

"NOT A SPARROW FALLS": ON PROVIDENCE AND RESPONSIBILITY IN HISTORY

To ask about the meaning of providence and historical responsibility in Christian understanding today is to enter a domain of mystery. On the one side, the experience of evil in the twentieth century is so profound that the simple saying of Jesus about God's intimate care for humans, "not a sparrow falls," seems almost naive. On the other side, the dominance of science and technology suggests a human community and a world quite on its own without need or opening for the care of God who, the saying implies, is involved in the world's smallest happening as in history's ultimate direction and goal.

There is a paradox in this sense of evil and of autonomy that is our burden today in questions of God's providence and our responsibility. For never have we been more conscious of the immense capacity that is ours. We have astonishing scientific and technological ability, to travel in space, to heal illness and prolong life, to feed the world, to create social, political and religious institutions, to reorder society according to inclusive and humane patterns. But we have also the ability to destroy, in our consuming greed, human lives and the human environment, to end the whole historical project. Hence our feeling of powerlessness, of entrapment in what we have made, the feeling that our agency is beyond our control, a new kind of fate.

How might the mystery of providence be understood today? Would something be missing in Christian experience without this symbol of God's hidden guidance, God's secret design for us and our world that constitutes a claim on our practice and on all we create?¹

A liberation theologian reports that providence is an abused concept in which God's will has been invoked to "justify colonial conquest, racism, the gross exploitation of the poor by the rich, and shameless abuses of political and even ecclesiastical power. . . ." While "colonial soldiers were taught to believe that they were agents of God in their conquest," the poor were taught a notion of passive religious acceptance.² How can these distortions be addressed, especially in relation to the comment of liberation thinkers that first world theology so often is oriented to the questions of the non-believer, questions of meaning, while theology in the third world is anguished by exploitation and suffering, the questions of the non-person?³ How can these two worlds of Christian reflection come together in

¹Paul Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Lewis S. Mudge (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 81, 85, 87, 93.

²Donal Dorr, *Spirituality and Justice* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984) 250.

³Gustavo Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1983) 92, 193; see Schubert M. Ogden, *The Point of Christology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982) 91.

our increasingly interdependent planet where we are so conscious of the masses of suffering poor, the presence of death and injustice, the demand for deeds and not just words? Where is God's guidance and what is responsibility in *this* history?

The following reflections attempt to respond to these difficult issues through 1) an interpretation of some of the history of the theology of providence, and 2) a sketch of some recent theological, biblical, and feminist views that offer images, concepts, and analogies for the divine that might illumine our understanding today. Finally, 3) I suggest two contrasting models according to which classical and contemporary thought about the mystery of providence, the link between divine and human activity in history, are shaped.

I. OUR HERITAGE

According to biblical testimony, God provides food for the animals (Job 38, Matt. 7), clothes the fields in beauty (Matt. 7), and is especially concerned with human persons as the very image and likeness of the divine (Gen. 1). Even though earth's inhabitants are like grasshoppers before God (Job 38), and we are made from dust (Gen. 2), God is nevertheless concerned for all life, and especially for people. It is for us that God controls the forces of nature, orders the seasons, "and governs the course of cosmic and historical events to an indescribably glorious consummation" (I Cor. 2:9; Rev. 18:22).⁴

In the theological tradition, St. Augustine could write, in the *Confessions*, that the hand of God was active in guiding the events of his particular life toward Christ and the church, just as *The City of God* shows God's direction of the church in the ambiguous course of the world's history. That guidance, however, was enmeshed in finite causes, either natural or human. For Augustine, God's sovereignty, decree, and providence absolutely control the actions of creatures and the events of history, and that control is exerted not only externally but also internally, from within finite action. The very human character of Augustine's and Monica's motives secretly played into the design of God in leading Augustine to Christ and the church. And God's intentions for the church were worked out in the tangled, often brutally destructive fabric of human history.⁵

Thomas Aquinas' analysis provided the pattern for much of the Catholic theology of providence down to the present. In fact, the whole of Aquinas' summary of theology can be understood as an exposition of God's providence in its *exitus-reditus* theme. For providence implied governance and God was seen as a monarch. In his treatise on the Divine Government, Thomas argues further that God acts both immediately in the world and also mediately, through finite causes. He shows how one action can be the result of both divine and human agency: "The one action does not issue from two agents on the same level; there is, however,

⁴Julian N. Hartt, "Creation and Providence," in *Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 143.

⁵St. Augustine, *Confessions*, book 5, ch. 8; *City of God*, book 19, ch. 17; see Langdon Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind: A Christian Interpretation of History* (New York: Seabury, 1976) 160-75.

nothing against one and the same action issuing from a primary and secondary agent.”⁶ The same action is performed by both causes, though in a different way. Thus Thomas could hold that God’s providential and primary activity guided, in the perfection of omnipotence and omniscience, the course of history as well as the events of individual lives within it. Moreover, “The rational creature is subject to divine providence in the most excellent way, in so far as it partakes of a share of providence, by being provident both for itself and for others.”⁷ God works through secondary causes and the forms of created reality, as artisans through their instruments.⁸ However, the correlation of divine knowledge with genuine human freedom, like the allied problem of grace and free will, continued to be the subject of debate.⁹

Early twentieth century Catholic theology continued to build on Thomist views of primary and secondary causality with regard to grace and freedom while the meaning of providence was seen in christological terms. It is in the Incarnation as a mystery of faith, according to Scheeben, that Christians catch a glimpse of the sublime plans of divine providence.¹⁰ Providence is understood as the overarching hidden background of the plan of God for Christ. The perspective widened to include the evolutionary history of both nature and the human in the christological focus of Teilhard de Chardin. And in Rahner’s elaboration of Christology within an evolutionary view, God’s “preservation of and cooperation with creatures” is understood as “the dynamism of the power of absolute being” within which genuine self-transcendence as the “leap to something *essentially* higher” can occur.¹¹ Rahner wrote:

An essential self-transcendence . . . is [not a] . . . contradiction . . . as soon as . . . it [is seen] to occur in the dynamism of the power of absolute being which is within the creature and yet is not proper to its nature—in other words, in what in theological language is called God’s conservation of the creature and [God’s] concurrence with its activity, in the inner and permanent need of all finite reality to be held in being and in operation, in the being of becoming, in the being of self-becoming—in short, in the self-transcendence which belongs to the nature of every finite being.¹²

⁶ST I, 105, 5 ad 2; see *God’s Activity in the World: The Contemporary Problem*, ed. Owen C. Thomas (Chico CA: Scholars Press, 1983) 2.

