

# Chance or Providence

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Chance or Providence:  
Religious Perspectives on Divine Action

Edited by

Louise Hickman

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**P U B L I S H I N G**

Chance or Providence: Religious Perspectives on Divine Action,  
Edited by Louise Hickman

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## INTRODUCTION

# CHANCE OR PROVIDENCE? RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVES ON DIVINE ACTION

LOUISE HICKMAN

Belief in some sort of providence is widespread. “Everything happens for a reason” is enough to cause a despondent sigh in any theologian within earshot but this oft-repeated cliché is significant. It might be called (to borrow a phrase from Mary Midgley) part of our “philosophical plumbing”, constituting a background belief for both religious believers and non-believers alike, hardly noticed until it starts to go wrong, perhaps through challenge from personal events or a nearby quarrelsome theologian. It also marks a chasm, complained about by Nietzsche, between our world-view and that of the ancient Greeks for whom tragedy was a real possibility, the gods using us merely for their sport. This optimistic aphorism hasn’t always been a human intuition.

The Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions are centred on a commitment to providence. The doctrine of God’s concern for creation and some sort of guidance, control or ordering of it is typically what distinguishes theism from deism, and also from fatalism, mechanism and—more recently—the suggestion that the universe and the life within it have arisen entirely from pure blind chance. Fortunately, most theological considerations have been somewhat more sophisticated than the aforementioned platitude, but there is still much reflection to be done. Insights from ecotheology, process theology and feminist theology encourage us to re-imagine metaphors of sovereignty and consequent debates about theodicy, particularly in relation to the non-human world. Our rapidly developing scientific understanding calls us to consider afresh the nature of direct and indirect divine action, the extent of human freedom, the legitimacy of distinguishing between providence, miracle and creative action, and even the role of chance itself.

The chapters in the volume have their origin in the 38<sup>th</sup> annual conference of the Science and Religion Forum ‘Chance or Providence:

Religious Perspectives on Divine Action' which took place in September 2013 at the University of Chester. The conference itself was notable for its inter-religious character, receiving papers from Jewish, Christian and Muslim scholars. The broad intention of the symposium, reflected in the contributions published here, was to combine together both scientific and theological perspectives on providence. Scientific perspectives have had a greater share of the attention in some recent publications but the outcome of the Chester conference was a more thorough integration of theology with science, reflected in this present collection.

The first chapter is contributed by Philip Clayton who outlines the main causes of scepticism about the possibility of divine action: religious pluralism, non-belief as an option for most people, and the epistemic authority of science. There is also a profound theological objection: as Clayton puts it, the more one defends God's special interventions, the more God's non-interventions require some sort of explanation. Clayton's own defence of providence lies in our non-lawlike mental life. This provides a sphere of influence for divine action on human minds and also makes us a vital part of the process: providence is thus participatory. This model is based on which enables the cohesion of a theology of providence together with an affirmation of the regularity of scientific laws (essential for the scientific enterprise).

Mark Harris in Chapter 2 explores scientific predictions for the end of the universe, all of which look bleak for biological life. He considers how scientific ideas about the future might contribute to a theology of the eschaton. He warns against making strong claims about the science of the eschaton or of trying to unite the different gospel account to come up with one proposed conception of resurrection. Developing a valuable critical hermeneutic, he argues for the importance of considering the New Testament passages of resurrection both in relation to the ancient cosmologies which form their context, and to the historical contexts of the biblical writers. He offers a rich model of engagement with historical scholarship and biblical criticism.

Michael Fuller provides an important discussion of the meaning of "miracle" and helps us to shift our thoughts about what might count as evidence for one. Empirical evidence is impossible precisely because this is not how miracles work. Miracles are instead, he proposes, transformative events with notable ethical or social dimensions. A reimagining of the concept of miracle is pursued further by Jeffrey Robinson, who in Chapter 4 proposes joy as a "signal of transcendence" that points to the presence of divine action. Building on recent insights about the working of the human brain, he develops a theology of joy as the



means by which we may communicate with, and be influenced by, the divine.

Chapters 5 and 6 address the reality of suffering. Bethany Sollereder examines different models of creation and their impact on theodicy. She points out that in order to be adequate, any theodicy must address the suffering of the non-human creation. In her chapter, she proposes a far-reaching model of theodicy that incorporates a dual-aspect teleology together with an open theist perspective of providence. The result is an account of providence that safeguards the freedom of creatures while allowing for our role in co-creation, God's co-suffering and the promise of redemption in the future. Daniel Langton, drawing on the theology of Isaac Mayer Wise, presents a Jewish response to divine action in the light of Darwin. He notes Wise's concern about the socio-political implications of Darwinism and the influence of Lurianic Kabbalism which led to his theology of an organising life-force, infusing nature yet going beyond it. Langton's discussion of Wise gives substantial consideration to the problem of evil as it is this life-force that drives the process of evolution towards the evolution of self-conscious beings. God's providential action thus becomes expressed through human agency.

Bertrand Souchart's discussion in Chapter 7 develops the idea of a life-force of nature by discussing energy as a model which can help us envisage how God might be both transcendent and immanent. Describing the importance of the concept for both biblical and ancient Greek writers, Souchart's account of energy presents a helpful alternative to both materialism and dualism. Peter Barrett draws on Sarah Coakley's systematic theology of the emergence of supernormality to propose a Trinitarian natural theology which affirms the validity of scientific knowledge of the world while appealing to tacit knowledge informed by the imagination. He presents a pertinent theology of the Logos and the Spirit acting on the unfolding cosmos and on creaturely development: divine action on a grand and small scale. God's action extends to the arenas of nature and history, while also embracing every individual human life.

