

to pass as God wills it, and thus everything is just as it is meant to be.   Summers, following Sherlock's logic, could join his fellow "gentlemen theologians" in the antebellum American South in seeing slavery as providentially ordained;[15] but so, it must be said, could Sherlock's readers in the North, and a number of the slaves themselves,[16] though their respective interpretations of the divine intention and its implications for human conduct would differ considerably.

Why did God arrange for the enslavement on this continent of millions of persons of African descent? Why does God want so many children to die of abuse and neglect? What did God intend by the destruction of the World Trade Center in New York? Moving to a more particular level: Why was it God's will that *A* should be killed outright in that latter disaster, that *B* should receive the injuries she received, and that *C* should have been absent from work on the morning of the attack and thus spared? These questions, once posed, obviously admit of a great many possible answers. The presumption in each case—the presumption upon which the entire standard Christian doctrine of providence depends—is that nothing happens that God does not intend. "Permit" or "allow" is not enough, if these words imply that God would have things otherwise.[17] If God would have them otherwise, they would simply *be* otherwise. The alternative—a world in which things are not in God's absolute control—is, from the standpoint of the logic of sovereignty at work here, simply absurd.

The seventeenth century was a boom period for the doctrine of providence. The Protestant Reformation and the ensuing theological, political, and social unrest created an urgent and persistent demand for it, in several ways, and the resulting literature has been determinative for the doctrine ever since.[18] Sherlock's discourse on providence, along with a few of the other leading expositions from the same era, have been commended, reprinted, excerpted, summarized, and paraphrased for over three hundred years, and we might even now echo the judgment of that mid-nineteenth-century Methodist reviewer: these works have not yet been superseded. Of the several factors that combine to account for this circumstance, two stand out. First, these were well-designed and effective instruments of popular doctrinal instruction, and were recognized

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[15] Summers is briefly discussed in E. Brooks Holifield, *The Gentlemen Theologians: American Theology in Southern Culture 1795-1860* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1978). His sometime pastoral colleague in Charleston, the Presbyterian Thomas Smyth, called slavery "part of the original curse pronounced upon the earth, on man, on woman, and is therefore to be classed among the evils incident to a sinful nature in a sin-polluted world, and a providential remedial agency for accomplishing wise and beneficial results . . ." (quoted in Holifield, p. 153). Smyth might have been paraphrasing Sherlock when he argued against reformers that we cannot "turn back the course of eternal providence." "This order of divine providence affects also our position, circumstances, and sphere of duty, as much as the duty itself. . . . Duty therefore requires us to accept God's arrangements, to acquiesce in them, to act in harmony with them, and not to fall behind or to go beyond them, until in the use of proper means, God opens or shuts the door" (Holifield, p. 152).

[16] See Riggins R. Earl, Jr., "Race, Suffering, Slavery, Divine Providence: Some Black and White Deists' and Theists' Voices," *Christian Faith Seeking Historical Understanding: Essays in Honor of H. Jackson Forstman*, edited by James O. Duke and Anthony L. Dunnavant (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), pp. 109-138; Josiah Ulysses Young III, *A Pan-African Theology: Providence and the Legacies of the Ancestors* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1992).

[17] For Sherlock and many others, such words may rightly be used to distinguish the evil done by a creature from the good God intends to realize through that creaturely action: God "willingly permits" the sin, and puts it to good use. Others renounce the concept of permission altogether as misleading.