⁷ST II/I, 91, 2.

⁸SCG III, 70.

⁹See *Divine and Human Action: Essays in the Metaphysics of Theism*, ed. Thomas V. Morris (Ithaca and London: Cornell University, 1988) especially Thomas C. Flint, “Two Accounts of Providence,” 147-81.

¹⁰Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *The Mysteries of Christianity*, tr. Cyril Vollert (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1946) 404; 729-30; see Emile Mersch, *The Theology of the Mystical Body*, tr. Cyril Vollert (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1951) 137, 142.

¹¹Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, tr. William V. Dych (New York: Seabury, 1978) 185.

¹²Rahner, *Theological Investigations* V, tr. Karl-H. Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966) 166.

Thus Rahner held that dependence on God and genuine autonomy increase in direct, not inverse proportion, in the analogy of transcendence.

Catholic tradition emphasizes, in a way more pronounced than Protestantism, that the doctrine of providence is a presupposition of the whole of theology, of the ideas of God and of continuing creation, Christ, grace, and eschatology. Many Catholic theologians seldom discuss the doctrine (although it is upheld) while providence is more often a prominent theme in Protestant theology. And in the Protestant tradition, it is John Calvin who represents the strongest view of God's providence as absolute control of the world and of human lives. God controls each drop of rain and all human action follows God's secret designs. Though Calvin is sometimes thought of as Stoic, his understanding of providence is not fatalistic but an interpretation of the Bible ordered to Christian piety: God not only "drives the celestial frame as well as its several parts by a universal motion, but also . . . sustains, nourishes, and cares for everything . . . , even to the least sparrow." Nothing happens by chance but by God's set plan. Providence means that we belong to God in Christ and "nothing that happens to us can detain, divert or cancel that destiny."¹³ Providence uses adversity (as in the hidden purpose of Christ's suffering) to bring us to God in trust, obedience and service of others. Faithful Christians are serene, courageous, and active in using their gifts and in accepting adversity as a test or teaching. Still, Calvin does not deny human responsibility or secondary causes and is careful to exempt God from responsibility for evil.¹⁴

The development of modern science in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with its emphasis on natural causes and laws, led to the deist view that God is like a watchmaker who has contrived the world and its laws but is no longer active in it. In response, the liberal Protestant theologians of the nineteenth century, deeply imbued by the new historical consciousness, insisted that the course of nature is not blindly mechanical but pervaded by the universal presence of God. Schleiermacher, for example, maintained that while divine providence and the closed system of nature that science investigates completely coincide, God's immanent providence acts continually to raise humanity to higher levels of consciousness. "It cannot be religious to think of God as intervening in the world, for this could only mean that, for a fleeting moment at least, the world had slipped out of God's control and taken an unintended course."¹⁵ What then, can it mean

¹³Gilkey, *Reaping*, 182; see John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* I, xviii, i; also see I, xvi. For an historical analysis that emphasizes the contribution of Luther and the Lutheran tradition see Richard Baepler, "Providence in Christian Thought," *The Caring God: Perspectives on Providence*, ed. Carl S. Meyer and Herbert T. Meyer (St. Louis: Concordia, 1973) 45-66. Both Luther and Calvin stress the mysterious and hidden character of God. Cf. B. A. Gerrish, "To the Unknown God": Luther and Calvin on the Hiddenness of God," *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982) 131-49.

¹⁴Gilkey, *Reaping*, 180-83. See Eric Fuchs, "Providence and Politics: A Reflection on the Contemporary Relevance of the Political Ethics of John Calvin," *Louvain Studies* 10 (1985) 231-43.

¹⁵B. A. Gerrish, *A Prince of the Church: Schleiermacher and the Beginnings of Modern Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) 65; also Gerrish, *Tradition and the Modern World: Reformed Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978) 105-10; see Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Macintosh and J. S. Stewart (New York: Harper & Row, 1963) §46, 170-78.

for Christians to pray? Schleiermacher takes as his text for a sermon on prayer the scriptural story of the agony of Christ in the garden where Christ's prayer was not granted. In praying, Christ reconciled himself to God's will and his anxiety and dread were finally overcome.

To be religious and to pray, Schleiermacher says, are one and the same thing. But the prayer without ceasing that the apostle commends (1 Thess. 5:17) consists, he thinks, in the art of combining every important thought we have with thought about God: a thought of the Creator when our eye rests on God's works, a glad sense of God's love when we are enjoying God's gifts, a thankful sense of God's support when we succeed in some good work, and so on. Schleiermacher does not doubt the efficacy of such prayer: it has the power to keep us from sin. It does not change the will of God, but he saw that it does change those who pray, transforming their wishes into humble acceptance. . . . To be conscious of God is not to invite divine intervention in the world but to acknowledge that the course of the world is sustained by omnipotent love and is therefore good.¹⁶

For Schleiermacher, the Christian religion is seen as the method that God uses to enable the religious progress of humankind in the course of history.

Ritschl, on the other hand, saw providence as the immanent activity of God which raises humankind to the fullness of moral existence and moved people toward the achievement of the universal *moral* society that is the Kingdom of God.¹⁷ Although Ritschl was chauvinist about the superiority of western culture and had little sense of the force of social structures and systemic evil in the task of the Christian transformation of society, he offered a vision of history as the very instrument of divine providence. The Protestant liberals wanted to avoid the identification of the divine with human activity but were unclear about the relationship as they sought to express the Christian meaning of providence for an age newly conscious of historical development, the evolutionary course of nature, the immense possibilities of scientific knowledge and the human progress it promised.

The hope that progress in science would be accompanied by moral advancement for all was first shattered in the twentieth century by the events of World War I, an experience of the mystery of evil repeated by worse and more prolonged wars, the Holocaust, the ecological crisis, the national security state, exploitation of the south by the north, the poor by the rich, the arms buildup, the nuclear threat. Elie Wiesel's character in *Night* utters the plaintive cry, "Where is God now?" in a way that signals the ambiguity today of simple belief in God's providence, and sounds the call for "theology in a new key," a theology driven by awareness of the starving and burning children of our age.¹⁸

One theological response in this century was given by Karl Barth. In a retrieval of reformation themes, Barth at first viewed history as a realm of meaninglessness, sin and death, distant from God and utterly condemned by God's

¹⁶Gerrish, *Prince*, 66-67; see Gilkey, *Reaping*, 210-12.

¹⁷Gilkey, *Reaping*, 212-16; see Albrecht Ritschl, *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation*, repr. of 1902 ed. (Clifton NJ: Reference Book Pubs., 1966) 252, 279-80, 292-94, 303-18.

