

## *The Changing Emphasis in the Doctrine of Providence*

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The theme of divine providence has suffered eclipse of late in the thinking of theologians: at least this is what is being urged by a number of recent writers. G. C. Berkouwer, for example, speaks of the crisis of the providence doctrine in our century and asserts that 'the confessions of God's Providence has become, now more than ever, a stone of stumbling'.<sup>1</sup> Roger Hazelton contends that this great doctrine has not been given the central place it should have in our modern theological enterprise.<sup>2</sup> In a recent article, Langdon B. Gilkey asks the question, 'Why has Providence in our generation been left a rootless, disembodied ghost, flitting from footnote to footnote, but rarely finding secure lodgment in sustained theological discourse?'.<sup>3</sup>

These quotations will be sufficient to justify the legitimacy of our treating of this subject. It is one of immediate and immense importance. Making the necessary allowance for some exaggeration in the above contention, we must allow that the thought of God as vitally, if not always vividly, in control of the moving events of history and concerned with the everyday affairs of our personal lives does not appear to hold the outside masses or to help the believing man as it once did. The present environment of ideas is considered to make the confession of divine providence a hard saying to many. The whole attitude and atmosphere of modern man is opposed to the notion of a God who controls and cares. The meaninglessness of life, the purposelessness of history and the recklessness of nature, it is declared, tell against the idea that there is a Divine Being who has effective sovereignty over the cosmic whole. Such loudly proclaimed notions have resulted in the destroying of the idea of a God-governed universe from the thinking of those without, and the blurring of the theme of God's rule over all in the faith and message of the Church.

In some quarters the doctrine of providence has been so evacuated of all significant meaning as to make it palatable to the modern mind. Nature and man are given credit for what the Christian confessions and theologies of an earlier day brought directly under the immediate action of God. The concept of secondary causes and the autonomy of man are invoked so as to remove God actively from the scene. In this way God is given singularly little to do and the idea of providence becomes nothing more than a vague and general concern of God for His world. But a God who does nothing, or only a very little, is most certainly not the God of the Christian Gospel: indeed He is not even a pale facsimile thereof.

### **I. A CRITICISM OF THE DOCTRINE OF PROVIDENCE**

J. H. Paton ridicules what he calls the blandly optimistic tone of much

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<sup>1</sup> G. C. Berkouwer, *The Providence of God*, 1952, 15.

<sup>2</sup> Roger Hazelton, *Providence—A Theme with Variations*, 1958, 5.

<sup>3</sup> Langdon B. Gilkey, art. 'The Concept of Providence in Contemporary Theology', *The Journal of Religion*, xliii, July 1963, Number 3, 171.

devotional writing. Not only does one of Cowper's hymns in which he expresses his faith in the sustaining and providing care of God, but the Psalms too, come under his rebuke. The Psalmist he regards as either very lucky or very blind when he asserted that although he was once young and is now old, yet he has never seen the righteous forsaken or his seed begging bread. Such facile optimism is pronounced by Paton to be a survival of primitive savage notions. It used to be the fashion to speak of special providence, and such a belief has been a comfort to simple souls who, Paton asserts, have never entered deeply into religious life itself. The idea of providence, Paton concludes, has no meaning, for the reason that there is no such particular action of God. The term special providence is merely another way of speaking of happenings which we regard as advantageous to ourselves. To think otherwise, it is added, is not religion but superstition.<sup>4</sup>

This repudiation by Paton of the meaning and relevancy of the doctrine of providence is unjust to the deeply religious insight of many 'simple souls'. Often it is precisely they who have an acute awareness of the real issues for faith. They move in the arena of life's actualities and are keenly alive to its lures and lashes. There are many theological problems which the 'layman' may leave trustingly in the hands of the theological expert, but providence, as Brunner rightly observes, is not one of them.<sup>5</sup> The questions which faith in God's governing, guarding and guiding power and grace involves arise out of life as it is lived. And the 'simple soul' who has experience, as Hazelton states it, of being spared, sustained and led, cannot doubt God's control and care.<sup>6</sup> Such a faith does not take account of the advantageous merely. Faith in God's providence, as Aulén stresses, has little in common with such an eudaemonistic attitude which seeks to make God man's servant. It is the very theocentric character of faith which calls for the radical removal of all such eudaemonism in the relation between God and man.<sup>7</sup>

The Christian believer in providence is not blind to the turns and tricks of events which come with soft feet as well as the sharp and stunning happenings which appear with threatening and frightening face. But he takes 'the chances and accidents of history' to be 'the very warp and woof of the fabric of providence which God is ever weaving'.<sup>8</sup> When the simple soul prays 'Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses', he unites the natural world with the moral and spiritual and is sure that God is actively in charge of both. The prayer would be meaningless unless faith had the assurance that God wills and works in his total world.

Such an assured faith in God's rule is far from the shallow optimism and pious platitudinizing so often mistaken for providence by superior souls. These tough-minded people of today prefer to expatiate on their estrangement, or debate about their despair, but the believing soul, the tender-hearted, is sure that life is not a haphazard and chancy affair. God is there. 'The idea of Divine Providence is also the absolute denial of the idea that the universe has no meaning, that things only happen "by accident"'.<sup>9</sup> Even if it be thought that the conception of providence expressed in the 'jazzed-up lyrics' of the modern chorus book is crude and curious, they nevertheless do make clear the truth that God is not 'on the limits far

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<sup>4</sup> J. H. Paton, *The Modern Predicament*, 1955, 353-7.

<sup>5</sup> E. Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, II, 1952, 148.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Roger Hazelton, *op. cit.*, 52 f.

<sup>7</sup> Gustaf Aulén, *The Faith of the Christian Church*, 1961, 172.

<sup>8</sup> W. G. Pollard, *Chance and Providence*, 1958, 71.

<sup>9</sup> E. Brunner, *op. cit.*, 155.

withdrawn'. To sing 'He's got the whole world in His hand' is to give vent and voice to a profound truth; for providence

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is, after all, 'more a theme of faith than a doctrine, and faith may be much clearer than the doctrine'.<sup>10</sup>

The suggestion that special providence is wishful thinking or sheer nonsense is a misinterpretation of the plain teaching of Scripture and a misreading of the requirements of a full-blooded faith. The Stoic, like the Platonist and the modern Idealist, was aware of a general providence only, an impersonal world-reason lying unmoved and immovable behind the causally determined, all-inclusive totality. But the man of faith knows otherwise. He knows himself not as a cog in the chariot wheel of Zeus, and a prisoner in an impersonal system. We do not say 'Providence' by saying 'Fate' in unctuous tones. For the Christian, providence 'is only another name for the fact that God looks at me, and who never ceases to look at me, at the same time with His glance embraces the whole, and unites His will for me with His will for the world'.<sup>11</sup> A vague belief in a general purpose will give little comfort to the single individual. 'Religion', declares C. C. J. Webb, 'cannot remain content with a mere general Providence which cannot be verified in the individual. The saying that "the very hairs of your head are all numbered" expresses an essential characteristic of religious faith'.<sup>12</sup>