The political implications of the theology of providence are discussed by Peter Colyer in Chapter 9. If every occurrence is the direct result of God's will then there is less incentive to challenge things at the social or political level, and this is something that every account of divine action should be aware of. In response, Colyer's noteworthy theology envisages God's relationship with the world as permissive and self-denying—in other words, kenotic. Creation can then be perceived as the gift of freedom and the act of self-emptying love rather than the expression of power.

In his second contribution to this volume, Mark Harris proposes a community-based approach to divine action informed by what he calls a “high” rabbinic theology in which the laws of nature are God’s laws, combined with a community-based scepticism. Both laws of nature and miracles he argues are matters of community judgement. Such an approach offers an imaginative critique of Hume’s definition of miracle. Mark Hart’s model of divine action is informed by Rowan Williams’ theology of creation and salvation. For him, the self-giving nature of God is the ultimate ground of the universe. Hart can therefore meet the theological challenges to specific or non-general providence by seeing salvation not a series of separate acts but as the fulfilling of inherent potential made possible by divine energy.

Christopher Knight concludes this volume’s reflection on providence with a valuable consideration of divine action in relation to naturalism. He challenges the distinction between special and general divine action as a category mistake. Arguing that personal responses to divine action do not need individual personal action for each occasion, he utilises instead the rich resources of Eastern Orthodox theology, in particular its panentheistic insights, to challenge our common perceptions of naturalism.

Lastly the epilogue presents a short history of the Science and Religion Forum written by our secretary Jeffrey Robinson. The objective of the Forum is to encourage conversation between religious thought and scientific insights. As some of the fruits of the 2013 conference, the chapters presented here go some considerable way towards promoting that aim by stimulating further theological reflection on this most crucial aspect of theistic belief; thereby aiding us further in the re-imagining of this particular part of our philosophical pipework.

CHAPTER ONE

TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF PROVIDENCE  
FOR A SCIENTIFIC AGE

PHILIP CLAYTON

**Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

It were cold and lifeless to represent God as a momentary Creator, who completed his work once for all, and then left it. Here, especially, we must dissent from the profane, and maintain that the presence of the divine power is conspicuous, not less in the perpetual condition of the world than in its first creation.... [F]aith must penetrate deeper. After learning that there is a Creator, it must forthwith infer that he is also a Governor and Preserver, and that, not by producing a kind of general motion in the machine of the globe as well as in each of its parts, but by a special providence sustaining, cherishing, superintending, all the things which he has made, to the very minutest, even to a sparrow. (John Calvin, *Institutes*, I.16)

Providence (from *providere*, to foresee or attend to) is the belief that God guides history and the lives of individual persons. This belief has stood at the heart of the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religions since their origin. Affirming God's gentle guidance and care probably plays a more central role for people of faith than any other mode of divine action.

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<sup>1</sup> Although this particular paper has only one author, the position conveyed here draws deeply from my co-authored work with Steven Knapp, *The Predicament of Belief: Science, Philosophy, Faith*. The core argument in *Predicament* was developed jointly between us, and the six theories of providence given in this paper are direct adaptations of the six 'levels' in our jointly authored book. I gratefully acknowledge this collaboration and intellectual debt, though without claiming that my former co-author would agree with the position on providence that I develop in these pages.

In the last thirty years of engaging scientists on matters of faith, I have again and again noticed the following pattern. During abstract debates, questions are often raised about whether divine action is possible in principle. But when, whether in private or in public, talk turns to the scientist's *own* spiritual life, to the moments that have affected him or her most profoundly, the topic of experiencing the presence of God becomes central. Sometimes the scientist has experienced God as present in the crucial moments of his or her life, and faith is alive and well. But when the scientist has come to believe that God is absent or uncaring, he or she has usually left faith behind.

Not only scientists are confronted with the high-stakes question: is it still rational to believe in divine providence in an age of science? Members of the clergy and theologians may not serve the significant public role they once played. But when it comes to the question of miracles and divine action, the expectation remains that they will be able to provide a theology of providence. As we will see, a satisfactory answer must include two dimensions: what one affirms that God does, and how one interprets his or her own language about divine action or care. A theology of providence that addresses only one of these dimensions provides only half an answer.

### **The Predicament of Belief: Reasons to Doubt**

The challenge is made more intense by several factors. Men and women in this era are more strongly confronted by the plurality of religious options than were previous generations. In the past, many followers of Christianity, the majority religion in the West, did not really view themselves as having any other live options for religious belief. Like mono-cultural and mono-linguistic people, mono-religious people—those who knew only one religious worldview—tended to think that their view was intuitive and obvious and that no other religious response could be credible. The “well, it’s just obvious” response is rather more difficult for those who belong to a minority religious tradition within their culture. Still, social isolation (often imposed by the majority religion) still made it possible for many to view their own tradition as their only option for belief and practice.

These conditions have changed dramatically in the last fifty years. Most people in the West now report that they can and must choose between multiple options for belief. Even more significantly, people now see non-belief or non-affiliation as an increasingly viable option. Americans are startled to find that, in just five years, the percentage of the

non-affiliated in the U.S. has risen from 15 to 20% of the population, and to 32% of young people (Pew Report 2012). In Europe, of course, the numbers have been far higher for far longer, and participation in organized religion is far lower. Many today no longer view any religious belief system as a viable option.