¹⁸Robert McAfee Brown, *Theology in a New Key: Responding to Liberation Themes* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978).

wrath. Notions of progressive meaning and the redemptive activity of God immanent in the world completely disappeared in his concentration on the event of Jesus Christ apprehended only in faith. Later Barth modified this negative view and elaborated a doctrine of providence in which the sovereignty of God over natural and historical events was reasserted. God's rule is all-encompassing, reordering and mysteriously working with human freedom as the instrument of divine purpose in the covenant of Christ's grace. Divine sovereignty and human freedom conjoin in history as the stage for Christ and the covenant community whereon Christ is preached and faith occurs.

The similarity to Augustine's view of providence has been noted, and one can ask whether either Augustinian or Barthian conceptions of human freedom really take account of its genuine creativity, beyond mere freedom of choice, in individual and social life.¹⁹ Is human freedom and creativity swallowed up in this affirmation of divine sovereignty? And is the notion of sovereignty itself, the vision of God as powerful, controlling and dominating king, compatible with the reversals entailed in the message of Jesus, in the story of his life, death and resurrection as an image of God's relation to the world? Is it adequate to our experience of God's activity in history?²⁰

The neo-orthodox thought of Barth and others was accompanied by the biblical theology movement in the 1940s and 50s which reaffirmed the testimony of the Bible to the action of God in history. One of its proponents asserted: "The central message of the Bible is a proclamation of the Divine action. . . . Biblical faith . . . is first and foremost a confessional recital of the gracious and redemptive acts of God."²¹ Exegetes and theologians debated whether God's action was located in the event itself or in faith's interpretation, whether God was active in all events or only in some, and how God's action is related to a seemingly closed finite nexus. In this context, an important article by Langdon Gilkey pointed out, in 1961, the split mentality of many Christians who affirm the mighty acts of God recorded in the Bible but generally believe that God does not interrupt or intervene in the natural and historical process today. He called for a new ontology to elucidate the action of God in a credible way for our time.²²

While it could be argued that many Christians in fact do believe in the direct intervention of God in human and worldly affairs (and also that modern physics *does* allow for the possibility of what religious interpretation calls miracle),²³

¹⁹Gilkey, *Reaping*, 217-20; see Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 6th Germ. ed. (New York: Oxford University, 1950); *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1967) III, 3, ch. XI, s48-51.

²⁰Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987) 63-69.

²¹G. Ernest Wright, *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital* (London: SCM Press, 1952) 120.

²²Langdon B. Gilkey, "Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language," *Journal of Religion* 41 (1961) 194-205.

²³Ian G. Barbour, *Issues in Science and Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966) 428-30, 434-37. See the perceptive comments on providence of Simone Weil in *The Need for Roots*, tr. Arthur Wills (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1952) 262-85.

analysis of that belief shows that it can lead to an individualistic reward mentality that is disputed by the biblical idea of the sun and rain equally distributed on the just and the unjust. Does it lead to a moral occasionalism that is finally incoherent, or an understanding of prayer that is a soliciting for special favors and in which God plays favorites? Would a God who answered some petitions and not others, who answered a prayer for a safe journey but ignored the anguished cry of the victims of the Holocaust, be the providential God that Bible and Christian tradition affirm? Nevertheless, the Bible and tradition call for prayer, affirm its effectiveness and encourage us to place our petitions before God as one who unfailingly responds to those who ask. Jesus' own prayer includes requests for the coming of the Kingdom, for the forgiveness of sin as for our daily bread, even as he prayed that God's will be done on earth as in heaven.

In debating the suggestion of a chasm between biblical and contemporary beliefs about God's action and in discussing the relation between religion and science, theologians attempted to work out the relationship between divine and human activity in the world. In this context, many upheld Bultmann's thesis that it is mythological thinking to see God's action as palpable intervention in the world. Rather, God works within ordinary events that are explicable on their own terms and this divine activity is only known to faith in the moment of individual existential decision. Thus it would be only in the realm of personal relations rather than cosmic action that God operates. It remains unclear whether God really acts in the world of history or whether it is simply individual faith that views the world *as if* God were acting.

II. SOME REINTERPRETATIONS

Gilkey's own response is a reworking of traditional concepts of God in the light of a changed culture which disputes older symbols of God's creation as an abrupt, absolute beginning and providence as the all-determining rule of God over persons and events. Such concepts are counter to contemporary presuppositions about scientific law, human autonomy, and the promise of a really open future. Starting with human temporality as the ground of experience of God, Gilkey develops the symbol of God as creator as an expression of the absolute dependence of all creatures on the power of God. "Creation out of nothing" refers not to a first moment but to God as the source of everything. This source, however, is understood as self-limiting in creating autonomous freedom. God exhibits personal polarities of absoluteness and self-limitation, unconditionedness and reciprocity. God's providence, then, is not temporally distinct from creation but rather is understood in terms of God's self-limitation, which allows the created world, especially persons, really to share in the divine creativity. In the human experience of radical temporality, there is ontologically required that deeper source that is itself not in passage, the reality of God who brings the past into the present and grounds the movement of the present into the future, both for individual and collective life. Thus God transcends time: "as the unlimited vision of possibilities, God is infinite."²⁴

²⁴Langdon Gilkey, *Message and Existence: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1979) 93; see also *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 248-49, 279-81.

Gilkey holds that this portrayal is more faithful to the dynamic notion of God suggested by the Bible than the classical view. And it does not attribute finitude or contingency to God, or subordinate God to creativity, a crucial point in his adaptation of process thought. "In sharing in temporality, relatedness, and change as the continuing ground of each, God transcends all three; as creator and preserver of all that is contingent and temporal, God 'is' necessarily and eternally as their source over time." That God is not an object, nor a person like other persons, is God's mystery as real transcendence, hidden power in the world, free and personal.²⁵

Schubert Ogden agrees that it is mythological, falsely objectifying, and inadequate to the transcendence of God to represent God's action as another secondary cause like other events or objects in the world. He proposes, adapting Hartshorne's thought, the analogy of the way persons relate to their bodies and the inner action whereby the self constitutes itself. In his view, every creature can be understood as God's act, just as our bodily actions are generally felt to be our own. And since we can grasp the meaning of reality and express it in language and practice, this action can represent and actually be the action of God. Further, Ogden's approach understands God both as eminently relative and strictly absolute. "God is by analogy a living and even growing God . . . related to the universe of other beings" and yet as "the *eminently* temporal and changing One, to whose time and change there can be neither beginning nor end . . . is eternal and unchangeable."²⁶

John Cobb, following Whitehead's cosmology, offers the analogy of the *influence* of one event or experience on another in discussing the activity of God and human responsibility. God, whose power is persuasive and never coercive, is understood to act on the course of the world and on personal lives through an influence that respects and responds to human freedom. Understood as both creative and responsive love, God acts in offering every occasion of experience, and to human persons, an initial aim toward the best fulfillment. Together with the influence of past events, each occasion (and each person) absorbs these influences in its own creative self-determination, bringing genuine novelty into the stream of history. This creative response really affects God's own reality (God's consequent nature) just as it affects the course of the world toward the future.²⁷

Neoclassical theism thus incorporates both God's active involvement in the world of experience and all the metaphysical attributes—immutability, impassivity, eternity, infinitude of classical thought. It coherently renders credible the scriptural representation of God as a truly related Self or Thou at the same that it preserves, in maintaining God's unique relation to *all* others, "the most truly ab-

²⁵Gilkey, *Message and Existence*, 96-97.