## II. 'A THEME WITH VARIATIONS'

Providence is, of course, 'a theme with variations': and anyone who would deal adequately with it in justification of his faith in a God-ordained and God-ordered universe has big questions on his hands. He must, for example, reconcile, if he can, his belief in God's all-inclusive providence with his feeling for man's autonomy. There is a danger of the discussion of this topic becoming a sort of theological parlour-game. But there is no reason why it should, if it is kept within the reality of living experience. It is tempting, to be sure, to accept the easy solution of a divine determinism. In this way one merely substitutes God for fate, in opposition to the popular doctrine which substitutes fate for God. No view of providence can be admitted which denies in any vital sense the absolute sovereignty of God or the relative freedom of man. No understanding of providence is true which conceives of it in a mechanical sort of way. God's providential control of the world does not cancel man's freedom. It is, in fact, this very autonomy which is necessary for man's moral responsibility. Here compulsion is out of the question. Sovereignty and predestination do not annul the freedom of man which makes him responsible *coram Deo*.

On the other hand, it must not be thought that God in any measure surrenders the destiny of the universe to His creatures. The truth is rather that His control is through means which take account of man's freedom. If we are not free then we are not responsible. But our nature affirms our freedom. At the same time a God who is not fully in control of His universe does not meet the demands of faith. Consequently, our nature assures our freedom, and our faith requires God's sovereignty. Both must remain. God has the power, to us mysterious, of guiding free beings from above their freedom without determining it. Above the field of

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<sup>10</sup> W. N. Clarke, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 1909, 194.

<sup>11</sup> E. Brunner, *op. cit.*, 157.

<sup>12</sup> C. C. J. Webb, *Problems in the Relations of God and Man*, 1911, 102.

human freedom God exercises a sovereignty in which there is no constraint. The freedom of man is accompanied by a higher sovereignty of God over spirits. God is greater than we think, and the mystery

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of providence is to be found in that greatness. We may be rightly suspicious, as George Santayana reminds us, of those who proclaim that they have the key of all reality in their pockets. Those little gnostics, those circumnavigators of being, need to be told that we do not believe them: God is great.<sup>13</sup> 'The gloria of God consists in the fact that He is so powerful in relation to the creature; that He asserts Himself so thoroughly'.<sup>14</sup>

Then there is the problem of a theodicy, the problem, that is, of reconciling the thought of the love and righteousness of God with the apparent contradictory mass of evidence of unjust suffering and tragedy. This 'shadow side' of creation, as Barth refers to it, cannot be rationalized away as by Leibniz with his 'this is the best of all conceivable worlds', or rhymed away as by Browning with his 'God's in His heaven, All's right with the world'. Theodicy, as the term implies, is a human endeavour to justify the ways of God to man. Maybe it is just here that it runs aground: man wants explanation where God seeks faith. This is not escapism, but a frank facing up to the impossibility, as Kant declared in 1791 in his *Über das Misslingen aller philosophischen Versuche in der Theodicee* (*On the Failure of all Philosophical Experiments in Theodicy*), of pleading God's case. After all, as Nathaniel Micklem has recently observed, 'Our imaginations are not strong enough to grasp the suffering of men, women and children through long ages past and even within our own lifetime through war, through cruelty, through disease, through hunger and through destruction, and when we are asked how we reconcile this tale of woe with the idea of God as Love, we have no answer except perhaps that what we do not know must somehow be consonant with what we know'.<sup>15</sup>

We are not offering these observations here as in any sense a solution of these major antinomies in the providence doctrine. They are obviously nothing of the sort. Against the background of what we have said so far, our purpose is to draw attention to the change of emphasis in the idea of the divine over-ruling and to seek for a statement of the foundation upon which a secure knowledge of God's sustaining and governing action in the world may be built.

### III. THE REFORMATION EMPHASIS

The Reformation theology has a strong doctrine of providence. For Luther the upholding and governing of God was a living experience. He knew himself to be 'spared, sustained and led' in a very special and spectacular way. True, Luther made no claim to be able to explain to all and sundry what belonged to the *Deus absconditus*: he had not eavesdropped on the Council Chamber of God.

Calvin speaks of providence as 'a most useful doctrine'.<sup>16</sup> He is emphatic that God over-rules all events not only in the world but also in the lives of every individual; in the perverse no less

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. George Santayana, *Introduction to Spinoza's Ethics*, (Everyman's Library, 1910), xxii.

<sup>14</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III, 3, 31.

<sup>15</sup> N. Micklem, 'Providence', in *Faith and Reason*, 1963, pp. 160-1.

<sup>16</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes*, (Tr. H. Beveridge), I, 174.

than in the elect. To use the words borrowed from Augustine, Calvin was sure that 'For the things which God rightly wills, he accomplishes by the evil wills of bad men' no less than by the good. Calvin states his assured faith that 'providence extends no less to the hand than the eye!', to which a footnote informs us that the French edition had added the epexegetical remark: 'C'est à dire, que non seulement il voit, mais aussi ordonne ce qu'il veut estre fait'—'that is to say, he not only sees, but ordains what he wills to be done'.

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Calvin, as Luther, does not profess to be able to make this deep doctrine easy to understand. Such a truth belongs to what he calls 'the secret counsel of God'. But the conclusion, he boldly affirmed, cannot be avoided, 'that God wills the sin he also punishes, the suffering he also deplores, and even the damnation from which he seeks to save us'.<sup>17</sup>

#### IV. BEFORE AND AFTER DARWIN

Calvin's doctrine was based squarely upon God's special revelation; it was, that is to say, essentially Biblical. But in the following period Protestantism cut loose from its Reformed origins and took its cue from the Enlightenment's confidence in human ability. As a consequence Natural Theology took a prior place and the idea of providence became based on cosmological observation and argument. This pre-Darwinian *adaptive* view of providence, reaching its climax in Paley's watch illustration, was virtually deistic. God worked by a sort of remote control only 'interfering' now and again in the distant past by what were called 'miracles' to prove His presence.

This adaptive view received its blow from the biological theory of Darwin who assured his generation that there was no need to appeal to a God outside the natural order to explain the origin and presence of existing organisms.

Darwin initiated the nineteenth century craze for evolution. And it was in this context that the providence doctrine was reinterpreted. A new twist was given to the teleological argument: if the universe was not constructed according to a divine purpose in the beginning, was it not clearly moving towards a certain goal? God was thus identified with the vital force in history, and providence was interpreted as the moving process of evolution and the kingdom of God was read in terms of social progress. This post-Darwinian *progressive* view of providence was essentially optimistic; confidence in unhindered progress was unbounded.