Where do people most often turn when they are looking for an authority or guide in deciding what to believe? The research is very clear: most people see science as the most reliable authority to guide them in forming beliefs, not religious leaders. Sometimes this response takes the virulent form of New Atheism, as in the biting words of Richard Dawkins, “Faith is an evil precisely because it requires no justification and brooks no argument... Faith can be very very dangerous, and deliberately to implant it into the vulnerable mind of an innocent child is a grievous wrong” (Dawkins 2006, 308).

But Dawkins’ overwrought language probably doesn’t express the real attitude of most Europeans or Americans. E. O. Wilson probably came closer in his well-known book *Consilience* (Wilson 1998). All matters of fact, he argued, fall ultimately within the domain of science; hence science is the authority that will ultimately determine what is the case and what is not the case. All knowledge thus belongs to science. Many spheres of human interest lie outside of the realm of fact, however: art, morality, hopes and fears ... and thus religion. If you want to know what a sunset *is*, you must be guided by science. But of course you are still allowed to enjoy the beauty of the sunset and to be moved by it. Such (purely affective) human responses are the only remaining home for our religious feelings.

These three factors—religious pluralism, non-belief as an increasingly live option for most people, and the uncontested epistemic authority of science—are the backdrop for this discussion of divine providence. The many people who feel the weight of these reasons to doubt, and who nonetheless still find themselves drawn toward religious belief, experience what Steven Knapp and I have called *the predicament of belief*. More than any other single theological topic, claims about God’s activity in the world evoke scepticism about traditional religious claims. The predicament of belief has many sources, but it appears that its primary expression lies in doubt about divine action.

## **Toward a Theology of Providence**

It’s sometimes held that all language about God or divine action is merely symbolic. “Sure,” the objector responds, “many *say* that God is

present with believers and providentially cares for creation. But what that really means is that they have a confidence in life, or that their faith helps make life more meaningful, or that they intend to *act as if* there were a God who cares for them.” One can of course understand the temptation to reduce the language of providence to existential statements about human beliefs and attitudes. But, it turns out, it’s also possible to defend a more robust response. That is, there is at least one religiously meaningful understanding of providence that is fully compatible with the pursuit of scientific knowledge. Successfully making a case for providence in light of science, however, does however require some breaks with traditional language.

The more one affirms God’s special interventions in the natural order, the more God’s *non*-interventions call for an answer. At that point only two options are available. One can (and many do) simply cease to engage the objections of non-believing discussion partners. “It’s God’s decision when to intervene and when not to, and it’s not our place to question. God’s actions should be greeted with gratitude and faith. God owes us no answer when God chooses to be silent.” The other option is to face the objection and offer an answer that addresses it. Wesley Wildman has formulated the objection as cogently as anyone:

[T]he personal God does not pass the test of parental moral responsibility. If God really is personal in this way, then we must conclude that God has a morally abysmal record of inaction or ineffective action. This I shall call the argument from neglect... It applies most obviously to versions of personal theism in which God is omnipotent. But [it] also applies to views of personal theism that deny omnipotence, such as process theology, because the argument establishes that God’s ability to influence the world is so sorely limited as to make God virtually irrelevant when it comes to the practical struggles of our deeply unjust world. (Quoted in Clayton and Knapp 2011, 45)

All adequate responses to the objection share one axiom in common: that it’s good for there to be conscious moral creatures who freely know and worship their Creator. Something is broken if the creation does not know its Origin or if it responds only in forced or mechanical ways to its Source.

Conscious moral creatures with the freedom either to acknowledge or to deny their Creator can only arise in the context of a lawlike natural order. Not only the evolution of such a species over time, but also the development of individual agents able to freely judge and respond, requires regularity in the surrounding world. Natural laws provide the constancy that is the necessary backdrop for conscious discernment and decision making.

It turns out that these conditions are fulfilled only if God does not suspend these laws from time to time. One reason comes directly from science. Science presupposes the regularity of the natural order. If the fundamental constants of nature vary over time, and if the fundamental laws admit of exceptions that are random from the standpoint of science, then science is impossible. Interestingly, this constraint applies not only to our actual measurements, but also when we're not looking. That is, science as we know it falls just as much into trouble if God occasionally alters fundamental laws and values without getting "caught" by science as it does if we actually verify the exceptions scientifically. In either case, scientific explanations are false and we are deceived.

There's a second reason that God cannot occasionally suspend natural law. If God intervenes from time to time, then God becomes responsible for the cases when God does *not* intervene. Indeed, a benevolent God could not intervene *even once* without incurring the responsibility to intervene in every case where doing so would prevent an instance of innocent suffering. In *The Predicament of Belief* Steven Knapp and I call this the "Not Even Once Principle."

Certainly, these conclusions raise difficulties for many traditional understandings of divine providence. Clearly God does not intervene in every case when innocent persons suffer. But an omnipotent, omniscient, all-good being would wish to respond to innocent suffering and would be able to do so. So it looks like the problem of evil gets the last word—*unless* this entire way of thinking about divine providence is mistaken. Fortunately, it turns out that there is a different way of conceiving of God's providential care.

This defence of providence begins by assuming the non-lawlike nature of our mental life. One does not have to be a dualist to hold this position; many emergentists affirm it as well. (By emergentists I mean those who affirm that evolution produces more complex agents over time, including complex emergent phenomena such as consciousness, subjectivity, morality, and spirituality.) Note also that one does not have to be a theist to affirm the non-lawlike nature of mental; naturalists have also argued for what they call the "non-nomological" nature of consciousness. I have defended this view in numerous publications.<sup>2</sup> The crucial thing to note is that, if (at least parts of) the human mental life is indeed non-nomological,

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<sup>2</sup> See (Clayton 2004); (Clayton 2009); (Clayton and Davies 2006). Donald Davidson is a naturalist philosopher who affirms the nonnomological nature of the mental, though his understanding of the mind-body relationship is not the same as mine. Note that affirming this position does not mean denying that there are neural correlates to consciousness.

then God can influence or “lure” thought without setting aside natural laws. Providence, I affirm, utilizes this sort of influence.