[18] See Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), chapter 1; Kaspar von Greyerz, *Vorsehungsglaube und Kosmologie: Studien zu englischen Selbstzeugnissen des 17. Jahrhunderts*. Göttingen: Vandenhoek und Ruprecht, 1990. Though both are mainly concerned with developments in England, both point to parallels elsewhere.

and employed as such. Their authors were attentive to what is involved in the conveying of doctrine not only as a coherent body of ideas but as a set of life-shaping concepts. They teach the facts of providence, as they see them, clearly and persuasively; but they also take care to teach the emotions that go with those facts. Thus they help the reader to understand what it would mean to live by this doctrine—to "get the concept" as a working capacity.[19] Though their particular rhetorics and strategies differ, these treatises are all written to be understood and absorbed by the common reader, and to shape that reader's dispositions. Sherlock's work in particular exemplifies the "plain style" of late seventeenth-century English prose, a style for whose rise John Wilkins himself was notably responsible, and which mediated theological as well as scientific knowledge to the general culture. In some ways, the style and the content of Sherlock's discourses were admirably suited to each other, and to the emerging modern sensibility.[20]

The second notable factor in the longevity of these works is simply that, in large part because of their formative standing, they have had no serious rivals in the past three centuries. Well into the twentieth century (though with waning influence and a dwindling readership) they were reprinted by denominational presses, endorsed by pastors, reviewed and recommended in church periodicals, and disseminated through the churches' publishing agencies. Imitated at times, they were never replaced.[21] They are still very powerful influences.

This may seem a strange thing to say. The doctrine of providence has been in serious trouble since these treatises were first published. Our expanding knowledge of the universe has rendered its anthropocentrism extremely implausible. Modern biblical scholarship has rendered its appeals to scripture for support untenable. And its content and implications are widely felt to be morally repugnant. The standard doctrine of providence inculcated by these classics has long since ceased to operate as a central guiding principle in the lives of many Christians living in the modern West. The questions stated a few paragraphs earlier (on the model of "Why has God done this?") would strike them, not as pious and pertinent, but as blasphemous and misleading. What Paul Ricoeur has termed "the death of the God of providence" is a fact of their existence as

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[19] Crane's work approaches this task most systematically. The bulk of it is divided into "observations," each with two chapters. The first enunciates a principle or maxim and illustrates it from scripture and occasionally from later history; the second indicates what the principle implies for the life of the Christian, often in the form of admonitions: be content, be consoled, be watchful. Flavel's work is filled with concrete illustration and exhortation to the same end. Even Sherlock's, which Thomas Jackson (see note ** below) called "more argumentative and less practical" than these others, is clearly intended to shape the attitudes and dispositions of its readers, and to give them what Sherlock would call a "sense" of providence, as distinct from a "mere belief." (On this distinction, see William Sherlock, *A Practical Discourse Concerning a Future Judgment* [London: W. Rogers, 1692], p. 189.)

[20] On the "plain style" and on these writers' employment of it, see W. Fraser Mitchell, *English Pulpit Oratory from Andrewes to Tillotson* (London: S.P.C.K., 1932) and especially Robert Adolph, *The Rise of Modern Prose Style* (Cambridge, MA: The M.I.T. Press, 1968). Irène Simon, *Three Restoration Divines: Barrow, South, Tillotson*, volume I (Paris: Société d'Edition «Les Belles Lettres», 1967), is helpful on the shift in modes of argument (see especially Chapter II, "Anglican Rationalism in the Seventeenth Century," pp. 75-148), as is Gerard Reedy, *The Bible and Reason: Anglicans and Scripture in Late Seventeenth-Century England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985). Barbara Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty in Seventeenth-Century England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), perceptively relates religious, scientific, and literary developments (see especially pp. 252 ff.); see also her *John Wilkins, 1614-1672: An Intellectual Biography* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969). Ian Green, in Print *and Protestantism in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) studies the publishing history and readership of a sample of "best-sellers" and "steady sellers," including several of Sherlock's books.

[21] Among nineteenth-century "updates" might be mentioned Thomas Jackson, *The Providence of God Viewed in the Light of Holy Scripture*, 2nd ed. (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1866), and Jonathan Weaver, *Divine Providence* (Dayton, Ohio: United Brethren Publishing House, 1872). Of the originals, only Flavel's work is currently in print, thanks to a Banner of Truth Trust edition which has been steadily reprinted since 1963.

well as of that of Western culture at large.[22] Clergy and laity alike may draw upon the traditional language in situations of crisis, simply because they have nothing to take its place; but when they do, they often discover both that they no longer "own" the language in any real sense, and that its use creates more difficulties than it removes.