Whereas the pre-Darwin adaptive view was based ultimately upon the idea of God's omnipotence, the post-Darwinian progressive view was wedded to an exclusive emphasis upon the love of God. God was humanized to fit the picture. He was presented as a Deity incapable of wrath (*à la* Schleiermacher, Ritschl, Herrmann). Thus developed what has been called the notion of 'genial providence'. But in the end the concept 'of a genial Providence is only a transfigured remnant of the doctrine of universal Providence'.<sup>18</sup>

During the period of 'genial providence' the problem of evil virtually did not exist for those who lived cosy lives in their country mansions attended by their servants, who followed them

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<sup>17</sup> Langdon B. Gilkey, *op. cit.*, 178. Cf. H. Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, 1951, 375.

<sup>18</sup> G. C. Berkouwer, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

to Church on Sunday—mornings only, of course; evening dinner was so essential—to sing lustily,

‘The rich man in his castle,  
The poor man at his gate,  
God made them high or lowly,  
And ordered their estate.’

It was for them, no doubt, a comforting thought. But it made nonsense of Biblical faith: for to be content with such things as we have is not the same as being content with things as they are.

The attitude to encountered evil was gay and buoyant. Evil was there, like

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rugger and cricket, to train the gentleman. In the spirit of a true sportsman even in this conflict he will be expected to play the game. Above all he must not be caught! Gilkey, in the article referred to above, has drawn attention to F. R. Tennant’s confident assurance about the presence of evil. It was regarded as necessary to moral health as a cold bath or vigorous exercise was to the bodily health of the Edwardian gentleman.<sup>19</sup>

## V. THE MODERN ATTITUDE

All this buoyancy was soon to be blighted. It held as long as the progress of social evolution pointed towards the goal of an inevitable utopia. It was as the moral dykes of history burst from the tragedy of two world wars that it appeared that both God and man were drowning. The notion of unhindered progress and the hoped for ultimate of the universal brotherhood of man under the Fatherhood of God was thus brought to collapse. The ‘intemperate optimism’ as John Baillie designates it, of that earlier period with its ‘Utopian illusions about the promise of the future’ is ‘now taking its revenge upon us’.<sup>20</sup>

The upsurge of incredible and incalculable evil has made a mock of that earlier gentlemanly optimism. In its place have come despair, chaos and nihilism. Certain modern poets have vied with certain modern philosophers in proclaiming the ‘tragedy’, the ‘nothingness’, the ‘meaninglessness’ and the ‘absurdity’ of life. Among the latter the non-theistic existentialists have been foremost in emphasizing the emptiness of existence. Sartre, for example, assures his audiences that ‘There’s no argument; I tell you, God is dead’. One after another his character-heroes, Mathieu and Oreste, for example, move within a philosophic framework of unrelieved chaos.<sup>21</sup> Gabriel Jaspers likewise, expressing the same tragic grimness, blames the poets of Christianity for failing to make acceptable the devastating ultimacy of the absurd. They have included it ‘within the plan of Providence and the operations of Grace’ and in this way have sought to immunize men from ‘the vast nothingness and self-destruction in the

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<sup>19</sup> Langdon B. Gilkey, *op. cit.*, 175, cf. F. R. Tennant, *Philosophical Theology*, II, 190-7.

<sup>20</sup> John Baillie, ‘Hope and Disenchantment’ in *A Reasoned Faith*, 1963, 24-5.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. ‘In the view of Sartre and, by Sartre’s account, of Heidegger, it is the very denial of God’s existence, not the search for him, that makes the inner odyssey of the self seeking the self philosophy’s primary concern... there is no single concept of humanity, because there is no God. For the concept of a human nature, Sartre believes, was a by-product of the traditional idea of God the maker; and so, when God dies, the notion of an essence of humanity dies with him...’ Mariorie Grene, *Dreadful Freedom*, 1948, 41-2.

world'.<sup>22</sup> And angry young men have joined the chorus and hosts of modern youth are living out the message. We are to accept as final fact that life has no significance and history no purpose. In such a situation the idea of providence has come to be quite meaningless. Man, as Christopher Fry contends, provides his own providence. He must adjust himself to his fate and with grim heroics accept the ultimacy of death; for as Emmanuel Mounier interprets the position, 'Human existence is being-for-the-purpose of dying'.<sup>23</sup> Above all, man must rid himself of the 'beautiful illusion', since assured by Freud, that there is no God, Creator of the world, a kind Providence, a moral order, and a life hereafter.<sup>24</sup> In this way the sobering reality of providence has been banished from modern life.

The interesting question which arises at this point concerns the way providence doctrine has been accounted for by contemporary theological thought against this background.

## VI. THE DEISTIC-ARMINIAN FORMULA

There are those who have advocated what may be precisely termed a deistic-Arminian apologetic, so as to relieve the tension which the acceptance of God's

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all-inclusive causality creates in the modern mind. The purpose here is to allow a certain amount of loose play within world events and human life. Those who take this line consider themselves to be doing justice to the present feeling for science on the one hand, and the present awareness of moral failure on the other.

The scientific climate of today has focused for everyman the concept of natural events. It is characteristic of our thinking to give to these natural events the credit for catastrophic happenings in the world order. The success of the empirical sciences has been such that the impression has become general that the universe is to be conceived as a great interlocking system of cause effect relationships. It is enough to find for any natural event its preceding cause. There is no other reason outside this to account for it. Thus, what was once referred to 'God' is, for the modern, referred to 'Nature'. And within nature the complete explanation must be sought. Material upheavals in the natural order, which were in other days brought believingly under the 'will of God', are now traced to a convergence of causes within the system of things.

With this understanding of the situation some contemporary writers on the position of God in relation to natural events have come to terms. They are happy to leave particular events to the action of natural causes. Yet God, they urge, must be regarded as having responsibility for the general order of affairs. This exposition of the providence concept is advocated to exempt God from direct responsibility for what has been usually called 'natural evils', such as, for example, the earthquake in Skopje and the dam burst in Vaiont. Ultimately, however, it is a lame and listless presentation of the idea of the divine overruling. God is too remote to be real. It is a deistic view which may suit the scientific mind but which fails altogether to meet the deeper need of the religious spirit. It is as well to remember, as Kant observes, that 'The

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<sup>22</sup> Gabriel Jaspers, *Tragedy is Not Enough*, 1953, 82-3.

<sup>23</sup> Emmanuel Mounier, *Existential Philosophies*, 1951, 39.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. S. Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, (E.T., 1934) ch. VI. Cf. 58.

