

Introduction

I realize I have always believed there is a great Providence that, so to speak, waits ahead of us.¹

In the history of the church, the concept of divine providence has been widely deployed. Its scope includes the order of nature, the direction of history, the ways in which the lives of persons are subject to divine guidance, the problems of evil and suffering, the language of politics, the constructions that we place upon our individual life stories, and the final outcomes of nature and history. A capacious theme, God's providence is illustrated by the stories of Scripture and has been theorised by theologians throughout the history of the church.

The term 'providence' refers literally to divine foresight and provision but its historic meanings are broader – these encompass purpose, direction, rule and vocation. Within Christian theology, providence is the sequel to creation. After creating the world, God preserves and directs it to fulfil God's purposes. This has been read maximally, particularly in the Latin west. Everything that happens is willed by God and serves some end – nothing lies outside the scope of divine volition and intentionality. This generates several virtues – confidence, patience, gratitude and expectation. Although providentialism is closely associated with Reformed thought and piety, it is powerfully expressed in medieval theology. Despite some popular misconceptions, the doctrine of providence is not a Calvinist franchise.

¹ Marilynne Robinson, *Lila* (London: Virago, 2014), p. 76.

INTRODUCTION

The term ‘providence’ hardly features at all in the Bible. Borrowed from Platonic and Stoic philosophy, it was inflected by Christian thinkers. Parallels can be found in other philosophies and religions, though languages such as Chinese and Japanese have no readily available equivalent term. Judaism has a more flexible account of providence and Islam a stronger reading, though these are generalisations which conceal disputes and variations surrounding the compatibility of divine determinism and human freedom. Indeed, the range of positions in the other Abrahamic faiths seems as diverse as those within Christianity.² In Indian traditions, there is a corresponding sense of a *karma* governing the universe. The way the world works ensures that in the long run we reap what we sow – we get what we deserve. Our *karma* determines previous and future lives, unless one finds release. This may explain physical appearance, social station and span of life. In attempting to affirm human responsibility together with cosmic order, Buddhist and Jainist teachers inveighed against forms of fatalism and materialism which disrupted the necessary equilibrium.³ Within Daoism, a similar acknowledgement of cosmic balance can readily be discerned. This moral and spiritual order resembles some aspects of the providentialism of Christian thought, particularly as reflected in the wisdom literature. For later theorists, it raised the question of whether these ideas are embedded in the human psyche. Freud famously postulated a universal projection arising from primordial fear.

And so a rich store of ideas is formed, born of the need to make tolerable the helplessness of man, and built out of the material offered by memories of the helplessness of his own childhood and

² See the essays in Karl W. Giberson (ed.), *Abraham's Dice: Chance and Providence in the Monotheistic Traditions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), and also David Burrell, *Freedom and Creation in Three Traditions* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), pp. 75–83 and 115–28.

³ See for example Naomi Appleton, *Narrating Karma and Rebirth: Buddhist and Jain Multi-Life Stories* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 7.

INTRODUCTION

the childhood of the human race ... Over each one of us watches a benevolent, and only apparently severe, Providence, which will not suffer us to become the plaything of the stark and pitiless forces of nature.⁴

Ideas of divine providence can be discerned in different ecclesial contexts and appropriated to a variety of purposes. The myriad details of personal life were to be decoded to detect God's hand. This is particularly evident in the diaries of pilgrims who travelled to the new world. Empires were viewed as providentially ordained to transmit the benefits of religion, education, trade and culture from the west to other parts of the world. This was almost an intuitive assumption of imperial rhetoric, particularly in the nineteenth century. On the one hand, the laws of nature and of economics were regarded as providentially ordered – these were to be respected and allowed to work their natural course for our benefit. On the other hand, exceptional events, particularly catastrophes, could also be seen as providentially directed for the sake of punishment, repentance and correction. As we shall see, the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 proved a hinge event in shifting European reactions to divine providence.

Many of us probably live according to some theology of providence, at least an inchoate or implicit one.⁵ Indeed, we may have several theologies of providence inside our heads, our particular moods and circumstances determining which of these is dominant at any one time. Pastoral work repeatedly exposes diverse convictions and confusions about divine providence, some of these profound and moving, others verging on the superstitious, others – perhaps the majority – an admixture of these. I was once asked to bless the new home of a young couple who

⁴ Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (London: Hogarth Press, 1928), p. 32.