In a remarkably probing article published in 1963, Langdon Gilkey noted the widespread neglect of the doctrine of providence in twentieth-century theology. In the late nineteenth century, evolutionary optimism had given the doctrine a new foothold and a new conceptuality. Especially in the reigning liberal theology, doctrines of evolutionary progress had supplanted the more traditional accounts of divine providence that had been struggling for viability at least since the Enlightenment. But when this faith in progress was shattered by the First World War and its aftermath, providence "was left a rootless, disembodied ghost, flitting from footnote to footnote, but rarely finding secure lodgment in sustained theological discourse."[23] The doctrine was dutifully mentioned in textbooks and in popular literature, but received little serious examination or constructive restatement. Gilkey's account of the reasons for this neglect is still largely persuasive, and if (as seems to be the case) we are currently witnessing a revival of serious theological interest in the notion of providence, the revival may be evidence of the importance of some fairly recent theological and cultural changes.[24]

Despite all this, it is accurate to say that the standard doctrine of providence is still a powerful force. In many conservative and evangelical Christian traditions throughout the world—often in conscious resistance to modernity in all its aspects—the doctrine is sincerely held and vigorously taught and professed.[25] However, in those more liberal traditions in which it is no longer affirmed and cultivated, it has not simply disappeared. Three centuries of discontent with the standard doctrine of providence has basically taken the form not of active critique and reconstruction but rather of passive avoidance. The doctrine remains in place; it is very deeply ingrained in the churches' traditions, piety, and practice, and has not been supplanted there. It is represented in the normative doctrinal heritage of a good many Christian denominations, including those in the Wesleyan tradition;[26] it is written into their hymnody and liturgy; it comes almost automatically to the surface in times of crisis, as members of a congregation struggle to provide consolation and support to one another. For better or worse, then, what we have in these

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[22] Paul Ricoeur, "Religion, Atheism, and Faith," *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, edited by Don Ihde (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974), p. 455.

[23] Langdon B. Gilkey, "The Concept of Providence in Contemporary Theology," *The Journal of Religion* 43 (1963): 171.

[24] In this connection, the significance of September 11, 2001 in the history of the Christian doctrine of providence may come to rival that of the Lisbon earthquake of 1755.

[25] This is not true of all conservative or evangelical Christians, of course. There is a lively current revisionist approach being argued by such theologians as Clark Pinnock and John Sanders—apparently a serious enough movement to have earned the formal censure of the Evangelical Theological Society at its latest annual meeting.

[26] See, e.g., John Wesley's treatment of "persecution" as God's work in his third discourse on the Sermon on the Mount; *The Works of John Wesley*, volume 1, *Sermons, I*, edited by Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), especially pp. 523-525.   A sample: "There is no one branch of God's government of the world which is more to be admired than this. His ear is never heavy to the threatenings of the persecutor, or the cry of the persecuted. His eye is ever open, and his hand stretched out to direct every the minutest circumstance. When the storm shall begin, how high it shall rise, which way it shall point its course, when and how it shall end, are all determined by his unerring wisdom. The ungodly are only a sword of his; an instrument which he uses as it pleaseth him, and which itself, when the gracious ends of his providence are answered, is cast into the fire."

classic texts has a fair claim to be regarded still as the established and recognized teaching of the churches—whether deliberately, or by default—regarding the providence of God.[27]

A Reorientation

The great liberal church historian Adolf von Harnack, like most great historians not lacking in a sense of irony, remarks somewhere that while primitive Christianity was trinitarian in its piety but monotheistic in its doctrine of God, the Christianity of later centuries became trinitarian in its doctrine but monotheistic in its piety.[28] On Harnack's reading of developments, the first Christians lived out of a vivid experience of God through Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit, but did so in a Jewish environment that insisted that God is one. As Christianity moved into a less Jewish and more Greek religious and cultural ethos, it intellectualized its experience of God, yielding to the pressures of the new ethos and using the philosophical resources it provided to work out a doctrine of the Trinity. Meanwhile, the strong monotheistic piety of that same Greek culture—perhaps sensing a vacuum at the experiential level—succeeded in supplanting the original, more complex trinitarian piety of the earlier Christians.[29]