Deist believes in God, the Theist in the living God'.<sup>25</sup> To be the living, God must surely be active; and to be so in relation with His creation. It must consequently be stressed that 'Nature does not stand between us and God like a "foreign body"'.<sup>26</sup>

Some philosophers of religion have sought to meet the situation by making God, if not quite as remote, yet even more helpless. E. S. Brightman, for example, impressed by 'the purposeless, the dysteleological, in short, surd evil' of the cosmic process, falls back upon the Platonic notion of a Divine Being not to be held responsible for such 'waste and futility'.<sup>27</sup> Like Plato, Brightman conceives of God as the author of the good only<sup>28</sup> and declares that the hypothesis which these facts force on us is that of a finite God.<sup>29</sup>

It is futile to try to minimize the reality of those happenings in the natural order, of which Brightman is so sensitive. They are there, grim and terrible,<sup>30</sup> and they cannot be eliminated from the scene by the astutest reasoning. On the other hand, the hypothesis of a finite God does not meet faith's demand: there would be here no certainty and no confidence for the believing man. 'The Biblical writers were fully aware of the presence of evil in the world, yet they confidently affirmed that the heart will know full satisfaction only when it trusts in a God who has a sovereign right to do things which appear to be contrary to human well-being'.<sup>31</sup>

'No age,' says Martin Heidegger in a section of his book, *Kant and the*

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*Problem of Metaphysics*, 'has known so much and so many things about man... And no age has known less than ours what man is'. It is certainly true that the anthropological issue has for some time been a major one in much recent discussion. Freudianism, Existentialism and Humanitarianism, among a number of other causes, have served to bring man into the centre of the picture. Philosophy, sociology and psychology generally have each in its own way been preoccupied with human nature.

Yet while man remains as much as ever *homo absconditus*, the common emphasis seems to be that he is to be understood as a free being. The 'freedom of man' has in fact become a sort of catch-phrase. Unique stress has been placed upon the notion of man as an 'autonomous', and 'creative being'. He is consequently such a creature as can 'make himself', 'discover himself', gain 'authentic being' and the like. He is his own cause, reason and source of action.

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<sup>25</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason* (Everyman's edition, 1934) 368.

<sup>26</sup> E. Brunner, *op. cit.*, 152.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. E. S. Brightman, *A Philosophy of Religion*, n.d., 139, 140.

<sup>28</sup> Cf., e.g. 'And being free from 'jealousy' he (God) desires that all things should be as like himself as they could be. This is in the truest sense the origin of creation and of the world... God desires that all should be good and nothing bad...' *Timaeus*, 30a. 'God, if he be good, is not the author of all things, as many assert, but he is the cause of a few things only, and not of most things that occur to men. For few are the goods of human life, and many are the evils, and the good is to be attributed to God alone; of the evils the causes are to be sought elsewhere, and not in him... God is not the author of all things, but the good only', *Republic*, 379c-380b.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Brightman, *op. cit.*, 156.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. 'Evil will not be gainsaid, argued away, made out to be something other than it is. Evil is evil, a standing contradiction to any thoroughgoing optimistic view of the world and life', F. W. Camfield, *The Collapse of Doubt*, 1945, 39.

<sup>31</sup> E. J. Carnell, *A Philosophy of the Christian Religion*, 1954, 303.



The idea of the ultimate autonomy of man has been given particular acknowledgment in some contemporary religious writings. The purpose is to stress man's freedom as the cause of his own failing. Since man is essentially free, God in no sense directly willed his sin. The idea of man's freedom was given special stress by Nicholas Berdyaev who sought in this category the key to the riddle of man's nature.<sup>32</sup>

Brunner, too, denying the scholastic distinction between God as *causa prima* and natural causes as *causae secundae* as valueless and doubtful, goes on to cast doubt upon the application of the causal idea to God at all. There is, he argues, no such relation between the Creator and the creation, and more especially between God and human freedom.<sup>33</sup> It is evidently Brunner's purpose to remove God from any implication in the sin of man. He thinks that the notion of a pan-causalism distorts reality and he consequently denies what he calls a 'determinism from above', a causal action of God which, he thinks, makes human freedom an illusion. He can still say, however, that 'All that is, and all that happens, takes place within the knowledge and will of God ...Everything that happens has its final ground in God'.<sup>34</sup> Brunner does not tell us how man's freedom to sin is to be brought into harmony with this statement.

Zwingli, it is well known, took the idea of the divine causality to an extreme conclusion and argued that man's crimes are 'caused, moved and urged' by God. Yet since man commits the acts he alone is responsible.<sup>35</sup>

Brunner thinks that Calvin, although maintaining man's responsibility, has really denied his freedom and consequently ascribes to God the origin of evil.<sup>36</sup> Brunner, like Berdyaev and others, see God's active will as somehow standing apart from the human freedom to sin. In this way they have introduced an Arminian strain into contemporary statements of the providence doctrine.

This note is, however, even more pronounced in the defence of some religious philosophers. C. A. Campbell, for example, stresses man's autonomy to such an extent as to render him the sole cause, not only of his own sin, but no less of his own moral and spiritual choices.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Berdyaev contends that a divinely bestowed freedom, as taught by 'traditional theology' in no way saves the Creator from responsibility for pain and evil', *The Destiny of Man*, 1937, 24. Man has his origin in an abyss of mystery: he comes with a freedom not bestowed of God but which has its source in something eternal. Berdyaev writes of 'primeval uncreated meonic freedom'. 'The element of freedom does not come from God the Father, for it is prior to being. The tragedy of God is the tragedy of freedom: God the Creator has power over being, but not over freedom. Fathomless freedom springing from non-being entered the world, consenting to the act of creation. God the Creator has done everything to bring light into that freedom, in harmony with His great conception of creation. But without destroying freedom He could not conquer the potency of evil contained in it. This is why there is tragedy and evil in the world; all tragedy is connected with freedom', *op. cit.*, 29, 30. The ultimate basis of all, Berdyaev teaches, is a mystery which merges into the last mystery of the Divine Nothing. Parallels to this extra-ordinary teaching are to be found in Eckhart and Boehme. Before his death, it is of interest to learn, Berdyaev had commenced a volume designed to deal with 'his deepest inspiration, the mysticism of Jacob Boehme'. See H. L. Martensen, *Studies in the Life and Teaching of Jacob Boehme*, with Notes and Appendices by Stephen Hobhouse, Part ii, Chapter iv, Appendix, 1949, 92 f.

<sup>33</sup> E. Brunner, *op. cit.*, 133, cf. I, 321 f.

<sup>34</sup> *Op. cit.*, 155.

<sup>35</sup> Zwingli, *De Providentia*, ch. 2. Cf. Brunner, *op. cit.*, 171.

<sup>36</sup> Brunner, *op. cit.*, 172.