An objection immediately arises: doesn’t this claim raise the “not even once” worry all over again? If God were to directly impart knowledge that would reduce or eliminate suffering, then God would become responsible for those occasions when God does not do so. For example, if God mentally warns people on the beach to run for high ground before the tsunami strikes, doesn’t that make God responsible for all the times that God does not warn people of impending danger?

The objection is correct. It turns out that the Not Even Once Principle holds here as well: God cannot even occasionally impart direct infallible knowledge to people. This means that, when we speak of God’s leading or guiding us in some way, we have to acknowledge that our conclusions involve some amount of interpretation on our own part. Providence is a participatory process: we believe God is luring and guiding, but not in such a way that we can claim infallible knowledge of what we believe God has said.

What then is the mode, the channel, of divine providence? Divine communication can take an axiological form; God can present to a person’s consciousness a value that she is free to embrace, pursue, reject, or ignore. Divine providence can also go beyond communication *per se*, taking the form of God’s bringing about the kind of religious experience in which the subject becomes aware of God’s presence. And of course we can sense God’s leading through sacred scripture, through life events, through nature, and through the voices of others—as long as we do not claim that God has transcended our own role as interpreters of the divine leading, convening direct and infallible knowledge.

In no sense is this conclusion trivial or inconsequential. On this view, God continually lures all creation. There is no reason not to affirm that this is a differentiated lure, personalized for each individual agent, human or otherwise. Because the human and divine agent participate together in constituting the message as it is understood and appropriated, Steven Knapp and I have called this view *a participatory theory of divine action*. Christians call this guiding and directing presence “the mind of Christ,” mediated through the Holy Spirit.

This view represents, we believe, a robust account of God’s presence and guiding. If we are correct, God can influence or “lure” thought without becoming responsible for natural and moral evil. As we summarize this account in *Predicament*, not only has God purposely created a universe in which beings could evolve who are capable of making moral choices and entering into communion with God. God also



purposely and graciously responds to, and interacts with, those beings, accompanying them on their journeys, inspiring their joys, and luring them, gently, into harmony with the divine will. God is not only the creator of the natural regularities that enable finite moral agents to exist in the first place; God is also engaged with us in the modes of gentle guidance, growing illumination, and persistent attraction. Such a God may not be able to stop a fatal mudslide, or warn the villagers of its impending arrival. But this is by no means a form of deism. On the contrary: a participatory conception of divine-human interaction suggests that God is involved in every instance of human action and experience in ways that infinitely exceed our comprehension (excerpted from Clayton and Knapp 2011, 64-66).

This view does not affirm divine interventions that set aside natural law. It does however offer a picture of creation that is based on God's active self-emptying love for a creation that is other than God's self. Genuine otherness can only exist if there is a world where suffering is real. On this theology of providence, suffering is not a phenomenon that God abstractly contemplates but a reality in which God participates—indeed, with a degree of comprehensiveness and intimacy that exceeds our imagination.

## **Speaking of Providence: Six Options**

As we noted at the beginning, to make a full response to the question of providence one has to consider two dimensions. One dimension is the theory of divine action itself: what does one actually affirm that God does? The other dimension is a theory of religious language: how does one interpret language about God and God's activity? Interestingly, this second question, to which we now turn, can be the more difficult one to understand.

Since the famous "Theology and Falsification" debate between Antony Flew, R.M. Hare, and Basil Mitchell in Oxford almost sixty years ago, theologians have been deeply preoccupied with the status of language about God—and rightly so: science may not eliminate language about God, but it does cause us to think more deeply about the status of God-language. Building on the conclusions of the previous section, I propose that there are at least six different ways to construe language about divine providence:

### ***Objective Divine Action, Known through Objective Arguments***

*Option 1.* One could construe the language of providence in much the same way as one construes scientific language. If you do this, you affirm that the theory that God is intervening providentially on behalf of creation, and perhaps on behalf of Christians in particular, is the most likely hypothesis given the total state of evidence available to humans. Bible stores in America are packed with apologetic books of this sort, books with titles such as *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (Josh McDowell) or *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (Timothy Keller).

Although this view is popular among fundamentalists and conservative evangelicals in America, I find it deeply implausible. A closer look reveals how similar these books are to that particular variant of Creationism known as Intelligent Design. Compare, for example, apologetics works of this sort with the newest book from Intelligent Design theorist Stephen Meyer, *Darwin's Doubt* (Meyer 2013). According to Meyer, the rapid diversification of life forms about 530 million years ago that we call the Cambrian Explosion violates core Darwinian principles such as uniformitarianism. Therefore, he argues, the best explanation for the rapid development of new life forms is a direct intervention by God.