Much in Harnack's account of the first few centuries of Christian history has been called seriously into question, including the various dichotomies built into it (dichotomies, for example, between Greek and Hebrew mentalities, and between piety and doctrine or experience and thought). But there is some substance to his observation, at least so far as the doctrine of providence is concerned.   It is as if there were two parallel processes at work in those early centuries. On the one hand, Christian thinkers were working to explicate and clarify the trinitarian "grammar" of Christian discourse—a grammar that had already been implicitly informing that discourse from New Testament times onward. The trinitarian rules for talking about God and about God's activity that were endorsed by major ecumenical councils are the result of that process. On the other hand, Christian thinkers—sometimes the same ones—were developing accounts of God's providence that seemed to have little to do with these same trinitarian commitments.

This dissociation of providence from trinitarian considerations may help to explain the subsequent career of providence as a doctrinal locus. In systematic theology, on the whole,

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[27]For all of its learned consistency and ecclesial support, this official line of teaching has always been received with something short of universal approbation. To be sure, many have found it profoundly consoling. Others have done their best to accept it, believing that any difficulties they may have with it are difficulties in *them* (the believers) and not difficulties in *it* (the doctrine). But others have found it impossible to accept. Some—as their circumstances permit—have left the church on this account. Others have followed the time-honored practice of "defecting in place"—a new name, perhaps, for a very old phenomenon. (For a range of contemporary examples, see *Defecting In Place: Women Claiming Responsibility for Their Own Spiritual Lives*, edited by Miriam Therese Winter, Adair Lummis, and Allison Stokes [New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1994].) It is common, but it may also be quite mistaken, to regard the resistance of ordinary Christians to certain official Christian doctrines as evidence of residual paganism or incomplete Christianization. In some cases, at least, their resistance may mean just the opposite. Rather than buy into a churchly-sanctioned doctrine that appears to them to do violence to the gospel and to themselves, they may seek out or develop on their own the resources to sustain a more acceptable alternative.

[28] I have been unable to locate this remark in Harnack's work, but an argument for the substance of it could certainly be reconstructed from his 1899-1900 lectures *What Is Christianity?*, translated by Thomas Bailey Saunders (second edition; New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1901).

[29] "So much depth and delicacy of feeling, so much earnestness and dignity, and—above all—so strong a *monotheistic* piety were displayed in the religious ethics of the Greeks, acquired as it had been by hard toil on a basis of inner experience and metaphysical speculation, that the Christian religion could not pass by this treasure with indifference" (*What Is Christianity?*, pp. 216-217).

providence has been "appropriated" to the Father,[30] and its treatment is largely uninformed by christological or pneumatological considerations. It is typically lodged within or appended to the doctrine of creation, where its chief function is to state that the same God who created the world sustains and cares for it. This creator-sustainer God often looks a great deal like the Supreme Being of philosophical theism, and indeed in many theological traditions providence, like creation, is regarded as a doctrine whose content can be known by natural reason, or "by the light of nature." Such structural features serve to reinforce the isolation of the doctrine from specifically Christian commitments and its liability to external control.

"Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets," observes the author of Hebrews, "but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he has appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds" (Hebrews 1:1-2 NRSV). There is certainly ample variety in the ways the biblical writings speak to the question of providence. Ranging from the claim that nothing happens that God does not make happen (e.g., Isaiah 45:7) to the claim that there is a good deal of sheer contingency to events (e.g., Ecclesiastes 9:11-12), these various ways resist and subvert harmonization.[31] In introducing his early study of a closely related theme, that of suffering, James Sanders noted: "There are some eight solutions found in the Old Testament to the problem of suffering. Briefly, sufferings are retributive, disciplinary, revelational, probational, illusory (or transitory), mysterious (only God has Wisdom), eschatological, or meaningless."[32] The phenomenon of canonization functions to preserve rather than eliminate this variety. The "monotheizing dynamic" of which Sanders was later to speak operates not despite, but precisely in and through, this conflict of understandings. The book of Job is the exemplification and, in a way, a culmination of this biblical strategy. God's speaking to us "by a Son" was anticipated by Job's "speaking rightly" of God (Job 42:7-9), as a number of commentators have observed;[33] and in both cases the "speaking" transcends words. Doing anything like justice to what is revealed about the God-relatedness of events in these two figures, and in the canonical witness taken as a whole, is no light task. The understanding of God (if one may properly speak of "understanding" in this connection[34]) that

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[30] John Wesley follows this convention of locating providence in the "first article" in his sermon, "Catholic Spirit" (I.12).

[31] For a brief analysis of the variety, see Frank-Lothar Hossfeld, "Wie sprechen die Heiligen Schriften, insbesondere das Alte Testament, von der Vorsehung Gottes?", in *Vorsehung und Handeln Gottes*, edited by Theodor Schneider and Lothar Ullrich (Freiburg: Herder, 1988), pp. 72-93. Hossfeld concludes that it is impossible to construct a coherent general theory of providence from the Bible—and that perhaps this impossibility is a clue as to how these materials might properly function for us. He takes the language of Hebrews 1:1—"*viele* Male und auf *vielerlei Weise* hat Gott einst zu den Vätern gesprochen durch die Propheten" (p. 72, italics his)—to suggest that we do well to speak of "the holy scriptures" in the plural, and to respect rather than downplay their differences.

[32] Jim Alvin Sanders, *Suffering As Divine Discipline in the Old Testament and Post-Biblical Judaism*, a special issue of the Colgate Rochester Divinity School Bulletin 28 (1955), p. 1.

[33] Notable among the more recent are Karl Barth (*Church Dogmatics* IV/3 part 1 [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961], p. 384) and Gustavo Gutiérrez (*On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, translated by Matthew J. O'Connell [Maryknoll, NY: OrbisBooks, 1987).

[34] "Si comprehendis, non est Deus," said Augustine. In a number of ways, Jewish and Christian rules and conventions for referring to God are meant to reinforce this very point. We operate in this area with a variety of concepts and "understandings" which we take (in hope) to provide sufficient guidance for the purpose at hand, but which do not finally add up to a "grasp" of the divine reality. See Paul DeHart, "The Ambiguous Infinite: Jüngel, Marion, and the God of Descartes," *Journal of Religion* 82 (2002): 75-96); R. Kendall Soulen, "The Name of the

emerges from a genuine encounter with these materials must reflect a certain complexity, as both Jewish and Christian traditions testify.

Blaise Pascal was not mistaken in his *mémoriale*: The monotheism proper to these traditions is a far cry from the abstract, generic theism of modern philosophical discussion. A number of contemporary theologians have labeled this latter theism, when it appears in Christian guise, a heresy.[35] But it is not difficult to understand why many people within as well as outside these traditions might tend to confuse the two. The God of modern theism is the heir of the "God of providence" of the long Constantinian period. It is a concept of God profoundly alienated from Christian trinitarian experience and understanding, despite their long co- existence.[36]

Far from being an abandonment of monotheistic faith, the doctrine of the Trinity represents its Christian form. As James Sanders puts it, the development of trinitarian doctrine was the early Christian attempt to monotheize.[37] That doctrine honors the "integrity of reality" by recognizing its inherent complexity. It aims to provide a sufficiently rich set of rules for referring to God, and for referring all things to God.   But "monotheizing" is an ongoing and never-ending struggle. The standard doctrine of providence represents a massive and chronic failure on the part of the church to monotheize its understanding of God's relation to events in accord with its own trinitarian insights.