<sup>37</sup> C. A. Campbell, *On Selfhood and Godhood*, 1957, c. ix and xiii. Cf. his *In Defence of Free Will*, An Inaugural Lecture, 1938. See *A Modern Introduction to Ethics*, ed. Milton K. Munitz, 1958, 375 f.; *Readings in Ethical Theory*, ed. W. Sellars and J. Hospers, 1952, 631 f. Campbell denies that there is any bias to sin in human nature

The result of all this is that the idea of providence has become restricted to an area outside natural causes and man's freedom. Thus has the doctrine lost something of its strength and solace. But God's rule must be taken seriously as at once *over* all nature and *in* it; and over man's sin and *in* it.

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## VII. THE FIDEISTIC-REVELATORY FORMULA

It is characteristic of much recent theological thinking to show a distrust of the adequacy of reason in the things of faith. This has arisen partly out of a reaction from man's failure during the era of optimism to lay the foundations for the earthly paradise. Man's goodness has been falsified by the facts. As a result, the subsequent period of pessimism has pronounced man as hopeless and helpless in the realm of the moral and spiritual. History itself has come to be regarded as the tragic catalogue of man's iniquity and as a telling commentary on man's injustice.

The consequent tendency has been virtually to abandon history to the devil. No longer is it in any believable sense God's world, with 'All things bright and beautiful'. It is really sin's domain. 'God is not in the world', says Berdyaev. 'There is nothing of God in the dull and prosaic normality of the objective world'. It is thus no surprise to find him urging that the traditional doctrines of providence are 'dreadfully strained and artificial', and to charge that they are 'the chief hindrances to belief in God'.

Such an idea of man and history has two results. On the one hand, it is to set what is called "salvation history" over against this human and demonic history as the scene of God's activity. On the other hand, it is to restrict the knowledge of God to the knowing of God. Barth puts this second point sharply: 'The knowability of God can be known only in the real knowledge of God'.<sup>38</sup> God is known in the revelation of faith; in a faith which is itself 'created out of nothing' and a revelation coming 'perpendicularly from above'.

With this goes the outright repudiation, in Barth's case, of a natural theology, which he defines as 'the doctrine of a union of a man with God existing outside salvation'.<sup>39</sup> Barth regards natural theology as 'a game played with the natural man with a view of leading him beyond this preliminary step and placing before him the actual itself'.<sup>40</sup> But he does not relish the 'game'. It is, he asserts, simply the naturalness of natural theology which commends itself to the natural man.

The outcome of these general ideas, aspects of which are more pronounced in some writers than others—for example, the elimination of God from history by Berdyaev and the repudiation of the *theologia naturalis* by Barth—was to give stress to the idea of 'existential encounter'. Saving knowledge is the same as revelatory knowledge since it is in the personal encounter of faith that God is known; and known only in this way.

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and traces all to the free act of willing, cf. *On Selfhood and Godhood*, 272 f. The same general view is evident in the writings of J. H. Paton, and H. D. Lewis.

<sup>38</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II, 1, 65.

<sup>39</sup> *Op cit.*, 168.

<sup>40</sup> *Op. cit.*, 88.

In the light of this understanding of human history as demonic and natural theology as repugnant, how is the doctrine of providence to be understood?

Broadly speaking, it yields the conception of providence as eschatologico-soteriological. By rejecting propositional knowledge of God much has been made of the concept of *Deus actus*. These acts of God as acts of salvation are referred to as *Heilsgeschichte*. The consequence is that God's relation to the actual world has been eschatologically conceived. The Christian view of providence, asserts Brunner, is wholly teleological, related to the End and determined by the End.<sup>41</sup>

It is evident that this eschatological conception is a reaction from the earlier evolutionary one, and while it has much more justification, it is still inadequate. It puts God out of touch with the 'dull and prosaic normality of the objective

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world'. It is one thing to allow that God's acts are to be read in terms of salvation history, but it is another to divorce the everyday world therefrom and to land up in a sort of dualism. Salvation history, let it be granted, may be the *arena* of God's activity, but it is not its *area*.

By stressing the fideistic-revelatory formula, some have identified providence, in this context, with salvation: it is being urged that only as providence is 'faith-centred' is it really Christian. Here is an emphasis common to Aulén, Berdyaev, Brunner and Barth. Brunner states that 'it is only from the standpoint of Election that we can think of Providence at all'.<sup>42</sup> Barth is even more emphatic. Having rejected an 'earthly fore-court theology or a Christian world-and-life view', Barth contends that 'Providence is nothing other than God's free grace, and God's free grace in Christ is Providence'. This statement made in 1948 in an exposition of the Heidelberg Catechism is the burden of his exposition in his *Church Dogmatics*<sup>43</sup>. The conviction that an idea of providence can be gained through nature or history is sternly repudiated.<sup>44</sup> Even Calvin is blamed for compromising with natural theology.<sup>45</sup> Such a fideistic-soteriological account prohibits any objective speculation. 'It is to be noted further', observes Barth, 'that in the knowledge of God's providence by faith there can never be any question of speculation or theory'.<sup>46</sup>

There is doubtless much in this statement which makes an inevitable appeal to the Christian spirit. But there are difficulties. We need not pursue here the question which immediately arises concerning the place of reason in a religious epistemology. Barth would exclude it *in toto* to leave us with the impression that the genuineness of our faith is the measure of its

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<sup>41</sup> E. Brunner, *op. cit.*, 157. Cf. 'For one who lives in the knowledge and certainty of the Providence of God... knows that he is preserved for redemption; he knows no other meaning of his existence than this, which is the whole meaning and the final meaning, *the Telos*, not a *Telos*', 159.

<sup>42</sup> E. Brunner, *ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Karl Barth, *op. cit.*, III, 3, 5 f., 14 f.

<sup>44</sup> *Op. cit.*, 22 f.

<sup>45</sup> *Op. cit.*, 30 f. Cf. 'What could have been more obvious, one might have thought, than to equate this ruling hand of God with the One who according to the witness of the New Testament has His place at this right hand?' (Barth is commenting on Ps. cxviii; 16; cxxxix; 10, etc.). 'Why', he then adds, 'did not Calvin and others work out that insight that the hands and feet of God, like His heart, are revealed in Christ and Him alone?', 35.

<sup>46</sup> *Op. cit.*, 24. Cf. E. Brunner, *op. cit.*, 157.

absurdity.<sup>47</sup> He would have us believe that which is essentially unreasonable: but somehow we just can't.

Then there is the natural theology issue. The modern reaction from the excessive place accorded to it in an earlier period is understandable. It is indeed a healthy and needed emphasis.