Now, for the record I note that I actually do believe in a Creator God; and when I interpret certain phenomena in the natural world *from the perspective of religious faith*, I interpret them as signs of design and providence. But Intelligent Design theorists do something more. Rather than interpreting design language from the standpoint of faith, they interpret it as a direct competitor to natural science. Indeed, they claim that the idea of an Intelligent Designer beats contemporary science in a head to head battle *within the domain of science itself*. If you are not convinced by such claims, as I am not, then you should not interpret the language of providence as a direct alternative to contemporary science in the sense of Option 1. (Recall the opening quote on providence from Calvin: “*Faith infers...*”)

*Option 2.* There is a close cousin to Option 1 that is a bit more plausible, or at least more humble, than Intelligent Design, though in the end I think it is still problematic. Here one admits that language about providence can't be proven scientifically; it's not superior to science in its own domain. But, these thinkers argue, we *can* provide a “theory of error” to explain why most scientists do not accept divine providence. According to this argument, science limits its domain of interest arbitrarily, or unfairly excludes some available evidence, or its prejudice closes it to facts that a neutral observer would acknowledge. So, although we cannot present arguments for God's providential care that scientists “ought” to

acknowledge, we can explain why they won't listen. I suppose you might call this an inferential case for providence.

Note what these first two options share in common. Both affirm that divine providence is an objective truth that can be demonstrated through objective arguments. And both take scientists as the target audience. To show the contrast, let's now jump to the other end of the spectrum—to those who interpret the language of providence as subjective rather than objective.

### ***Subjective Views of Divine Action, Known through Subjective Arguments***

Suppose you believe that the language of science rules out any real divine action in the world. Taking science seriously, you conclude, means that miracles are impossible. You want to still use the language of divine providence, but your position had led you to conclude that God cannot actually do anything at all in the world. When you use the language of providence, then, you probably mean one of the following two options:

*Option 5.* When you speak of God's providential care, you do not mean to make a factual statement of any kind. Facts, after all, you say, belong to science alone. So your language must have a different cognitive status. The first possibility is that you are expressing a kind of hope. "I hope that human existence is not meaningless in the end," you say, "but that there is a God behind it all who is somehow directing human history toward a divine goal." When you speak of providence, you don't actually believe that God is influencing outcomes in the world; and if you don't believe that, you clearly are not claiming that God is really directing the course of history. So your language about providence might be parsed as a statement of hope: "I hope it will turn out, despite what science seems to demand, that God is somehow working in and through the natural order, bringing about meaningful results out of the otherwise random physical events that make up universal history. When I pray for God's providential care, I pray in the guise of hope alone."

In *The Predicament of Belief*, Steven Knapp and I gave this view a more technical expression. Adapting the text (p. 116) to our question, it would read as follows:

The individual is attracted to belief in divine providence and hopes it will turn out to be true. Perhaps she occasionally finds herself believing in it, but she does not have what she regards as good enough reasons to persist in doing so. If she continues to guide her thoughts and actions by the possibility that God in fact exercises providential care for creation, she

does so as a ‘seeker,’ that is, as someone who does not now actually believe in providence (even if she once did) but as one who hopes that it is true and is attracted to the possibility that she might someday come to believe it.

For example, she might disbelieve in providence now, but hope for a new world with real divine action and no suffering and injustice—a world with “no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Rev. 21:4).

*Option 6.* There is a yet weaker possibility. You might hold that the language of providence serves as a useful fiction. You neither believe that God literally does things in the world, nor would you say that you have hope-plus-faith that it will turn out that God is somehow working behind the scenes. Instead, you use the language of providence metaphorically. For you, “I trust that God will see us through” means “we’re going to work very hard to achieve this goal, and I think we’re going to make it.” Or “God helps those who help themselves” means “those who help themselves have a better chance of succeeding.”

Perhaps prayer for you is a way of focusing your inner energies and strengthening your resolve, so that you can be a more effective actor in the world. Or perhaps you feel identified with your religious congregation, and part of belonging to that congregation is using the language that your tradition uses. No one says that you have to take it all literally anyway, and you know that many of your other co-religionists share your doubts about traditional language. Again, we can give this more technical expression:

The individual does not believe in providence, or perhaps believes that statements about divine action are actually false if understood literally, and therefore does not even hope that God is providentially guiding her life or the course of history. But she does regard language of this sort as a valuable metaphor for a proposition or set of propositions she does regard as true. She may at times allow herself to suspend her disbelief in divine action while participating in religious practices like prayer or worship; she does so, however, with at least a tacit awareness that statements about divine providence are not true in their own terms but are really, for her, metaphors for something else. (cf. *Predicament*, 117)

***Real Providence, but the Case is Irreducibly Controversial  
because of Subjective Elements***

Options 1 and 2 try to give objective reasons for providence as an objective fact, and Options 5 and 6 offer subjective reasons for a

subjective, metaphorical use of providential language. Both ends of the spectrum are popular in Western society today. The positions in between are not as widely acknowledged, perhaps because they are more complex. Yet they are arguably the more interesting responses (because they are more robust than Options 5 and 6) as well as more plausible (because they avoid the overly strong claims of Options 1 and 2).

*Option 3.* This time let's begin with the technical statement and then explicate what it means in practice:

The individual believes in Providence but does not expect her belief to be endorsed by scientists or atheist philosophers. Unlike Option 2, however, she cannot point out any specific mistake that her opponents are making. She therefore regards believe in Providence as irreducibly controversial. Yet given her particular experience and point of view, she has what she regards as good reasons to believe in Providence—reasons she thinks that a neutral discussion partner also should regard as good reasons *for an agent in her position*. The individual, in other words, regards her belief in Providence as rationally indicated, but only for agents who share certain of her assumptions and experiences. (cf. *Predicament*, 115)

I think that a great many religious people actually hold a position similar to this. They will often say, “I know all the reasons from science to doubt that God is active in the world, and I also struggle with the problem of evil.” But then they will describe an experience of healing or apparently miraculous care that they (or someone they love) have undergone. Or they will describe a sense that just won't let go that God is present to them and cares for them.