What might a doctrine of providence honoring trinitarian commitments look like?

The Second Council of Constantinople (the fifth ecumenical council, meeting in 553), in its opening statement on the triunity of God, affirmed the "one nature or substance" of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, "their one virtue and power, a consubstantial Trinity," and added: "For there is one God and Father, from whom are all things, and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and one Holy Spirit, in whom are all things."[38] With this latter statement the council was not innovating, but was endorsing a rule of trinitarian grammar regarding the "economy" of God, i.e., God's action *ad extra, that had been worked out some time before.*[39] In doing so, it was invoking an insight lodged in the "depth grammar" of Christian doctrine: God relates to things "triunely."

This insight yields several implications for the construction of a Christian doctrine of providence. Most, if not all, of these have been acknowledged and explored at some point in the history of the doctrine, but have then been subordinated to the logic of sovereignty controlling

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Holy Trinity: A Triune Name," *Theology Today* 59 (2002): 244-261; Humphrey Palmer, *Analogy: A Study of Qualification and Argument in Theology* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973).

[35]Nicholas Lash, "Considering the Trinity," *Modern Theology* 2 (1986): 183-196.

[36] Michael J. Buckley, S.J., *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987) illuminates these connections and disconnections brilliantly.

[37] James A. Sanders, *Canon and Community*, p. 59.

[38] Canons of the Second Council of Constantinople (553), in *Documents of the Christian Church*, third edition, edited by Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 100. Cf. Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, ¶213.

[39] For a key statement, see Gregory of Nyssa, "On Not Three Gods" (composed ca. 390): "Ad Ablabium, Quod Non Sint Tres Dei," in *Gregorii Nysseni Opera Dogmatica Minora*, part 1, edited by Frederick Mueller (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1958), pp. 47-48. Some recent translations of this admittedly difficult work seem to obscure the force of the three crucial prepositions, *ek* (from), *di'* (through), and *en* (in). The old NPNF version, while perhaps problematic in some other ways, does not.

the standard doctrine, so that their potential for transformation has been left unrealized. One such implication is that God's relation to what goes on is coherent, but complex, and that the complexity demands and deserves attention. The most visible and promising trace of this implication in the history of the doctrine is the emergence and widespread (though not universal) acceptance of the familiar threefold distinction within the concept of providence: the work of providence is at one and the same time *conservatio*, *gubernatio*, and *concursus*, or "upholding," "governing," and "cooperating." Thinking through this complexity with some close attention to the doctrine of the Trinity, and particularly to the "prepositional logic" of the conciliar statement cited above (from the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit), might be a revolutionary step, particularly if it is taken in conjunction with a second implication. This one, so far as I am aware, hardly figures in standard treatments of the doctrine. It is simply that the triune pattern of God's relation to all things is also the pattern of our knowledge of that relation. To the extent that we can understand how God is related to what goes on, we understand it "through Jesus Christ" and "in the Holy Spirit."

Space does not permit further exposition of these two suggestions here.[40] The range of possibilities they open up can be hinted at, however, by a brief quotation from the Anglican theologian who (in her other vocation as mystery writer) furnished the epigraph for this paper, Dorothy L. Sayers. Writing on the implications of the doctrine of the Incarnation for our attitudes toward "matter," Sayers writes:

> [T]he Church . . . must insist strongly that the whole material universe is an expression and incarnation of the creative energy of God, as a book or a picture is the material expression of the creative soul of the artist. For that reason, all good and creative handling of the material universe is holy and beautiful, and all abuse of the material universe is a crucifixion of the body of Christ.[41]