For Barth, Anselm is hailed as the high priest of the *theologia revelata* with its principle of *analogia fidei* in contrast with Aquinas the patron saint of the *theologia naturalis* and its key category of *analogia entis*. He sees in the *fides quaerens intellectum* of the Doctor Magnificus an outlook akin to his own.<sup>48</sup> Whether Barth is correct in setting the Doctor Magnificus, as the champion of faith, over against Aquinas the Doctor Angelicus as the protagonist of reason, is an issue which does not concern us here.<sup>49</sup> But it is germane to our subject to observe that by restricting the method of God's providence there must follow the reduction of the area of God's providence. To be accurate, it should be pointed out that Barth does assert an idea of providence extending to 'those outside the covenant', but this cannot apparently be known to such; even the slightest glimmer is hidden. Gustaf Wingren pronounces Barth's thesis 'unbiblical', and contends that although Barth uses Biblical language his system is totally foreign to the Bible. His main error, according to Wingren, is that 'He has removed the law as a power that rules over man even before the preaching of the gospel appears'.<sup>50</sup> John Baillie confesses that on reading Barth's works 'what struck me at once as unfamiliar was his insistence that mankind had no *knowledge* of God save in Jesus Christ'.<sup>51</sup>

The main difficulty, however, in the fideistic-revelatory category is that it

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seems to limit God's relation to the inward response of faith. But God's over ruling is actual outside His particular acts of revelation. His saving activity takes place in the real spatio-temporal world; indeed the spiritual and physical are not 'severed as by an axe'. God is both Creator as well as Redeemer; and because He is the first He is responsible for His world and since He is the second He is able to act redemptively in His own realm. If the world order were in the last analysis hostile to His actions, it would be an end of all certainty for faith. It is

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<sup>47</sup> Barth has stated that he can no longer be reckoned among the Existentialists, but in this respect, at any rate, he is a consistent Kierkegaardian; cf. 'For the absurd is the object of faith, and the only object that can be believed' S. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 189. The idea is virtually a refrain in Kierkegaard's works. Note the following comment by Mariorie Grene, 'If a thinker without paradox is an inconsiderate fellow, the thinker who loves the absurd for its own sake is, in his own way, a questionable character, for he may easily turn out as much falsity as truth or as much nonsense as sense', *Dreadful Freedom*, 37. Niebuhr thinks that Kierkegaard went too far in his notion of 'an absolute absurdity', cf. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Human Destiny*, 38 n.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. 'I believe I have learned the fundamental attitude to the knowledge and existence of God... at the feet of Anselm of Canterbury', *Church Dogmatics*, II, 1, 4. 'We will not find any passage in Anselm', he declares elsewhere, 'where he worked out the "proof", that is the argument directed outwards with the unbeliever in view, as an action that is different from the searchings that take faith itself as starting-point or where another special 'apologetic' action would follow on the "dogmatic" or where such action come first analogically or apagogically'. *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum*, (E.T. 1960), 67.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. art. 'Faith and Reason: Anselm and Aquinas', E. L. Mascall, *JTS*, xiv, Part 1, April 1963, 67-90. 'And Dr. Karl Barth has made a heroic-and in my view a heroically perverse-attempt to show that Anselm was really a Barthian before his time' (68).

<sup>50</sup> Gustaf Wingren, *Theology in Conflict*, (E.T. 1958), 159.

<sup>51</sup> John Baillie, *The Secret of the Presence of God*, 1961, 225.

only a God who is sovereign in the universal whole who can institute a salvation having mundane repercussions within the sphere of world history. God is not sovereign within the terms of grace-faith relation only. 'If we are to avoid this fatal "spiritualizing" or "interiorizing" of Christianity, which relinquishes not only the whole external world of nature and history but also, in effect, the first two persons of the Trinity in favour of the third alone, we must, it seems to me, be able to make theological statements about God as the providential lord of objective natural and historical events, even if this means an overhauling of our existentialist epistemology'.<sup>52</sup>

The problem of how the knowledge of divine providence comes remains, therefore, a matter of vital moment. Is it cosmologically or soteriologically based? Is it discoverable from the contemplation of nature or the analysis of experience? Put historically, the issue is whether providence is to be regarded as a 'mixed article' or as a 'pure article' of faith. According to Thomism, old and new, providence is one of the 'mixed articles' because it is a truth discoverable within general revelation. Knowledge of providence is a conclusion open to men in general as they behold 'the glorious harmony of the cosmic totality'. The purposive character of the universal order reveals an over-arching design. This understanding of providence, characteristic of the Church of Rome, is pronounced abstract, theoretical and, indeed, pagan by many Protestant writers.<sup>53</sup>

It is the opinion of these writers that such a conception of providence, virtually identical with the Stoic doctrine of Fate, has no place in the authentic Christian message. Here, belief in providence derives from the experience of forgiving grace. 'In the cross,' declares Bavinek, the Christian believer 'has seen the Special Providence of God. He has, in forgiving and regenerating grace, experienced Providence in his heart'.<sup>54</sup> In this sense it is a 'pure article' of Christian doctrine.

The emphasis on experience as the ground of faith in providence has been sharply stated by some writers. H. H. Farmer, for example, puts the main stress here and contends that belief in providence derives from the living experience of the religious man. He has an unquenchable awareness of a divine purpose shaping his destiny and bringing him within the responsive awareness of the love of God.<sup>55</sup> Wendland, to whom Farmer would appear to be indebted for some of his account, maintains emphatically that faith in providence starts with the experience of personal guilt and Divine grace within the individual's own life. 'Christian faith in providence becomes a reality only for one who has experienced the redemptive love of God as directed to him personally. It becomes clear to him, as he looks back over the past, that the seeking love of God is traceable in all the complex circumstances of his life. Faith is certain that as in the past, so too in the future this holy Divine love will surround us'.<sup>56</sup> Without this experience of faith, without fellowship with God by prayer and thanks-

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giving, belief in providence is simply unattainable, he states. Wendland speaks of belief in providence as 'a believing certainty which must be always gained anew by means of ceaseless

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<sup>52</sup> Langdon B. Gilkey, *op. cit.*, 185.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. G. C. Berkouwer, *op. cit.*, Ch. 2; H. Bavinek, *The Doctrine of God*, 1951, 41-80, 373 f.

<sup>54</sup> H. Bavinek, quoted by Berkouwer, *op. cit.*, 45.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. H. H. Farmer, *The World and God*, 1935, 101.

<sup>56</sup> J. Wendland, *Miracles and Christianity*, (Tr. H. R. Mackintosh, 1910), 164, 165.

inward labour and active obedience to Divine Tasks, and in full view of all our bright and dark experiences'.<sup>57</sup>

The implications of this stress needs more elaboration than we can give here. But reference must be made to an obvious corollary to this way of understanding how the knowledge of providence arises. It will be clear at once that the one who reads in his own experience the undoubted evidence of God's over ruling, will not regard himself as having a monopoly of the Divine regard. He will not find it hard to believe that others who, like himself, have been brought into the kingdom of God are also subjects of the same sovereign superintendency.

