

PROVIDENCE, NATURE, AND HISTORY: A RESPONSE TO CHARLES CURRAN

There seems to me little doubt that Charlie's major premise is correct: providence understood in terms of God's direct intervention in the world is foreign to the Catholic tradition. Catholic moral tradition understands God's salvific plan for the world as mediated through human responsibility and activity, so that providence is not problematic for human moral responsibility.

But it seems to me that understanding providence in terms of God's salvific plan for the world involves not only the question of whether God's action in the world affects humans, which *is* more problematic for Protestant than Catholic ethics. The concept of providence also involves questions as to *how* God's activity takes place and to what end it moves. In Part II Charlie alluded to two issues which have raised contemporary questions about the form God's activity takes. Treating the Holocaust and possible nuclear annihilation entails asking the question as to whether God's process of salvation is so broad, so long and so open that such catastrophic events could possibly signify only momentary setbacks in an overall advancement. There is also the question of the character of the salvation to which God orders the world. This is another guise for the perennial question of what is the good. Charlie refers to Aquinas' insistence that something is good not because God wills it, but rather God wills it because it is good. This, of course, leaves us with the question of how we recognize the good, which in natural law terms is more or less practically identical with the question of how we recognize God's will.

With regard to these aspects of providence there *are* some problems in Catholic moral theology—and indeed, Christian ethics in general—and I want briefly to explore them with references to some of Charlie's points.

Charlie rightly identified our traditional understanding of history as inadequate, and pointed to examples in both the manualist tradition and Vatican II. I would suggest that our inadequate understanding of history is linked to inadequate attention to nature, and to confusion about nature and its relationship to history.

Christian, including Catholic, tradition has, I think, concentrated almost exclusively on human nature and tended either to ignore nonhuman nature, or to treat it peripherally and suspiciously as the larger sphere of the material, of which the lower and more dangerous half of our nature is a part. Thus some treatment of human nature connected us to animals, to which I will turn presently. Though our treatment of nonhuman nature has most often been grudging and condescending, there has also been a relatively minor but, I think, nevertheless influential understanding of nonhuman nature in idyllic terms, as that part of creation which was not corrupted by the Fall, and which continues as a static and harmonious realm symbolized by the Garden of Eden. For example, papal social teaching especially

of the first half of the twentieth century often expressed distaste for industrial society and a preference for agricultural society as more harmonious and uncorrupted because based on nonhuman creation. (Parenthetically, I would add that a number of feminist thinkers have pointed out a similar bifurcated view of women as both inferior and ideal, as madonna and whore.)

It is not necessary to discuss the inadequacy of traditional suspicions of all materiality, including nonhuman creation, by repeating the many excellent twentieth century critiques of dualistic understandings of the human person and of creation in general. The inadequacy of such understandings is relatively clear, though such understandings seem remarkably resistant and long-lived. As for our failure to treat seriously nonhuman nature, the ecological crisis is beginning to make us realize that nature is not sufficiently dealt with by probing human nature only. Perhaps the most unresolved problem regarding nonhuman nature is unrealistic understandings of it. The first world has had a bifurcated view of nature, seeing it not so much as evil to be overcome as inanimate matter to be used, abused, transformed and used up according to the needs and whims of humanity. At the same time a highly romantic view of nature prevails; we want to have our factories, our oil platforms, and also have untouched forests and bays, nature preserves, and extensive national parks, which we view in storybook terms of harmonious internal cooperation and balance. This latter view has often been shared by moral theologians whenever they have gotten past the suspicion of nature which resulted from the connection between nonhuman creation and human materiality.

Charlie mentioned in Part II that evolution has been considered by some as a problem for providence, because its randomness seems to conflict with the notion of God's plan operating in history. But evolution has created other major problems besides randomness—in fact, the randomness in evolution is both cause and result of the conflictual nature of evolution. Much of the balance and harmony which humans revere in nature is based on unrelenting conflict within and between species: conflict for mates, for food, for territory. Even if nature is a mixture of ruthless conflict and cooperation, there is no doubt that human moral norms do not for the most part carry over into the internal operation of nonhuman nature.