Sometimes their accounts affirm God's miraculous action, transcending the laws of nature. People will say, “As implausible as it seems, I can't deny what I have seen or experienced.” Other times people will continue to affirm providence without the belief that miracles ever occur: “God is somehow watching out over us. I know there is no guarantee that God will keep me or my loved ones from harm; after all, bad things happen to good people. But whether or not miraculous things happen, I continue to believe in God's providential care.” Both groups have what they regard as good reasons for their particular belief in providence. They don't expect to convince a jury of their peers, but somehow that doesn't seem necessary. “Given what I've experienced,” they say, “it just makes sense for me to believe. You would also if you were in my position and had my experiences.”

*Option 4.* Option 4 is similar to the previous position, but it makes a slightly weaker claim. Again, I begin with the technical statement of the view:

The individual believes in Providence but, as in the previous case, does not expect her belief to be endorsed by non-believing scholars, cannot point to a mistake she believes that they are making, and therefore regards her belief as irreducibly controversial. She still has reasons to believe, but now the inferences are complicated enough, the possible criticisms serious enough, and the experiences from which she derives these reasons unclear enough that the status of her belief seems *even to herself* to be ambiguous. So she no longer claims that a neutral observer should regard her reasons as good ones, and she does not regard her belief as rationally indicated, even for an agent with her particular experiences and point of view. Yet she nevertheless has enough reason to believe in Providence that it remains rationally *permissible* for her to do so. (cf. *Predicament*, 115f.)

These two middle positions on the spectrum represent, I believe, the most plausible approaches to providence today. The difference between them is the difference between claiming that belief in Providence is “rationally indicated (for agents with certain experiences)” on the one hand, and “rationally permissible” on the other. The distinction is not difficult to grasp. Some of us feel that anyone who has had the experiences that we have had would believe in divine providence, and that they would be justified in so believing. Others of us believe that it’s *permissible* for us to believe in a divine providential care; we don’t break any rational obligations when we form this belief. But we’re not interested in making (or feel we can’t make) a rational case for this belief. It’s a subjective belief, even a subjective certainty, for us; but that’s as far as we want to go or think we can go.

### **Rethinking Divine Action**

What sort of theology of divine action is indicated by these results? Before closing, it seems important to outline the theological understanding of divine providence that, if this argument holds, is most justified for Christian believers.

For some years I was involved with an international research program known as the “divine action project,” co-sponsored by the Vatican Observatory and the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences in Berkeley and organized by Robert J. Russell. In the end, the Divine Action Project published seven books and played a major role in the development of the religion-science debate over almost 15 years.

Among the achievements of the Divine Action Project were several concrete proposals for non-interventionist objective divine action (NIODA). The goal was to spell out the mechanisms, or at least the

general scientific parameters, by which God might be able to engage in objective divine action in the world without breaking natural laws. The Cambridge physicist and priest John Polkinghorne used chaos theory to advocate for one sense of divine action that met this goal. Perhaps the most ambitious and best known proposal was the suggestion that the indeterminacy of quantum physics, and in particular the collapse of the wave function, offers an opening for God to influence the world without breaking any natural laws (Russell et al. 1995). God might then use evolution to ‘amplify’ these quantum-level influences and perhaps to guide the course of evolution (Russell et al. 1998). The leading advocates of this position were Robert Russell, Tom Tracy, Nancey Murphy, and George Ellis.

I have come to hold reservations about the attempt to ground objective divine action in quantum-level divine influence. Now that we have considered the six options for a theory of divine providence in some detail, the reason for these reservations should be easier to describe. The quantum approach worked to parse divine action as a purely objective phenomenon defended by purely objective arguments, in the spirit of Options 1 and 2 above. By contrast, the approaches to divine action that we have been focusing on—Options 3 and 4—involve individual experiences that cannot simply be translated into the language of science, experiences that are to some extent *essentially personal* (or interpersonal). If you are drawn to Options 3 and 4 in the way that I am, you will tend to approach questions of divine action using a rather different set of assumptions than the quantum-level theory uses.

Unlike Options 5 and 6, however, our position does not make language about God’s providence purely subjective. Language about divine action is not merely language about what human beings think and do; instead, the affirmation is that God really plays some role. This claim—however challenging it may be to translate it into more philosophical terms—allows us to draw more directly on biblical and theological language.

One is immediately struck by how different are the biblical concerns. They start with the nature of God and the goals of divine communication, which Jesus associates with the kingdom of God. The High Priestly Prayer in John 14–17 offers a Christological and pneumatological theory of divine action. It centres on the Paraclete, the one who “comes alongside.” The central New Testament questions are then: *to whom* does the Holy Spirit come? What is the nature and what are the goals of the kingdom of God? What is the call to discipleship on the part of the receiver?

In the New Testament account, the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ, so the service of God and the emulation of Jesus’ teaching and priorities

are intrinsic to the nature of divine action. And those priorities are extremely clear: God's providential care focuses on the outcast and marginalized. As Mary proclaims in the Magnificat:

He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;  
 he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.  
 He has brought down rulers from their thrones  
 but has lifted up the humble.  
 He has filled the hungry with good things  
 but has sent the rich away empty. (Luke 1:47, 51-53)

"[God's] power is made perfect in weakness," writes the author of 2 Corinthians (12:9). This general theological principle sets the context for divine action. Understood Christologically, it is inseparable from the famous kenotic passage in Phil. 2, which may represent the oldest extant Christian hymn. The nature of God is most fully known by the one who "being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but emptied himself (εκενωσεν), taking on the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of man" (Phil. 2:6-7).