But surely the man whose experience has made vital for him the reality of providence will not stop there. He will not regard, as Leibe did, those who have been apprehended by the grace of God, the elect, as alone the objects of God's concern. God, after all, is not limited in His sovereignty. And it is out of his own assurance of the divine arranging that the believing man will conceive of God's providence as having within its scope those who have never sought His grace and even those who resolutely refuse it. His rain falls upon the evil as well as the good. While to those who have come to faith in His government, God's presence will be more intimately real; to all, including those who are alienated still, His power and purpose are certainly actively real.

Yet it must be added that God's providential control takes into account in a special way the unity of the race. While from one point of view this idea of race solidarity has a dark and forbidding aspect, from another point of view, it has been the means of untold blessing. 'Racial unity and solidarity are vitally connected with the spiritual leadership of Christ. The benefits of his mediatorial work flow out to men because he is one with mankind'.<sup>58</sup> and, it may be added, to many who neither know nor care about them.

The man who has a living faith in the providence of God cannot but be aware that it is in the present world that the providential action of God takes place. He sees no good reason for restricting it to an *eschaton*. He will be assured that the cosmic totality is under the authority of God. 'Unless we are to abandon the conception of Providence altogether', declares C. S. Lewis, 'and with it the belief in efficacious prayer, it follows that all events are equally providential. If God directs the course of events at all then he directs the movements of every atom at every moment; "not a sparrow falls to the ground" without that direction. The "naturalness" of natural events does not consist of somehow being outside God's providence'.<sup>59</sup>

## VIII. FAITH IN PROVIDENCE AND A RESTATEMENT OF THE MORAL ARGUMENT

It is out of his redeemed experience, which has thus assured him of God's providence, that the religious man can bring faith to an understanding of itself by giving content and significance to the moral argument for the existence of God. The believing man sees his life as having religious and ethical meaning. Facts for him have their interpretation as values. But these valuations relate, on the one hand, to God, and, on the other hand, to the world.

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<sup>57</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> E. Y. Mullins, *The Christian Religion in its Doctrinal Expression*, 1917, 269.

<sup>59</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Miracles*, 1947, 208, 209.

The existence of value, as, for example, that there are some things worth while, that life has a meaning, that there are good and evil, are assurances of living faith. The awakened religious consciousness is aware that there is required an Ethical and Spiritual Reality, wherein man's ethical and spiritual nature can find fulfilment. Nothing in the 'here' and 'now' ultimately satisfies the need of the ethically and spiritually awake soul. Thus, to find an adequate 'Something', man has to go beyond the present world.

Yet since man's ethical and religious life find that satisfaction in the 'here' and 'now', then there is needed a God who can meet not only the demands of the religious consciousness, but who can order and maintain the world in which man's religious nature finds scope and expression. If the world were in its final issue hostile to the ethical and religious life, then there would be no guarantee of fulfilment for that life. Because, then, the ethical and religious life works itself out in the sphere of the material and the temporal it is essential to faith to be assured of a Moral Being who causes the material and the temporal to be a fit sphere wherein that outworking takes place.

Man lives in a natural order and upon its regularities his very life depends. And because this is so, even the religious man is not exempt from those physical contingencies which are 'natural' to that order. Providence, that is, does not work against that order for the protection of the good man and the destruction of the bad. But the natural order provides the sphere within which the moral life can be developed and trained.

That the idea of providence when raised into the cold atmosphere of reflective thought, as Farmer shows, is involved in difficulties is sure.<sup>60</sup> Yet it remains the unshakable conviction of the believing man that all things do work together for his good. Even in the most bewildering happenings he is certain that there somehow is the hand of God. In the most tangled events of his life he still holds to the faith that seeming evil works for his good. He is convinced that what he calls the chances and changes of everyday experiences have their place in God's providential scheme.<sup>61</sup> Physical things no less than spiritual; happenings which are felt to be accidental as well as events which are seen to be diabolical, are not outside God's control, but are one and all used for us men and our salvation.<sup>62</sup>

Such a faith, it is insisted, based on man's own experience 'remains, and must ever remain, the affirmation of a mystery, so far as the manner of its working out in and through the infinite complexity of events in this universe is concerned. It is an affirmation of faith and not of sight; it arises primarily out of the deep insights and necessities of the soul of the man as God calls it into awareness of Himself and its own significance, and not from any observation of the general course of external events'.<sup>63</sup>

This fideistic-revelatory basis for the providence doctrine, whether interpreted in terms of encounter or experience, has a very strong appeal. And despite the protestations of Barth and

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<sup>60</sup> Cf. 'It is when the intenser mood of religious awareness gives way to reflection that the sense of paradox, even of downright contradiction, arises', H. H. Farmer, *op. cit.*, 101.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. J. Wendland, *op. cit.*, 182; John Baillie, *The Sense of the Presence of God*, 226.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. Langdon B. Gilkey, *Maker of Heaven and Earth*, 1959, ch. vi. Cf. '...from nature, or the natural man, you can only get a God who repeats on a vaster scale those anomalies of experience from which a God should deliver us. We only get a natural God of preternatural scale. We cannot get a spiritual God, a God of Grace, from a natural world', P. T. Forsyth, *The Principle of Authority*, (second edition, 1952), 358.

<sup>63</sup> H. H. Farmer, *op. cit.*, 100.

his followers, it does allow for very definite propositions rightly to be drawn from it. There is, however, a most obvious danger in placing the total emphasis on the personal and the inward: it is to equate theology with epistemology by making the area of doctrine to be at one with the reality of the encounter or the measure of the experience.

But it is not possible to locate man's experience of God in the bare structure

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of the I-Thou relationship, nor is there such a thing as a 'naked' or 'unmediated' experience. The faith-encounter or faith-experience, whichever term is preferred, cannot be a mere inner feeling.<sup>64</sup> There must be an encounter with God, or an experience of God. But the God known in faith—this is the very essence of Christianity—is known in Christ alone. The Christ so known, however, is not the historical Jesus merely, or the supra-historical Christ only:<sup>65</sup> it is the Biblical Christ, the Christ who needs the whole Bible for His explanation and interpretation.<sup>66</sup> It is therefore in the context of a documented revelation that a full faith in providence must be mediated and a full providence doctrine authenticated. 'The Christian doctrine of providence is Christian not general', Barth asserts.<sup>67</sup> To be that it cannot be read in the terms of Christian encounter or experience alone. It is the documented revelation which attests that God could come redemptively into human experience because He has done saving acts of grace in history. Experience, on the other hand, assures that since God has come redemptively within our own lives, He could do saving acts within history. In this way the documented revelation communicates to experience and is, in its turn, confirmed by experience.