⁵ Vernon White explores the ways in which notions of providence continue to surface in contemporary 'secular' literature. See *Purpose and Providence: Taking Soundings in Western Thought, Literature and Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2015), pp. 39–70.

INTRODUCTION

were experiencing fertility problems. Although it was obvious that some transaction was intended, this was never admitted or explored. Perhaps that represented a failure on my part. A spurious deal was being done with God, a bargain in which a modicum of sacrifice would elicit the outcome of an appropriate reward. This manipulation of the supernatural by some natural means at our disposal is close to one standard description of magic. The people of the church may hold a host of assumptions and beliefs that do not reflect those of any mainstream or recognisable theological position; this is an uncomfortable thought for those who are theologians or pastors. Perhaps this has generally been the case – and study of popular religion may increasingly confirm this. Within the domain of providentialism, we are confronted by a range of half-formed assumptions and hopes that are difficult to justify on any serious theological reckoning. At the same time, we need to recognize that church teaching has often reinforced some bad ideas about providence. This has led to a surfeit of guilt, anxiety and anger which might have been alleviated by a more honest account of the matter. The faithful who have ‘defected in place’ may have been more discerning than their teachers.⁶

Many of us need some notion of providence by which to lead our lives, both in good times and in bad, though others seem to eschew any notion of a unifying narrative pattern.⁷ But we are also conscious of the formidable difficulties that surround the standard

⁶ Charles Wood, *The Question of Providence* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), p. 65.

⁷ Galen Strawson contrasts ‘narrativists’ and ‘non-narrativists’, arguing in favour of the latter, though also citing some moving examples in support of the former. His claim is that our history as selves has neither unity nor the sequential coherence that could intelligibly be rendered in the form of a single story. ‘I concede it. Consideration of the sequence – the “narrative”, if you like – may be important for some people in some cases. For most of us, however, I think self-knowledge comes best in bits and pieces.’ *The Subject of Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 135.

INTRODUCTION

accounts that have been given. This is captured by some remarks of David Martin in surveying religion in England in the late 1960s.

[V]ast numbers of people work on the assumption of two basic principles: one is the rule of fate or chance, conceived as rooted in a kind of symmetry (such as disasters occur in threes), and the other is a ‘moral balance’, rooted in a universal homeostasis whereby wicked deeds eventually catch up on those who perpetuate them.⁸

Research undertaken on the religion of soldiers during wartime reveals a deeply ingrained sense of providence, even when most other vestiges of faith have disappeared. This is hard to distinguish from fatalism, a persistent feature of army life, and perhaps one that is even more apparent in modern times on account of the range and indiscriminate fire power of artillery. Writing from the front during the First World War, a Scottish army chaplain stated of the infantry battalions:

Almost every soldier in the lines has become an Ultra-Calvinist – if not a man of faith, at least a man of fatalism. He believes that he will die only ‘when his number’s up’ and that this bullet has his name on it. I have had more talks on Predestination and on God’s ordering of lives with soldiers than with Christian people during all my ministry.⁹

Michael Snape describes the attention that was devoted in wartime to dreams, premonitions and lucky charms.¹⁰ Fortune-tellers flourished and were regularly consulted by troops preparing to leave for the front. Alarmed at these trends, the churches inveighed against all forms of fatalism, seeing these as displacing a proper trust in a personal God. This antithesis of belief in divine providence with abandonment to fate may also have contributed to the traditional Protestant hostility to

⁸ David Martin, *A Sociology of English Religion* (London: Heinemann, 1967), p. 76.

⁹ Quoted by Michael Snape, *God and the British Soldier: Religion and the British Army in the First and Second World Wars* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 28.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

INTRODUCTION

gambling, even to the extent of proscribing raffles and games of chance at fund-raising events (guessing the weight of the cake or the number of sweets in the jar).¹¹ While such attitudes are easy to lampoon, they reflect a laudable concern to protect people from addiction and exploitation in ways that remain all too evident.