John Caputo captures this framework for any talk of providence in his book on *The Weakness of God*:

The perverse core of Christianity lies in being a weak force. The weak force of God is embodied in the broken body on the cross, which has thereby been broken loose from being and broken out upon the open plain of the powerlessness of God. The power of God is not pagan violence, brute power, or vulgar magic; it is the power of powerlessness, the power of the call, the power of protest that rises up from innocent suffering and calls out against it, the power that says no to unjust suffering, and finally, the power to suffer-with (*sym-pathos*) innocent suffering, which is perhaps the central Christian symbol. (Caputo 2006, 43, citing Placer 1994)

## Conclusion

We have explored six different ways that one might affirm divine providence in an age of science, focusing in particular on options 3 and 4. By combining a theology of divine action with these options, I have sought to turn attention to the two dimensions of the theological task: the combination of *what* is affirmed and *how* it is affirmed. In theology today, the complexities of the two dimensions are nowhere more pronounced than in the debate about divine action. Sadly, the debate has splintered into two warring camps: those who affirm objective divine action for (what



they take to be) fully objective reasons, versus those who affirm subjective divine action based on purely subjective reasons. Far less attention is focused on what we might call the hybrid views—those that make a case for real providence while admitting that the arguments are irreducibly controversial because of their subjective elements. Yet the hybrid views may well be the most plausible and fruitful.

My argument has also associated the six options with specific answers to the providence question. Although this link—what philosophers would call the link of epistemology and ontology—is contentious, I believe it is justified. When theologians treat providential language as a direct competitor to natural science, or when they make a philosophical case for miracles, they almost inevitably avail themselves of ‘objective’ arguments (Options 1 and 2). By contrast, when theologians centre their theory of providence on hope alone, or when they treat it as pervasively metaphorical, they tend to employ a more subjective theory of knowledge, of the sort described in Options 5 and 6. Thus it is no coincidence that the participatory theology of divine action that I’ve defended here pairs itself naturally with the epistemological options 3 and 4, in which subjective human experience plays a role in justifying knowledge claims without rendering those claims “merely” or “purely” subjective.

When it comes to divine action, humans are disposed to seek dramatic miracles and signs. “Unless you people see signs and wonders,” Jesus said at one point, “you will never believe” (Jn. 4:48). The heart of a theology of providence, however, lies elsewhere. Perhaps we need to learn to look more closely for the gentle lure of God that is always already around us.

In her famous 1927 novel, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Willa Cather tells the tale of two French missionaries in primitive New Mexico. In the closing narrative of Part One, Father Joseph speaks movingly of the miracles associated with the shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe, extolling “the reassurance of that visitation.” He concludes, “Doctrine is well enough for the wise, Jean; but the miracle is something we can hold in our hands and love.” But the bishop responds,

Where there is great love there are always miracles. One might almost say that an apparition is human vision corrected by divine love. ... The Miracles of the Church seem to me to rest not so much upon faces or voices or healing power coming suddenly near to us from afar off, but upon our perceptions being made finer, so that for a moment our eyes can see and our ears can hear what is there about us always.

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## CHAPTER TWO

# WILL RESURRECTION BE A LAW OF NATURE? SCIENCE AS DIVINE ACTION AT THE END OF THE WORLD

MARK HARRIS

### Introduction

Although eschatology is a major theme in Christian theology, contemporary mainstream scholarship has largely avoided becoming embroiled in specific questions about the end of the world, preferring to leave them to the more literal-minded. Hence, doomsday expectation has largely been the domain of fundamentalist Christian movements, Harold Camping's two failed predictions in 2011 providing a case in point.

On the other hand, contemporary cosmological research also makes literal doomsday predictions, but on the basis of scientific research rather than biblical texts. Several scholars working in the science-religion field have in recent years countered this challenge from science by pointing to traditional Christian expectations of “a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev. 21:1) as found in the New Testament. But in order to bypass the difficult problems of interpretation presented by the book of Revelation—that mainstay of fundamentalist apocalypticism—the theme of *resurrection* is emphasised as the key motif for investigation. Thus, the main New Testament texts under the microscope have been the four Gospel accounts of the empty tomb, and the resurrection appearances of Jesus, and Paul's discussion of resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15. The approach taken is to say that, if it can be demonstrated that Jesus rose bodily, then not only is that a clear miracle of hope pointing beyond the desolate pessimism of scientific predictions, but it suggests something important about the end of this world and the creation of the new. It suggests that the physical matter of this world—together with the science that describes it—will not be done away with entirely, but will form the basis for what is to come.

This chapter is directly concerned with the proposed science of the new creation; hence my title: Will resurrection one day be a law of nature? If so, will divine action be “scientific”? In the spirit of the scientific method, my approach towards these questions will be primarily empirical, concerned with the data that we possess: principally the New Testament resurrection texts (which I will consider to be represented chiefly by the following chapters: Mt. 28; Mk 16; Lk. 24; Jn 20-21; 1 Cor. 15). To be precise, my method will not only be empirical, but *hermeneutical*: I will be concerned with analysing the style of reading performed by those science-religion scholars who have taken up the challenge from modern cosmology: John Polkinghorne, Robert Russell, and David Wilkinson. Each of these scholars reads the New Testament texts as inferring a *bodily* resurrection of Jesus. While these readings are largely in accord with traditional Christian beliefs about the resurrection of Jesus, it is worth pointing out that wider scholarly opinion within Christian theology is by no means uniform. While there are many scholars who affirm bodily resurrection, there are many who question it and apply alternative interpretations to the resurrection texts. Among science-religion scholars, for instance, Arthur Peacocke was openly “agnostic” about the empty tomb traditions and the idea that Jesus was raised bodily, preferring instead to draw attention to the disciples’ experience of continuity between the risen Jesus and the Jesus they had known before (Peacocke 1990, 1993, 332). The recent study by Clayton and Knapp (2011) takes this approach still further, seeing the resurrection of Jesus less in terms of an objective happening to the body of Jesus and more in terms of an opening-up of spiritual participation with believers in the life of God. In their approach, Easter becomes rather like Pentecost.