It is clearly not possible, however, to restrict the Christian doctrine of providence to those aspects of it which can become verified and vivified within individual experience. There are most certainly many phases of the Biblical account of God's over-ruling which lie outside such a possibility. No Christian experience, for example, can attest either the ἀρχή or the τέλος of God's actions in the world: and there are, too, other items of God's providence in history and nature which cannot come within the range of a personal experience. Here the Christian believer can only accept the account of God's dealings which has come to him. Consequently, what the Christian knows of God's providence in the experience of faith, is not the full measure of faith's knowledge.<sup>68</sup> Faith's subjectivity has indeed its assurance and its certainty in faith's objectivity. Yet while Christian faith in providence surely begins in experience, it is not thereby limited to the mere analysis of experience.

'We do not stand on the fact of our experience', declares P. T. Forsyth, 'but on the fact which we experience'.<sup>69</sup> And the fact which we experience is the 'Fact of Christ'. It must, indeed, be

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<sup>64</sup> 'What is meant by Religious Experience?', H. D. McDonald, *Vox Evangelica* II, 1963, 58-69 [[http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/vox/vol02/experience\\_mcdonald.pdf](http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/vox/vol02/experience_mcdonald.pdf)].

<sup>65</sup> Cf. '...while the Ritschlians saw Christian faith as the spiritual apprehension of the historical Jesus—a Jesus of history, the Barthians see Christian faith as man's being apprehended by a super-historical Being, the Christ of faith—a Christ apart from history. But neither view appears to us to be correct without the other', H. D. McDonald, *loc. cit.*, 63.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. H. D. McDonald, *Ideas of Revelation*, 1959, ch. x; *Theories of Revelation*, 1963, ch. ix.

<sup>67</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III, 3, 33.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. 'We but focus, reflect, and prolong, even in our most vivid experience, the vaster faith of the great Church', P. T. Forsyth, *The Principle of Authority*, (second edition, 1952), 326.

<sup>69</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *op. cit.*, 178.



urged that even the Apostles in their declaration and preservation of the Christ-fact were not merely calling attention to their own experience. They were not simply reporting what God had done for their soul. They were not giving a statement of their own spiritual discoveries as 'eminent Christians': they were messengers of a given Word. They were the chosen interpreters of God's act in Christ, and as such they ensure an authentic and authoritative revelation through which following generations may come into living contact with the same saving act of God in Christ and there may find a secure faith in the divine overruling of God in history. The Apostolic preservers of the Christian message were not men of genius whose sharp insight made them aware that unless the account of the Christ-fact were not recorded it might evaporate into a vague theosophy or degenerate into a corrupted tradition. They were rather themselves the providentially elect stewards of the truth aspect of the revelation of God in Christ. Thus while it is true that the redemptive word comes to us only as experience, it cannot be that our understanding of all God's ways is limited to an interrogation of experience. We need indeed to

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be more certain of God than of our own immediate experience. 'Which is the way of the Spirit-subjective illumination with its shifting lights, or objective revelation in an ever-fresh and growing experience? Is it today's vagrant insight or yesterday's apostolic inspiration, good for to-day and for ever?'<sup>70</sup> If no organized Church, as Forsyth contends, can live without a normative Bible, a formative Gospel and a positive Word, no more can the individual believer. He needs these, not only as the cause of his experience, but also as the check upon his experience; not only for his illumination but no less for his instruction. This means, with reference to the issue with which we are concerned that, as a final fact, a total Christian doctrine of providence must be a thoroughly Biblical one.

This last remark needs special emphasis in view of the status accorded to theological statements by those who regard themselves as having come to terms with the claims of the modern linguistic empiricists. Theologians of this brand are urging that they are seeking to communicate the Christian understanding of things to those imbued with the present-day rejection of metaphysical abstraction for experiential analysis. They are anxious to break out of the restriction-to-revelation thesis of neo-orthodoxy which 'becomes too easily a closed circle, in which believer speaks only to believer, in which all human content is concealed'.<sup>71</sup> From a new angle, then, we are said to be forced back, for our theological understanding, to an actual analysis of our divine-human relationship. In view of the furore created recently by the *Honest To God* paperback of the Bishop of Woolwich, it may be worth while to point out that here we have, perhaps, its key principle, as well as the chief reason for its weakness. In a passage in the newer volume, *The Honest to God Debate*, Robinson has explained his fundamental viewpoint more clearly. 'Theological statements', he declares, 'are affirmations about the constraint of this love-both as grace and demanding which the Christian finds himself held. They are descriptions, analyses of the relationship in which he is encountered by reality at this level.'

'In the past Christians have tended to make statements which have appeared to characterize a Person in himself rather than a personal relationship. But what lies outside or beyond this relationship we can never say. And if pressed we must be modest and moderate our

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<sup>70</sup> *Op. cit.*, 241, 242.

<sup>71</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, art. 'God and the Theologians', in *Encounter*, 120, Sept. 1963, 7.

metaphysical claims'.<sup>72</sup> Robinson goes on to apply this principle to the idea of a Personal God and the doctrine of the Trinity. Certainly God is 'experienced' in a personal way and this is what theology analyses. So, too, with the Trinity: we 'experience' God as a tri-unity, since it is in the Spirit that, through the Son, we come to the Father. Robinson claims, however, that such a conception is not a model of the divine life as it is in itself. How he can be so sure of this he does not, of course, say. But he maintains that all the features in the Trinitarian formula are in the last analysis representations of elements in the existential relationship. He will not have it that the experience can be depicted adequately in terms of the relationship of three separate 'persons' in the modern sense. He contends that the words of the Catechism 'I believe in God the Father, who hath *made* me, and all the world... in God the Son, who hath *redeemed* me, and all mankind... and, in God the Holy Ghost, who *sanctifieth* me, and all the elect people of God' refer to functions and must not be made the basis for a distinction between persons. God, he concludes, is experienced in three modes of being.<sup>73</sup>

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So far so good. But is this all we can say? Does not a big question go begging for an answer? Is the *Deus revelatus* ultimately other than the *Deus absconditus*? We can hardly think it is so. In revelation, God is revealed; true not all that He is, but certainly not other than He is. The God for me cannot, in essence, be different from God within me.

Thus, too, it is with the doctrine of providence. The analysis of experience cannot be the last ground of faith. True, the reality of God's care and concern for me and over me must be a vital experience if belief in God's providence is to ring true at all. But the content for the experience, the sort of God of whom I have become gratefully aware, is assured only in His revelation. To that revelation, documented in Scripture, we are thus driven back. The God whose providence we have experienced must be the God whose saving action we read in the history of redemption. We cannot stop short for our account of providence at an analysis of experience or deductions from it. We must get behind experience to God; to God in His self-disclosure and in the conviction that it is Himself He unveils. We must certainly meet God in relationship, but the knowledge of the God who sustains and governs is not secure by a mere questioning of that relationship. God has spoken as well as acted: and what He does for us must be strengthened by what He has said to us.

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<sup>72</sup> *The Honest to God Debate*, John A. T. Robinson and David L. Edwards, 1963, 253.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. *Op. cit.*, 254-5.