Another vital implication of the confession that "all things" are from, through, and in God must be mentioned: there is a radical unity to the work or action of God *ad extra*. Writers such as Sherlock and Crane were well aware of the conventional division of the external activity of God into two *opera*, creation and providence, and also of the concession by many writers that this division is an artifice for the sake of exposition and that the two are essentially one. "There is an indissoluble or firm knot knit betwixt the Lord's creating and governing the world," observes Crane; "for what is providence but a kind of continued creation?"[42] But no sooner is the point made than it is left behind. Sherlock writes, "it is a vain inquiry of the schools, which no man can resolve, and which serves no end in religion, whether creation and preservation be the same or two different acts"; and he goes on the make the distinction that is determinative in nearly all standard expositions: "This much is certain: to create is to give being to that which was not before; to preserve, is to continue that in being which was made before; and when any thing is once created, it cannot be newly created, for to create is to make out of nothing, not to make a thing which already is."[43] Sherlock's Lutheran and Reformed contemporaries on the

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[40] A beginning is made, or at least attempted, in Charles M. Wood, "How Does God Act?", *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 1 (1999): 138-152.

[41] Dorothy L. Sayers, *Creed or Chaos?* New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1949), p. 42.

[42] Crane, *Isagoge ad Dei Providentiam,* p. 5.

[43] Sherlock, *A Discourse Concerning the Divine Providence*, pp. 24-25.

continent were issuing the same sort of disclaimer: God does not continue to create. Creation is complete, as the Genesis account of the first week makes clear (they pointed especially to Genesis 2:1-3, with its repeated emphasis on "finished"). If providence is to be called a continuation of creation, we must be careful (the disclaimer says) to specify this as God's continuation or holding in being of what has already been created, and not as a continuation of the activity of creation.[44] Some writers, apparently sensing a danger even in the highly qualified use of the idea, eventually went beyond the disclaimer to deny that it is appropriate to call providence "creation continued" in any sense, lest the important distinction between the finished work of creation and the ongoing work of providence be compromised.[45]

In effect, providence has been severed from creation. Providence has been allocated the time "in between" the world's creation and its consummation—between creation and new creation, we might say—and has been drained of any creative significance. It is no accident, then, that the emphasis in the doctrine is on preservation, stability, order, and harmony, and that the virtues it inculcates are mainly passive. Our duty under God's providence is to adjust to the way things are, to accept the order of things, and to receive with all humility and gratitude what God sends us. To say, as Sherlock does, that the question of the relation of creation and providence "serves no end in religion" is a tragic mistake.

To recapture the unity of creation and providence—the creative character of providence, and the providential character of creation—might aid in the liberation of the doctrine of providence from its long captivity to "the way things are."[46] It might give the doctrine a better chance than it has ordinarily had to serve the ends of God, rather than those of earthly sovereigns of one sort or another. If there is any proper sense in which creation is "finished" (and this depends in large part on what one makes of *creatio ex nihilo)*, there is a very important sense in which it is not finished; its finishing, like its beginning, is ongoing. The enigmatic words of the Johannine Jesus, as he explained his willingness to heal on the Sabbath, are worth pondering in this connection: "My Father is still working, and I also am working" (John 5:17).

Finally, to view creation and providence, and, for that matter, new creation, *together* as one ongoing work, one eternal act of God being realized throughout time and space, might not only renew the doctrine of providence but also provide new perspective on every other aspect of the Christian witness.

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[44] See Heinrich Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, third edition, translated by Charles A. Hay and Henry E. Jacobs (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), p.179 ; Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, revised and edited by Ernst Bizer, translated by G. T. Thompson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1978), p. 257. J. A. Quenstedt, following J.F. König, seems willing to take the relation more seriously: "God preserves all things by the continuation of the action by which He first produced them. For the preservation of a thing is, properly speaking, nothing else than a continued production of it, *nor do they differ except by a designation derived from without*" (quoted in Schmid, p. 179).

[45] Chr. Ernst Luthardt, *Kompendium der Dogmatik*, 10th ed. (Leipzig: Dörffling & Franke, 1900), §34, "Das Verhältnis Gottes zur geschaffenen Welt (De providentia)," p. 142.

[46]A probing recent study of this captivity is Roque Frangiotti, *A doutrina tradicional da providencia: implicacões sociopoliticas* (São Paulo: Ediciones Paulinas, 1986).