²⁶Schubert M. Ogden, *The Reality of God and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965) 59-60, 164-87.

²⁷John B. Cobb, Jr. and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976) 41-62; see Cobb, *God and the World* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969) 67-86, and *Process Theology as Political Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982).

solute Thou any mind can conceive."²⁸ The "substance" and "being" of traditional metaphysics, founded in *sense* experience, are replaced by "process," "sociality," "relation," and "temporality" as more adequate to social and temporal experience. David Tracy argues that process thought affirms the value of secularity without being uncritical of modernity; it does not mistake process for progress. And it suggests how the classical tradition failed to understand the scriptural vision of God. "Is not the God of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures a God profoundly involved in humanity's struggle to the point where God not merely affects but is affected by the struggle? . . . Can the God of Jesus Christ really be *simply* changeless, omnipotent, omniscient, unaffected by our anguish and achievements?"²⁹ The pattern of process thought, affirming that God alone is absolute and supremely relative to all, offers a way to understand providence as intimately involving human creativity and responsibility. It is also a theodicy in which finitude and freedom account for the possibility of evil as well as good and the transformation of the past in the God beyond all history.³⁰

Some such framework seems implied in John Wright's recent description of prayer, based on a patristic view that is consonant with the Bible. He suggests that the "will of God" be understood not as a blueprint but as God's love. It is a design "for free creatures called to love and to work out their destinies in complete reliance on [God's] grace," a plan that entails response. In this plan the whole initiative is God's love and grace.

We see God's plan, then, as involving three stages: an antecedent plan, in which God opens up possibilities and invites us to growth; the human response to the invitation, by which we accept some of these possibilities and decline others; and the consequent plan of God, in which God passes judgment on the human response, working whatever portion of [the] gracious antecedent plan our response has made possible. . . . In this view, our prayers are free responses to God's antecedent plan, accepting the possibilities for growth . . . that it contains and asking for what we think will aid that growth. God answers our prayers by responding to our free responses to [the divine] initiative. In this way, God always answers our prayers, always grants what we ask according to God's will and in the name of Jesus.³¹

Some of these themes of American thinking converge with other currents, both theological and biblical, in recent times. In England, John Macquarrie sketched a

²⁸Ogden, *The Reality of God*, 65. For criticism see David Basinger, *Divine Power in Process Theism: A Philosophical Critique* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988).

²⁹David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1975) 177. See William J. Hill, "Christian Panentheism: Orthopraxis and God's Action in History," *CTSA Proceedings* 35 (1980) 113-23.

³⁰See David Ray Griffin, *God, Power, and Evil: A Process Theodicy* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976) and the review by Philip Hefner, "Is Theodicy a Question of Power?" *Journal of Religion* 59 (1979) 87-93. Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *The End of Evil: Process Eschatology in Historical Context* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988) 61-155, offers an historical and constructive exposition of process thought as theodicy.

³¹John H. Wright, "When we Pray," *Commonweal* 116/3 (1989) 75-77.

view in which providence is seen as an aspect of creation, the continuing dynamism and creativity of God as an ordered movement into richer being. Randomness and necessity occur within the context of order and purpose, although it is not always obvious that "in everything God works for good" (Rom. 8:28), but is rather a faith and a hope. And, Macquarrie argues, "in its highest manifestations providence enlists the free cooperation of responsible creaturely beings."³² In this context, he reinterprets the attributes of God. Immutability indicates the consistency and faithfulness of God. Creation itself constitutes a self-limitation on God's power, so omnipotence cannot mean sheer power but rather is the affirmation that God is the source and horizon of all possibilities. Omniscience implies God's transcendence of every limited perspective. And each entails the element of God's risk and self-limitation in creation itself, especially the creation of free and responsible creatures.³³

Brian Hebblethwaite reviews further English discussion about God's activity in the world and the meaning of providence. Contrasting the thought of Austin Farrer to that of Maurice Wiles, Hebblethwaite makes a distinction between miracle and providence. He believes Bultmann meant miracle in denying the objectification of the divine action as it is projected onto the plane of worldly occurrences. Mythology or miracle "imagines the closed weft of the world to be torn asunder, whereas faith transcends it as a whole when it speaks of the activity of God." For Farrer the activity of providence works in and through natural agencies, not in gaps or interventions, and is what God can and does do in and through creatures, in a necessarily unknowable way, "without forcing or faking the natural story." According to Hebblethwaite, Wiles misinterpreted Bultmann in using the denial of miracle as an argument for the rejection of the special action of God in providence.³⁴

Further, where Bultmann conceded the world of nature and history to scientists and historians, restricting the experience of God to the tangential point of preaching, Farrer (not sharing the German fear of objectification) affirmed the believer's experience of grace as extrapolated to nature and history as well. In Farrer's discussion, providence is the influence of divine persuasion on natural processes and historical events in which the whole web of creaturely life is construed as pliable to God. God's action in history is an inscrutable dimension which only becomes manifest as we look back over the whole story, of evolution, for example, or the history of Israel, the story of Jesus, our own stories. It is the whole story, not a part within it, that is significant. These views of divine persuasion known by hindsight challenge a merely "uniform notion of Creator/ creature re-

³²John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977) 245, 239ff. On the issue of chance and accident see William G. Pollard, *Chance and Providence: God's Action in a World Governed by Scientific Law* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958). Pollard uses Martin Buber's distinction between I-It and I-Thou to describe the twofold nature of reality.

³³Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, 204-208.