Such non-bodily and non-objective interpretations notwithstanding, this chapter will focus on the *bodily objective* interpretations of Polkinghorne, Russell, and Wilkinson. My motivation is to investigate the degree to which the New Testament texts might be said to speak to the nature of physical reality, especially the physical reality of the end of the world. This is not an insignificant issue in New Testament interpretation. The issue of historical/objective/material reality, and the degree to which we can extract it from the biblical text, has been shrouded in controversy for more than a century of New Testament scholarship. Biblical scholars have expended a great deal of effort since the nineteenth century in attempting to clarify the relationship between the text and the notional historical reality to which it refers, and this has been the central aim in the search for the historical Jesus. So far, despite hundreds (if not thousands) of articles and books written on this very question of the historical reality

of Jesus, the relationship has still not been fully resolved. Hence, it is worth highlighting at this point that, if this exercise is difficult when the reality is the *historical* Jesus, then how much harder must the difficulties be when the reality being searched for—the *risen* Jesus—is altogether more controversial, and more out-of-this world (literally when the tradition of ascension is taken into account) than the *historical* Jesus could ever be. This point about the elusiveness of reality—resurrection reality—will therefore be an important focus of this chapter, along with the degree to which the New Testament may enlighten it.

## Science and the end of the world

First, we must examine scientific predictions for the end of the world. The relevant natural sciences—cosmology, earth sciences, and the environmental sciences—suggest a number of scenarios, all of them depressing. First, the world could end effectively on a local (that is, global) scale. Human life on this planet might become difficult or impossible because of catastrophes of our own making. Evidence pointing towards accelerating climate change, with attendant human disasters in the form of catastrophic storms, floods, and droughts, bears such a fear out. There is also the very real possibility of catastrophe from space, as demonstrated by the extinction of the dinosaurs at the end of the Cretaceous period some sixty-five million years ago, possibly precipitated by a monumental asteroid impact. In fact, mass extinctions have occurred throughout the history of life on earth; some 99% of all species that have ever existed on earth are now extinct, and while humans have been particularly successful in the past 10,000 years or so there is no reason to suppose that we are especially immune against a future catastrophe.

On a slightly less local scale—beyond the immediate environment of the earth—we face danger from our sun. While the sun is the earth's source of light, heat (and thereby life), it is steadily expanding, and it will one day certainly extinguish all life on earth. Perhaps five billion years from now the sun will reach its maximum size as a “red giant”, by which time the earth's seas and atmosphere will have long since boiled away. If humankind is to survive this into the far future, we must find an alternative home.

Even if humans escape such catastrophes and find an alternative home, we are doomed in the still longer term because of what is sometimes called “freeze or fry”. As we know from the Big Bang model, the universe has been expanding since its birth, and cosmologists can describe the history of the universe relatively well up to the present day. Many cosmologists

believe that a period of rapid exponential expansion in the earliest fractions of a second—called inflation—explains much of what we see of the present rather homogeneous structure of the universe. Where will it go from here? Solutions to Einstein’s Theory of General Relativity made in the 1920s and 30s suggest three possible scenarios for the future, all of which depend critically upon the density of the universe, as the force of gravity which works against the expansion from the Big Bang seeks to pull the universe back together again.

The first scenario describes the situation where the universe is denser than the critical value. This is called the “closed universe”. In this case, the force of gravity will one day overcome the expansion. The universe will continue to expand for perhaps 500 billion years from now, before it contracts upon itself in a dramatic reversal of the original Big Bang, aptly-named the “Big Crunch”.

The second scenario (the “open universe”) describes how the universe will continue to expand indefinitely, much as it has done since the Big Bang. The temperature will gradually decrease (as it has been since the Big Bang), until life as we know it becomes impossible; this is the so-called “Big Freeze”, where the universe tends towards a state of maximum entropy. Ultimately all of the energy and matter localised in stars and planets becomes distributed evenly throughout the universe: “heat death”.

In the third type of model (the “flat universe”), the density is exactly equal to the critical value, and the universe will also expand indefinitely into another “Big Freeze”.

It is difficult to be certain which of these three models is most appropriate, given that so little is understood about the total mass-energy of the universe, but cosmologists currently favour the third scenario, the flat universe. And even though these three scenarios are now understood to be too simplistic (Penrose 2010, 59–67)—to the extent that more complicated scenarios such as the Big Rip, Big Brake and Big Lurch have been proposed (Saudek 2001, 139-40)—the long-term prospect for biological life still appears bleak. It seems likely that we will either “freeze or fry” ultimately if these models are reliable, probably freeze (Russell 2008, 300).

On the other hand, two rather bizarre glimmers of hope have emerged, both highly implausible from our present perspective. First, humans might be able to escape this universe before life becomes impossible. If, as many cosmologists suspect, our universe is one of many (the multiverse), then it has been suggested that black holes in our universe might work as escape hatches (“wormholes”) into other, younger universes (Wilkinson 2010, 17-18).