

DIVINE PROVIDENCE: CLASSICAL AND EVOLUTIONARY VIEWS

Three brief papers were presented at the beginning of the session: "The Providence Tradition Revisited" by John H. Wright; "Providence in Evolution: A Teilhardian Perspective" by Richard W. Kropf; and "A Neo-Whiteheadian Approach to Divine Providence" by Joseph A. Bracken.

Traditionally, argued Wright, providence means a divine plan by which God guides or governs the world for the purpose of sharing his goodness and manifesting his glory. This meant for many a plan eternally predetermined in all its details, which simply unfolds in the course of time. But this fundamentally Stoic conception breaks down in the face of creaturely freedom and evil. Others therefore liken providence to "contingency planning," whereby God first of all opens up countless possibilities, among which creatures choose freely. God then actualizes the world in accordance with these choices. Some evil is inevitable in such a world; but whatever happens, God's love draws good from it and directs it to his gracious purpose. God sees events in their presentiality, so that his knowledge is eternal and certain, but not predetermining.

In his essay, Kropf stressed that for Teilhard divine providence works through chance; the creative power of God synthesizes the agencies of apparently unrelated causes so that they move, albeit unconsciously, toward Omega Point, cosmic consummation in the divine. Sin as the misuse of human freedom is a statistical necessity in such a scheme, although each instance of moral failure is ultimately a matter of personal responsibility. For, if human intelligence is "consciousness squared" (i.e., while animals "know," only humans know that they know), human freedom is "chance squared" (i.e., the basic randomness of natural processes as perceived, reflected upon, and willingly acted upon).

Bracken, in turn, set forth three positions, with his own as intermediate between the first two. The first is that represented by Jacques Monod in *Chance and Necessity* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), wherein nothing like divine providence can exist. The second position is that of classical Thomism in which God is said simultaneously to know and will an entire world order in its "presentiality." Bracken's third position stipulates in line with A. N. Whitehead that God does not know the future except in terms of possibilities, but that in virtue of these possibilities God provides creatures with "initial aims" to make choices in line with God's own structural aims for the world process.

SUMMARY OF THE DISCUSSION

John Wright began the discussion by noting that, while Aquinas and Teilhard have much in common, neither of them has much affinity with Whitehead. For, Whitehead sees God as subject to time. Time, on the other hand, is a creature of

God. Thereupon it was objected that, if one may speak of the antecedent and consequent will of God for creatures, then God must experience temporality or succession. To this, Wright responded that the antecedent will of God has to do with possibilities, the consequent will with what actually happens. Both can co-exist from all eternity. Likewise, it was objected that in Wright's scheme human beings and other creatures contribute nothing to God by way of meaning or value. To this, Wright replied that in returning God's love, creatures indirectly enrich God's being. As a result of creation, God is intelligibly different from what God would have been apart from creation.

Another issue which surfaced repeatedly was that of divine foreknowledge and predestination. Predestination was intended by St. Paul to be a word of comfort for Christians experiencing trials; their salvation is already assured. Only later in Augustine, Aquinas and, above all, Calvin, was emphasis shifted to God's foreknowledge of those who will be damned. This reflection, however, has led contemporary Christians to distrust the goodness of God. One must trust that somehow God's unfailing love will achieve its purpose.

Several objections were also raised to the neo-Whiteheadian scheme presented by Bracken. For example, there would seem to be no place for an apophatic or negative theology within such a system. Bracken replied that his scheme is a model, not a picture, of reality. As such, it should be taken seriously, but not literally. Likewise, no model ever exhausts the reality it seeks to explain. On the issue of God's relationship to time, Bracken noted that Whitehead followed Einstein in conceiving time as the byproduct of the interaction of entities. In this sense, the three divine persons experience their own sense of time or duration in their ongoing relation to one another; creatures experience a different sense of time in relating to each other. Wright confirmed that different levels of being correspond to different understandings of time.

Finally, it was also pointed out that the starting point of any contemporary theology has to be the experience of suffering in the world. Kropf pointed to the *kenosis* or self-emptying of God in creation according to Teilhard. Perhaps this belief is the antidote for a residual distrust of the goodness of God in the matter of predestination. One of the advantages of the process-relational metaphysics of Whitehead is that it allows God to experience the suffering of creatures. But this raises the further question whether a suffering God is truly worthy of worship.

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