³⁴Brian L. Hebblethwaite, "Providence and Divine Action," *Religious Studies* 14 (1978) 223-24.

lation to which individuals tune in, as it were, in moments of existential insight.”³⁵

For Hebblethwaite, Bultmann’s controversial refusal to see the “act” of God as mythological meant there is a distinction between mythology and analogy; analogy with human action is necessary for conceiving God at all. And analogy enables us to see the paradoxical double agency that obtains when we experience God’s hidden work through creatures, providence and grace not overwhelming but working in us. Thus Hebblethwaite defends a particular divine agency against the tendency to stress only the receiving and interpretive side of the divine/human relation. While that relation *is* constant, it is best conceived as God’s purpose both as overarching and as particular for individual lives within the whole—ours and Jesus’—as the creative hand of God weaves all together. In this, there is real contingency and real freedom. If we are not to think deistically or in terms of miraculous intervention, we have to see how God “radiates” through all experience “without faking the story.” The analogy of the story or plot is provocative. It indicates the parts played by chance, decision, and determining conditions in the whole of God’s immanent activity. And like process thought, in which the same pattern is present from atomic to macroscopic levels under the indirect divine agency, this pattern offers a theodicy which also entails the necessary conditions for finite life and personality distinct from God.³⁶

What of petitionary prayer? Peter Geach argued that such prayer is not asking for a miracle since there is genuine contingency in the natural and human world and thus scope for God’s particular action without breaking natural regularities. But this is to search for a gap in the world process where God can act. Rather, in Farrer’s view, to see the hand of God is to see what God is making of the interaction of systems in nature and in human life, not to postulate specific efficient causality. “Prayer,” Farrer holds, “is rather a seeking of the divine will in and for every situation that arises in the course of the interaction of the creatures whom God is making make themselves.”³⁷ And the answer to prayer takes place in the natural, psychosomatic regularities of life (even telepathy and serendipity). God is, by choice, vulnerable to the non-cooperation of creatures, and does not override human freedom and its necessary environment. Far from a single blueprint, there are numerous ways divine providence can achieve its aims in and through natural processes. And even miracle, not conceived as a dislocating interference but as transcendence of apparent limitations, in the power of mind over matter—or in the Incarnation—does not break the structural grain of things.³⁸

How do these British views square with the traditional understandings of God’s attributes, such as omniscience and omnipotence? On classical terms, God as eternal simultaneously knows past, present, and future; but it is difficult to affirm the reality of time in this view, elaborated long before the developmental character of both nature and history was perceived. Attempting to account for that character,

³⁵Ibid., 224-28; see Austin Farrer, *Love Almighty and Ills Unlimited* (Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1961).

³⁶Hebblethwaite, “Providence and Divine Action,” 229-32.

³⁷Ibid., 233.

³⁸Ibid., 234-35.

one can argue that the universe is really developing but is in fact predetermined. Or one can posit a universe of open possibilities which entails real freedom and creativity. If the latter is the case, as experience seems to warrant today, then God must be seen to relate to the creation of a temporal universe and free creatures. The direction of process thought seems accurate, wherein God acts by inspiration and attraction, not by force or omnipotence. God's will to win love overcomes only by forgiveness, redemption and grace.³⁹

Thus Hebblethwaite posits a divine self-limitation which waits on creatures' choices. God is self-limited in a way that is appropriate to creation. "God's omniscience, like [God's] omnipotence, is self-limited by the nature of what [God] has made."⁴⁰ Such limitation is consequent on the free decision to create and entails the necessity of change in God, who acts in response to what creatures do. The divine subjects itself to change in creating a changing universe. In this view, not everything that happens can be attributed to God, because God chooses to be constrained by a universe in which there is chance, the random, and individual and systemic sin. Providence is the changeless yet responsive purpose of God within the pattern of creation, redemption, resurrection and the eschaton, in an open and temporal world.⁴¹

In Germany, Jürgen Moltmann has contested the notion of the apathetic God of classical doctrine and affirmed self-limitation and even suffering in God. He turns to sources in the Jewish tradition, especially Isaac Luria and Abraham Heschel, and to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity to develop his thought. Heschel claims that the biblical God enters into the covenant in passionate freedom. While God is free and not subject to any destiny, God is nevertheless committed to Israel. And this "bipolar theology of the covenant" reveals another bipolarity: God's self-differentiation, an idea developed by Luria in the doctrine of *zimsum*. This is the kabbalistic or mystical understanding of the exile of the Shekinah, in which the descent of God to relation with Israel is thought of as a divorce in God, a divine estrangement overcome by good acts (*tikkun*) and prayer that is the "uniting of God." God's unity is a "becoming unity" in which the becoming is given to human hands. Drawing on these themes, Moltmann sees the history of the world as the consequence of a series of divine "self-humiliations," accommodations to human weakness but also anticipations of God's universal indwelling. Creation itself implies the self-limitation of God for it is only by a kind of "withdrawal" that God frees the space in which the other of creation can emerge.⁴²

³⁹Brian L. Hebblethwaite, "Some Reflections on Predestination, Providence and Divine Foreknowledge," *Religious Studies* 15 (1979) 433-37.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 441.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 442-48.

⁴²Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, tr. Margaret Kohl (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981) 25-30, 108-11. Moltmann notes the nineteenth and early twentieth century English discussion of the passibility and suffering of God and the contributions of Miguel de Unamuno and Nicholas Berdyaev (30-47). For the theme of the suffering of God in recent Protestant thought see Warren McWilliams, *The Passion of God. Divine Suffering in Contemporary Protestant Theology* (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1985). McWilliams reviews the thought of Moltmann, James Cone, Geddes MacGregor, Kazoh Kitamori, Daniel Day Williams, and Jung Young Lee. For the theme of God's suffering as it relates to understanding of human love, see Stephen G. Post, "The Inadequacy of Selflessness," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 56/2 (Summer 1988) 213-28.