What we see here may represent only a very visible manifestation of deep-seated trends in human nature. The terms ‘magic’ and ‘superstition’ are not easy to define and have often been used to create a binary opposition either with proper, mainstream religion or with reliable, scientifically informed belief. But we need to consider that historically one person’s superstition may have been another person’s faith. Attempts by powerful elites to suppress popular practice and belief by castigating these as superstitious may never have been entirely successful. The Latin term and its Greek counterpart were used to denounce practices and beliefs adjudged unfounded, disruptive or even dangerous. So Pliny the younger could complain in his letter to the emperor Trajan of the immoderate superstition of Christians. The body politic should be protected from this contagion as it was leading to a neglect of temples, festivals and the purchase of sacrifice animals. Yet, as Dale Martin notes, by the time of Eusebius in the fourth century, the tables were turned when Hellenic religion and philosophy were denounced by Christian writers as superstitious.¹²

¹¹ ‘In the Divine Providence and through the limitations of human knowledge, life brings us uncertainty, risk, hazard, and adventure: these are to be cheerfully and courageously accepted, not for gain or personal advantage, but for the ends of the Kingdom of God and in reliance on the Divine Providence. The Christian motive must determine all our life and service, including economic effort and the acquisition and use of money. Gambling is contrary to an acceptance of the Divine will and providence. Belief in luck cannot be reconciled with faith in God.’ *Minutes of the Annual Conference of the Methodist Church* (London: Methodist Publishing House, 1936), p. 390.

¹² Dale B. Martin, *Inventing Superstition: From the Hippocratics to the Christians* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 206–25.

INTRODUCTION

Another popular pastoral assumption is that everything is ordained by the will of God. This has some warrant both within Scripture and *a fortiori* within the traditions of western theology after Augustine. We can find some heavyweight authorities to cite in support of this view – Aquinas and Calvin, to name but two – yet it is one that requires careful handling. In dealing with sin, suffering and evil, exponents of this view have generally attempted to distinguish between the active and the permissive will of God. Even within Reformed orthodoxy with its strong determinism and insistence upon the sovereignty of the divine will, there is a belated leaning in this direction. But whether this tradition is in good order is seriously doubted by significant bodies of opinion today. Does the biblical narrative of salvation history make much sense unless we assume that the world is not the way God wants it to be? We are enjoined not to meek acceptance but to complaint and protest. A useful doctrine should mobilise us rather than demand our resignation to injustice. Our prayers and actions are enlisted in the cause of transformation, as opposed to the recognition that everything is as it is meant to be. Can we face our suffering (and that of others) with the gloss that it comes from the hand of God and is foreordained? Alternatively, can we discern our good fortune as the outcome of divine blessing, if this entails viewing someone else's misfortune as the absence of such blessing or (still worse) the result of a divine curse? Or if we deny this and allow aspects of nature and history to run apart from God's rule, do we then postulate a form of dualism in which there are powers, forces and agencies at work in the cosmos outside the sovereignty of God? I shall argue that one of the tasks of a chastened doctrine of providence is to offer a more circumscribed description of what constitutes the will of God.

The rhetoric of divine providence has often found its way into political discourse, whether pagan, Christian or secular. It is not hard to see why. If the citizens of a republic or the subjects of a realm are asked to subordinate their own private and domestic interests to that of a wider social cause, then they must be motivated

INTRODUCTION

accordingly. This will require a good story, powerful symbols and a set of concepts that create a vision of a cause and ends that are worthy of our allegiance. Alasdair MacIntyre has shown how this generates a problem for modern liberal democracies that seek to establish the rationale for the state on purely procedural grounds. The state as a guarantor of individual freedoms and the arbiter of disputes about equality and justice may manage to persuade us in good times of the reasonableness of paying our taxes. But to demand of us – or our children – that we lay down our lives in hard times, the state will have to furnish us with a better story. Otherwise, as MacIntyre says, it is as if we are asked to fight to the death for our telephone company.¹³ In exploring the ways in which this problem has been faced, we should note how much of the post-Christian politics of the twentieth century has continued to retain the discourse of divine providence by harnessing this for ideologies, some of which have had sinister outcomes.