Yet under a theory of divine providence nature operates under God's plan also, and is also being moved toward salvation. If God works in the human world by mediation, and plans and works for the good but allows evil as a consequence of freedom and dynamism in creation, then do we also understand that in nonhuman creation there is both what is directly intended by God and what is tolerated for the purpose of both diversity and dynamism? Gustavo Gutierrez interprets God's speech to Job in the book of Job to present the animal world as a place in which God's gift of freedom and dynamism to animals takes forms which inevitably produce some conflict and tragedy, conflict and tragedy which are to be accepted as the cost of the freedom and majesty manifested in creation. In the hot controversy over the Park Service's decision to allow those forest fires in Yellowstone which had natural causes to burn, much of the public refused to accept the Park Service's argument that nature needs, and provides for such tragedies in order to renew itself, to continue its dynamic process. I think the most responsible treatment for assessing natural disasters—tidal waves, forest fires, volcanoes and earthquakes—is to take this tack, that they are allowed but not directly willed. If this

is so, we have the moral problem of discerning in nonhuman nature that which is willed from that which is only permitted, and discerning what of that which is permitted should be encouraged, since this distinction should govern our ecological decisions.

This is, of course difficult. Charlie says that "The Christian looks at the world and history in terms of the fivefold Christian mysteries and symbols of creation, sin, incarnation, redemption, and resurrection destiny." Under a concept of providence, what do incarnation and redemption have to say to the resurrection of nonhuman nature, or whatever the resurrection analogy for nonhuman nature would be? I have yet to see Christian ethics take seriously questions as to the preservation of species, or rain forests, or other aspects of the natural world apart from their importance to human survival. Aquinas' arguments about the theological importance of diversity in creation seem to have fallen on deaf ears, except for his justification of God's creation of women in terms of the greater glory of God implied by diversity in creation. In particular, I have never seen natural law systematically invoked to answer these questions about the significance and end of nonhuman nature. We have been too exclusively preoccupied with our own status and nature. Divine providence can serve to remind us that we are one part of God's plan—the whole part.

But the issue is larger than this, for our tendency to understand nonhuman creation as static has negatively influenced our understanding of history, and thus of humanity. Nature and history cannot be effectively separated. Evolution is not merely an explanation of how human beings came to be; evolution is an ongoing process in all of our world, and has always set the ground and conditions for history. All of our world is in evolutionary flux, and decisive events in human history are often linked to changes in nature. Droughts, floods, volcanic eruptions, climatic changes, shifts in animal populations and locations have caused human migrations, famines, civil wars, new social structures and organizations, and struggles over territory. The failure to understand nature as dynamic is, I think, one major cause of the failure to view history as dynamic. The Catholic moral tradition has tended until very recently to view history as static, and to see change within history as either only accidental or as the result of sin. In the modern age the Reformation, the rise of science, the Enlightenment, liberal democracy and Marxism, and perhaps most recently the women's movement have all been understood by the church primarily in terms of sinful refusal to accept the God-given order. Twentieth century social teaching is rife with this very criticism of the modern world: Pius XI and XII on women's rightful place and on communism and socialism are merely two more recent examples of this train of thought.

Simpleminded belief in providence sometimes led in the past to understanding God's plan in terms of humans cooperating with a world already fixed for salvation, a world in which humans alone were the discordant element. If only individual humans would accord themselves with God's will through obedience to scripture and the church's interpretation of natural law, salvation could be complete. In the present, simpleminded belief in providence sometimes takes the shape Charlie described with Vatican II: a historicist approach to the world as definitely improving, of perfecting itself through technology and through a process of human maturation in which human wisdom increases with our species' age.