Moltmann elaborates God's self-limitation in a trinitarian doctrine of theopathy or divine suffering in which the attributes of God are reinterpreted and a perspective on providence is suggested. The cross is the revelation of the grief of God in the death of Jesus, the suffering of God in the suffering of the world. Using the history of Jesus' passion as the key to a Christian concept of God, Moltmann argues that God does not suffer because of a deficiency of being (like creatures) but out of superabundant love. This means that the only omnipotence of God is "the almighty power of suffering love" in which evil is transformed into good, brute power into vital energy. The notion of absolute power derives from Roman laws of property, hardly appropriate to God who is love. In speaking of God's freedom, categories of personal relations must be used. God's freedom is not the "torment of choice," nor is it lordship, power and possession but rather joy in the good, the self-communication of love, friendship. The other side of the real sorrow in God is the redeeming joy which overcomes the world, and thus there is movement in the divine. God longs for the human other, the image of God, not out of need but out of superabundant and creative fullness. In Moltmann's words:

The theology of God's passion leads to the idea of God's self-subjection to suffering. It therefore also has to arrive at the idea of God's eschatological self-deliverance. Between these two movements lies the history of the profound fellowship between God and [humans] in suffering—in compassionate suffering with one another, and in passionate love for one another.⁴³

Through the idea of divine self-limitation as God's passionate involvement in the world, Moltmann sees God's guiding and inviting transcendence as the meaning of continuous creation in its self-transcendence. God gives the creation movement and irreversible direction, "accompanies it in this movement by opening up new possibilities, and entices it" forward.⁴⁴ God's historical action is not limited to the preservation of what once was begun but is an anticipation of the new, the salvation that is creation's consummation. "The unremitting creative activity of God . . . both preserves and innovates," manifesting faithfulness and sustaining hope. And the creative power of God in history is made known in the patient, inexhaustible power of suffering, a sign of strength not weakness. This creative action in history essentially means the opening of systems turned in on themselves:

Through [God's] inexhaustible capacity . . . and readiness for suffering, God . . . creates quite specific chances for liberation . . . and . . . for the evolution of the various open life systems. Because it is a . . . suffering and enduring creating, the activity of God in history is also a silent and secret one. It is not through supernatural interventions that God guides creation to its goal, and drives forward evolution; it is through [God's] passion, and the opening of possibilities out of [God's] suffering. Seen in terms of world history, the transforming power of suffering is the basis for the liberating and consummating acts of God.⁴⁵

⁴³Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 47-60, quotation at 60; also see Moltmann's *The Crucified God*, tr. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (New York: Harper & Row, 1974) 235-47.

⁴⁴Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*, tr. Margaret Kohl (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985) 207.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 211.

In this accompanying activity, God acts in and through the activity of creatures. And creatures act out of God's potencies and into God's environment. While there are no spectacular disruptions in God's unobtrusive accompaniment, there are signs that can be discerned within its light.

These theological perspectives have received corroboration in some provocative studies of the Hebrew Bible by both Jewish and Christian interpreters. Jon Levenson's remarkable analysis of ancient texts on the theme of creation (and by implication, providence) points out that dogmatic presuppositions have so tended to downplay the fragility and vulnerability of the created order "that the drama of God's exercise of omnipotence is lost, and a static notion of creation" is maintained.⁴⁶ Levenson argues that God's "mastery" or "sovereignty" is often undialectically understood as the center of the Bible when this idea is only one theme among several. In an equally important tradition, (Psalm 82, for example), that mastery is not primordial. Rather, "God's assumption of mastery is not complete and . . . the demise of the dark forces in opposition to [God] lies in the uncertain future." Sovereignty is a hope but not a present reality. In Psalm 74 there is an Israelite myth of God's combat with watery beasts, followed by the triumphant act of ordering the world. This myth "speaks of God's total mastery not as something self-evident, unthreatened, and extant from all eternity, but as something won. . . ." In the Genesis story of Noah, the injustice of humans "threatens to undo the work of creation, to cause the world to revert to the primordial aquatic state from which it had emerged." Centuries of theological interpretation have obscured the biblical meaning of creation as the dynamic "emergence of a stable community in a benevolent and life-sustaining order." This positive order is not seen as irreversible but as threatened by human evil (the sea dragon); its continuance depends, as in the Noah case, on the covenant. "God's ordering of reality is irresistible, but not constant or inevitable." There is a keen sense that the order of creation is precarious.⁴⁷

In the mythical idea of creation through combat, Levenson demonstrates the strong biblical belief that without the command of God the forces of chaos will return. The drama of creation lies in the acknowledgement of the persistence of these forces and the possibility, hope and even promise that God's omnipotence will defeat them. "The confinement of chaos rather than its elimination is the essence of creation, and the survival of ordered reality hangs only upon God's vigilance. . . ." ⁴⁸ That vigilance is God's covenant which entails both the fragility of life and its absolute dependence on God.

In Psalm 74, the painful empirical evidence of evil and the affirmation of God's mastery are held in tension as the Psalmist cries: "Rise, O God, champion your cause." God's sovereignty is a *hope* born in Israel's myth and nourished in its liturgy. That God "will triumph is predestined and inevitable" but this is because of the unconditional "covenant of friendship" (Isaiah 54:10). In the Davidic covenant, the promissory aspect is even clearer. In "dialectical counterstatement"

⁴⁶Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988) xiii.

⁴⁷Ibid., 3-13, 14-25; quotations at 7, 9, 10, 12.

⁴⁸Ibid., 17.

both faith and realism, God's unconditional promise and historical experience are present (Psalm 89). God's sovereignty is acclaimed in all its inaccuracy not to promote scepticism but to call on God to close the gap. "To acknowledge openly the ground for doubting the stirring affirmations of the religion has itself become a religious act."⁴⁹ This dialectic steers between the optimism of naive faith and the pessimism that accepts innocent suffering in resignation. It affirms a mysterious "interruption" in God's life that the worship and actions of human beings may yet heal.

In dealing with the theme of cosmogonic victory, Levenson shows that the eschatological elements of the victory feast (Isaiah 25) indicate that whatever the past triumphs of the power of God they yet remain incomplete as "earnests of a coming consummation." The idea of resurrection of the dead emerged in belief that death itself must be defeated if God's worshipping community is to endure, if God's commandments are to be obeyed. In rabbinic interpretation, the right to participate in the eschatological banquet, itself an act of the divine initiative, is thus dependent on observance of the Torah. "Both divine initiative and human responsibility—grace *and* works—are central to the vision of the eschatological feast";⁵⁰ it is both "Augustinian" and "Pelagian." In the battle against the evil impulse the rabbis maintained (against later versions of utter human depravity) that the Torah was doable, that victories could and must be won until the final triumph when human "goodness becomes as constant and reliable as God's, . . . when the prayers of prophets and psalmists for a new heart and new spirit are at long last granted."⁵¹ In the vision of God's ultimate triumph, there is acknowledgement that "God is not yet God," that God's rule will be complete only when the human heart, on which it partly relies, will embrace the divine commands with integrity.