A further challenge to the doctrine of providence came in the form of Darwinism. Indeed, soon after the publication of *The Origin of Species* in 1859, some critics, notably T. H. Huxley, claimed that natural explanation had now supplanted divine providence. God was no longer needed to explain the creation of complex organs such as the human eye or the ways in which forms of life were so beautifully adapted to the environment in which they flourished. The old worldview of William Paley, which saw divine providence everywhere active in nature, now lay in ruins. Or so it was argued. Instead of God's wise ordering of means to ends throughout nature, we have an algorithmic formula which can explain, given enough time and space, how the world has come to be as it is. Whether this indeed displaces providence altogether or simply leads to its restatement and relocation is a question for consideration.

¹³ Alasdair MacIntyre, 'A partial response to my critics' in John Horton and Susan Mendus (eds.), *After MacIntyre* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), pp. 283–304 at p. 303.

INTRODUCTION

Tackling the theology of providence can also be a frustrating and elusive exercise for other reasons. It is difficult to identify many classical loci on the subject that command the field and provide an obvious point of reference. What are the best works on providence? Almost all the leading theologians of the church tackled this subject – Schleiermacher, who regarded it as a pagan import, is one possible exception – but none of them is renowned for a treatise on providence. One can find important accounts in Aquinas and Barth, but these do not stand out as the obvious high points of the *Summa Theologiae* or the *Church Dogmatics*. A sifting of Augustine provides influential materials but this is hard work and does not lend itself to the teaching of providence from an accessible source. Some theologians – Theodoret of Cyrus and Zwingli – wrote individual treatises but these were largely defensive and did not set out lines of enquiry that others developed to any significant extent.

A further frustration surrounds many of the standard textbook treatments of the subject. These often begin by spelling out what providence is not – it is neither fate, nor fortune, nor determinism, nor caprice. But then when we come to the substantive material, the theology of providence begins quite quickly to lean in the direction of those proscribed notions, doubtless as the result of real pressure to avoid other unwanted associations.

Despite its scope and existential significance, the subject of providence is less widely treated than other doctrinal loci. There may be accidental reasons for this. After all, some doctrines are more fashionable than others at different times. Who would have guessed fifty years ago that so much would have been written about the doctrines of the Trinity or the Eucharist? But one reason why providence has suffered some neglect may be its standard textbook location as a subdivision of the doctrine of creation. Through reduction to an account of how God continues to preserve and shape the world after its initial creation from out of nothing, providence has been downsized to a minor element in Christian theology. This sub-theme has been stressed, partly to avoid a deist construction

INTRODUCTION

of the relationship between God and the world and partly to articulate scriptural claims about God's wise oversight of creation and provision for its creatures. The difficulty here is that providence is too narrowly presented in terms of the general outlay of the natural world. Other themes relating to redemption, sanctification and eschatological consummation are squeezed by location within the first article of the faith. To put it another way, the work of providence tends historically to have been appropriated to the first person of the Trinity, with too little attention given to the enhancement of providence by the work of the Son and the Spirit, whom Irenaeus described as the two hands of God in the economy of creation and salvation. These two hands have not featured sufficiently in standard accounts with their exclusive focus on the sovereign will and rule of God as Father.

Not all theology has treated providence in the context of the doctrine of creation. In much medieval theology (including Aquinas), it is located within the doctrine of God, rather like a divine attribute, or a deduction from other essential properties. Yet this also has a constricting effect, by a relative absence of reference to the work of the Son and the Spirit. Here providence is something that God must necessarily have by virtue of the divine being. It is placed alongside or even prior to the divine decree that precedes creation – Zwingli seems to have assumed this in his treatise on providence, as did some of the later rationalists such as Samuel Clarke in his 1704 Boyle Lectures. Here maximal providence is a function of divine omnipotence.¹⁴ God must have foresight, control and a will that disposes every actual outcome across the whole creation. Without

¹⁴ 'And when and whilst things are in being, the same moral perfection makes it necessary that they should be disposed and governed according to the most exact and most unchangeable laws of eternal justice, goodness, and truth because while things and their several relations are, they cannot but be what they are.' Samuel Clarke, *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 88. See also the discussion in Heinrich Heppes's *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. G. T. Thomson