What taking the dynamism of nature and history seriously means for moral theology is understanding the world as much more complex than we have thought in the past. This means that discerning moral action is more complex also. We are becoming much more aware that moral decision does not take place in a set of givens, is not a decision whether or not to *introduce* disorder into the world. Moral decision takes place in an interactive environment already permeated with conflict and disorder. The challenge is to discern what conflict and disorder is creative and an integral part of the process of God's plan for salvation, and which is sinful, that is, opposed to the salvific process. This need to discern creative conflict and disorder rather than to condemn or disregard all is increasingly clear as we begin to approach moral decision-making from the perspective of those most caught in chaos and suffering. Many of our traditional approaches are being challenged by new social movements of the poor, racial minorities, of women, of advocates for the chronically ill or unemployed, all of whom are frequently criticized for introducing conflict, for destroying what seemed to others as social harmony. The complexity in moral discernment today is not merely the result of technological progress; it is also directly attributable to a broader lens for doing moral theology, an expansion of the numbers and situations of the interlocutors of moral theology, a movement toward doing moral theology from locations which are not above, and therefore oblivious to, existing conflict and struggle. This expansion of moral theology is a primary form that a more adequate vision of nature and history takes.

Yet another, more narrow aspect of nature which requires probing is the relationship between humans and other species. Since we have neglected the task of discerning natural law for nonhuman creation, but have inappropriately subsumed it under human creation, many of the analogies between humans and animals which have been used in moral theology, for example in natural law regarding sexuality, are inappropriate without much greater clarification. Charlie has done more than most to criticize heavy traditional reliance on physicalism in interpreting natural law. There can be little doubt that physicalism in natural law has been based on the biological nature we share with many mammals. Not only is the animal-human analogy explicit in our moral tradition, but many of the conclusions which have been reached in sexual morality could not have been reached if exclusively human biology had been thoroughly consulted. For example, I have never understood how we could claim that our natural law sexual ethic is biologically based, when science as well as the observation of even the simple minded has made clear that human females, unlike other mammals, can have and do desire sex during their infertile times, and that human males are sexually attracted to females during infertile times. If biology reveals God's will, surely this major sexual difference has some significance for God's will for human sexual behavior. Moreover, humanity long suspected before it was confirmed by modern science that the female clitoris was created to serve no other function than female sexual pleasure. Had the clitoris served some other physical function, so many patriarchal cultures would not have come to require female genital mutilation in the form of clitorrectomy, a mutilation which has been inflicted on 30 million women alive today.

In conclusion, I think I would see much greater need than Charlie does to investigate the concept of providence from the perspective of moral theology. Practically, I would concur in his criticism of some prayers of petition, to the scandal of our parents and grandparents who understand providence to mean that God an-

swers their prayers that they find the car keys, or that their sports team wins games and series. I concur that prayers of petition do have a place: who could criticize Salvadoreans and Guatemalans who pray for the end of death squad activity? When most forms of opposition against death squads have become too dangerous for some individuals or groups, prayers of petition for their end serve as reminders of what is important to care about, and spurs people both to support whenever possible those who continue such opposition, and to take up opposition activity again in the future.

But the major issues around providence seem to me to involve the basic areas of nature and history. In concluding I would like to suggest that with a more adequate understanding of nature and history the concept of providence becomes much more distant in time and space, involving not discrete events but long term processes and trends; providence thus becomes much more difficult for concrete individuals to discern. It becomes much more necessary for us to recognize the need to cooperate with providence, rather than to be directed by it or finding it in discrete events. Most people who talk of providence think they can see in their personal lives instances of God's plan at work. This can be the wishful thinking of the fortunate, another form of the notion of temporal retribution, in which the fortunate attribute their fortune to God's rewarding them for their virtue. Or it can be a desperate attempt of those unable to see providence in their wider social world to discern some evidence of God's care.

Belief in providence is the stuff of hope, and real Christian hope is, I think, based in experience of the cross. Christian hope develops in a dialectic between concrete causes for despair and fragile possibilities for good. In this dialectic we come to understand our participation in larger liberating processes which offer a glimmer of hope despite the possibility that these particular processes may be aborted in the unfolding of history.

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