The utterly benevolent God of creation will be [God] only when humanity, male and female, created in [God's] image, is able to be itself, without the interference of malign forces. In this theology divine and human integrity are neither identical nor separable. Both are *ultimately* real, but *proximately* frustrated.⁵²

Like Moltmann, Levenson evokes the theology of the Kabbalah which maintained that human obedience to God in the *mitsvah* "of prayer and action effects integrity," and "enables the life-enhancing divine energy to flow freely and without inhibition."⁵³

Terence Fretheim evokes similar themes of eschatological dynamism in his exploration of the metaphors for God in the Hebrew Bible. He points out that most of the metaphors derive from the human sphere, are anthropomorphic. And he insists that, far from being "mere" metaphors, they really say something to believers about God's relation to the world. As he puts it, "metaphors matter." The creation of humans in the image of God allows us "to reverse the (theomorphic) process and, by looking at the human, learn what God is like." Because God's

⁴⁹Ibid., 20-24; quotation at 24.

⁵⁰Ibid., 26-46; quotation at 36.

⁵¹Ibid., 40.

⁵²Ibid., 38, 46.

⁵³Ibid., 46.

relationship to the world has integrity, it must be affirmed that the transcendent yet truly immanent God of the Bible gives up some freedom, "does change in the light of what happens in the interaction of God and the world."⁵⁴

Fretheim demonstrates the importance of several categories to describe God's experience in time *as God*: the "language of planning," "the divine if," "the divine patience" and "divine consultation" (with Abraham and Moses, for example). The texts indicate that God really shares human history, that there is a divine self-limitation which affects God's knowledge of the future. Such self-limitation is entailed in the fundamental biblical metaphors which ground the testimony that God is faithful, loving, gracious, righteous, testimony that provides the interpretive clue for the meaning of history in the Bible. God's decisions are not irrevocable; Israel's future is open and even God's future is somewhat open-ended, although God knows what God will do. The evidence shows that "the people have a role to play," that "God shared the decision-making with those whose future is at stake."⁵⁵ That the divine moves into a yet unknown future shows openness not indecisiveness. And that God's knowledge increases entails real change in God. For the sake of relationship, in the desire for intimacy, God is affected by the world and is met in the events of the world.

Fretheim discusses the degrees of intensification of God's presence, pointing out that loss of intensification—the apparent absence of God—is not loss of presence altogether. God is present in absence, honoring the structures of creation and human freedom in decision. Far from overly protecting the divine freedom, the Hebrew Bible rather shows divine freedom as limited by God's reliable but not irresistible promise. In steering between what later would be called deism and determinism, the Bible shows God as both transcendent and immanent, as intimately related to free and responsible human being.⁵⁶

A similar divine self-limitation is apparent with regard to power. God shares power in an efficacious but indeterminant way that depends on the response of the people. The future of God is dependent on creatures. Fretheim says, "God has chosen to be dependent on human beings in their carrying out of God's work in the world, and what God has to work with is often not the best, to say the least." Hence God often "looks bad," has "dirty hands," even intensifies the sinful behavior of people in the interplay of human actions and their consequences "for history is our judgment and God enables history, carrying the world along not in mechanistic ways but with personal attentiveness."⁵⁷ That the Bible shows God's power as limited does not mean that the language of omnipotence is no longer usable. Rather omnipotence must be seen as a power that has freely chosen to be vulnerable, that is present in, with, under the particulars of creation in genuine reciprocity. And this reciprocity means that the response of humans can effec-

⁵⁴Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) 1-44, quotations at 11, 35. For an earlier biblical and theological study, see H. Wheeler Robinson, *Suffering: Human and Divine* (New York: Macmillan, 1939).

⁵⁵Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 45-60, quotations at 55.

⁵⁶Ibid., 60-71.

⁵⁷Ibid., 76-77.

tively push God back to less intensified forms of presence. Finally, using theophany as a clue, Fretheim argues that the *human* forms of the divine appearances and the ambiguous language of *self*-manifestations suggest that the physical and spiritual are not mutually exclusive categories, that there are essential continuities between God and humankind. Sharing in the human condition, God suffers *because* of the people's rejection, *with* people who are suffering, and *for* human beings in the context of relationship. Thus it is accurate to speak of a "grieving God," the "memory of God," and even the "future of God."⁵⁸

III. VISIONS OF PROVIDENCE

These theological and biblical perspectives suggest an emerging consensus that divine providence (intensified in grace) and human responsibility in history are in reciprocal relation and that the character of that relation changes with the historical process itself. Thus, while it may be anachronistic to argue that Jesus directly calls for "liberating praxis" with regard to ecclesiastical, political and economic systems and structures, that call of Latin American, Asian, African, black, feminist theologians may be seen as precisely what God's providence is persuading, influencing, enabling, luring us toward today. For specifically liberating praxis, the explicit historical consciousness of ourselves as creators of our environing systems and institutions is itself a product of our human history. Feminist thought, for example, only emerged in recent centuries in the awareness that patriarchy is a man-made social structure, a product of human creativity and human culture. Its ancient structures had endured so long and so widely that patriarchy was construed as natural, the "order of creation," a God-given pattern in human life. Seen as a product of human freedom, however, the task of dismantling its unjust structures becomes an urgent responsibility.⁵⁹

This creative and productive capacity of human beings, both individual and collective, is really part of the discovery of historical consciousness. Ogden writes that

[I]t has only gradually emerged in the course of the revolutionary transformations, scientific and technological as well as political, that have created the modern world. Just such explicit consciousness, however is . . . involved in the special form of historical praxis that is properly liberating; for being the form of praxis that is directed toward transforming the conditions of injustice and oppression, liberating praxis is borne by the consciousness that we ourselves are the agents of history who bear full responsibility for the social and cultural structures of our life together.⁶⁰

Once that historical consciousness has emerged, it is clear that theological understandings of providence and responsibility are immeasurably deepened. The scope of responsibility, for us, involves the maintenance or transformation of the very structures of society and culture, even of human anatomy and physiology, given our knowledge that these basic conditions "are neither divinely appointed

⁵⁸Ibid., 79-166.

⁵⁹See, among many examples, Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

⁶⁰Schubert M. Ogden, *On Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986) 148.

nor naturally given but historically created by such as ourselves."⁶¹ The praxis of love and justice, in the light of new awareness of the depth of human creativity in the workings of divine providence, means that responsibility can no longer simply mean meeting needs in the existing order of things. "The primary, if not the only, task of a loving praxis is precisely the liberating praxis whereby the existing order is so transformed as to include all the others who . . . still suffer the oppression of being excluded from it."⁶² Just as the insistence that faith is distinct from politics, as inward transformation from outward action, has its truth, so it is also true that they are inseparable: authentic faith is the faith that works through love. And in our day faith informed by love must be directed to the massive evils of our time, toward elimination of poverty and exclusion, toward resolution of the ecological and nuclear crises, toward ending the exploitation of the Third World abroad and at home. That is where God is now, persuading humankind toward a more just and loving future.

Two models of Christian understanding of providence and responsibility can be discerned in classical and contemporary theology. In an earlier age, Christian thought focused on the past as the period of the perfection of God's creation and rule. Theology adopted neo-platonic and stoic themes as well as monarchical political images in its understanding of God's sovereignty as dominant and controlling, supremely active in guiding human life. Even as it was recognized that human freedom was real as a secondary cause and that human sin, not God, was the source of evil, the infinite and almighty power of God was conceived in dominative, kingly images and the hierarchical concepts and analogies derived from these images. As feminist theology has suggested, God's power was conceived as "power-over" in such a way that everything that happened was "God's will" and the appropriate religious response entailed human obedience as passivity, acceptance, even abandonment to divine providence. Grace enabled acceptance of situations and structures that were given, for these were seen as ordained by God, as the natural, as the order of creation. The analogies of classical theology entailed the view that God's power was diminished if human beings assumed too much power of their own, in a kind of competition between the divine and the human where a zero-sum, quantitative measure held sway.

In this model, emphasis was placed on God's power as control rather than God's love and concern. God's plan was understood as an unchanging blueprint and God's design for creation as decree, entailing its infallible execution. In this stress on God's almighty power as coercive "power-over," omnipotence meant domination or control. Most importantly, God's will was known through a kind of sacramental mediation in which God's control of creation was reflected in the given structures of individual and collective life. A provident and benevolent Father could thus be perceived to legitimate human domination of women and slaves in a paternalism that reigned throughout the created order. Hierarchical and feudal images led to philosophical concepts of higher and lower, a chain of being that issued in a chain of command in the human situation. Master ruled over slave as king

⁶¹Ibid., 149. See Bonnie Miller McLemore, "Produce or Perish: Generativity as a Virtue for All Ages," paper given at the American Academy of Religion, 1988.

⁶²Ogden, *On Theology*, *ibid.*

over subject, man over woman, priest over people, just as spirit ruled over flesh, mind controlled body and head controlled heart.

This past-oriented and static model of providence was coherent with a view of God as really distant from creation, as apathetic, uninvolved, nontemporal and unchanging. And human responsibility in a universe so designed by God and dominated by God's will meant knowing one's place in the hierarchical scheme of things and accepting in faith whatever was ordained as willed by God's unerring control. The institutions of church and society mediated God's will to human beings.

With the emergence of historical consciousness, a new culture began to develop, oriented not to the past but to the future. Awareness of human autonomy meant that creativity is understood not just as freedom of choice but rather as creative, self-transcending, historical and productive in its reach. New questions emerged with regard to the prophetic and eschatological orientations of the Bible and especially of Jesus. History itself is seen as the locus of God's liberating presence, activity and lure, in its evolutionary and dynamic character. And Jesus is no longer seen simply as mediator but as eschatological prophet as well.⁶³

The images of God that have accompanied this new culture are dynamic ones that honor the scope of human agency such that God's action is seen as both creative and responsive to human history. Thus God is understood not so much as sovereign king and hierarchical lord but as cooperative participant and respectful friend in the process and struggle of individual lives and of human history. God's power is conceived not as coercive “power-over” acting by eternal decree but as persuasive “power-to” or power in relationship, in responsive enablement of human actors and groups as they struggle to achieve the mutuality and reciprocity that is the ideal of personal and collective life.⁶⁴ The use of political images, analogies and concepts for God that emerge from contemporary understandings is an option simply not available to the classical worldview. Ideas of social power, shared power, self-rule, government by the consent of the governed, order created by mutually agreed upon laws are among the values that the new culture affords. Thus the themes of relationality and interdependence, empowerment of and working with others and persuasive rather than coercive power take on new theological significance.

It has been suggested, in fact, that recent process and feminist thought, with its analogies of divine influence and persuasion, its images of God as mother, lover and friend, and its suggestions that the world be understood as God's body radically change the notion of divine power. Even the idea of self-limitation in God

⁶³The widening of the model of mediation to include the eschatological is registered in the work of Edward Schillebeeckx, from *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963) to *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (New York: Seabury, 1979) and *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* (New York: Crossroad, 1980). See Bradford E. Hinze, “A Prophetic Vision: Eschatology and Ethics,” in *The Praxis of Christian Experience: An Introduction to the Theology of Edward Schillebeeckx*, ed. Robert J. Schreiter and Mary Catherine Hilkert (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989) 131-46.

⁶⁴See Catherine Keller, *From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism, and Self* (Boston: Beacon, 1986).

still suggests an absolute control or domination that has been voluntarily curtailed. In moving from a notion of God's power as domination and control to energizing empowerment, the effective capacity to influence and be influenced, a transformation occurs, beyond mere scope or quantity, in the very meaning of divine power itself.⁶⁵ And this changed view changes our understanding of what God's omnipotence, and God's providence, might mean as guidance for human responsibility today.

Yet the continuities are apparent as well in the mystery of God's design as a claim on human practice. For power as influence, enablement, persuasion, and care mean that God is with the temporal process as well as over it, sharing in the sorrows of our historical tragedies and the joys of our limited victories, guiding the mysterious process that engages human response in dependent prayer and courageous action. In love and in infinite concern, God is attentive to the fall of a single sparrow, vulnerable, responsive, yes, even anguished in our anguish, dependent on human action in history. As the shocking story of Jesus' death and resurrection reveals, our categories are reversed once again in what newly appears as stumbling block and foolishness but is the wisdom and power of God. God is in us, with us, guiding our responsible action, engendering our hope despite our sinful disrespect of creation and disregard of the covenant of grace. God is faithful to the promise of a new heaven and a new earth, guiding the liberating work for the human future that is our providential task today.

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⁶⁵Anna Case-Winters, "The Problem of Omnipotence: A Theological Exploration of the Meaning of Power," paper given at the American Academy of Religion, 1988. Note that this redefinition of divine power has reference to God and not to human political and social arrangements which indeed must be oriented primarily to enablement or power-to but still require elements of control or power-over. See John Coleman, "Power, the Powers, and a Higher Power," *CTSA Proceedings* 37 (1982) 1-14, and Christine Firer Hinze, "The Notion of Power in Christian Social Ethics: Toward a Comprehensive Approach" (dissertation, University of Chicago, 1989). Using Martin Buber's distinction between I-It and I-Thou, Manfred H. Vogel offers a similar discussion of divine power in *A Quest for a Theology of Judaism* (Lanham NY; London: University Press of America, 1987) 41-62, esp. 54.