

THE CONCEPT OF GOD AFTER THEODICY

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“It is the Son himself who is the Providence
of the Father.”

If, by “Providence,” we mean the manner in which God governs the world in view of the good, this notion today seems untenable or even scandalous. The idea that the world has a rational order, willed by God, for the good of humanity, and which is guiding history towards an end, hardly seems likely. After the horrors of the twentieth century, the notion of Providence has become the primary argument our contemporaries offer against the existence of God: if God existed, he would not have allowed the massacre of so many innocent victims. But in the name of what concept of God is this objection formulated? When we say something of this sort, are we thinking of God in a manner appropriate to the reality? In order to respond to this objection, certain thinkers hope to save God by giving up the notion of Providence. They thus affirm that God, far from being all-powerful as the Creed proclaims, stands impotent before human history. A notable example of this view appears in Hans Jonas’ *The Concept of God After Auschwitz*.¹ Is there a way out of these alternatives?

In reality, what has led people to reject God is not the recent tragedies, but rather the concept in which we have trapped God, an improper, rationalistic notion of his transcendence. This idolatrous

¹Hans Jonas, *Le Concept de Dieu après Auschwitz, Une voix juive* (Paris, 1995) [French translation of *Der Gottesbegriff nach Auschwitz: Eine jüdische Stimme* (Frankfurt am Main, 1984)].

notion is incarnated in “theodicy,” an understanding of God that seeks to justify him by showing that the order of the world conforms to divine justice. It seems to me indispensable in the first place to investigate the origin of the concept of Providence that is presupposed here (both by the champions of theodicy and by its adversaries), and to ask whether it genuinely corresponds to a biblical (and Christian) understanding of Providence (I). Next, I will explore the interpretation of Providence that lies at the heart of the great rational theologies of the West, showing how “theodicy” logically ends in the death of God (II). Finally, I will attempt to explain in what sense we can still speak today of Providence, without denying the scandal of evil and the suffering of the innocent, and by trying to avoid falling back into the rut of rationalistic concepts (III).

I. Biblical Providence and the Wisdom of the Ancients

It was initially Greek wisdom, and Stoic philosophy in particular, that developed the notion of Providence. The Bible borrows the notion from this ancient world, but always in a critical manner, modifying it in light of the meaning of God’s sovereign freedom.

1. The philosophical concept: a necessary destiny

Even if we find in Plato the notion of a natural order, and in Aristotle various forms of economic and political forethought (or “Providence”), it is really the Stoics who developed the concept of Providence. For them, there exists a universal order of the world, which is governed by a rational principle. Indeed, the divine coincides with this cosmic order, which is like a beautiful organism in which all things are interrelated. According to Cicero, the world “is fashioned and guided by divine Providence” (*The Nature of the Gods*, 3.92); it must therefore “be governed by their [i.e., the gods’] will and their Providence” (2.80). *Pro-videre*, in this context, has the meaning of “providing for,” i.e., of seeing that means and ends work in concert to form a harmonious whole. It would be useless to pray to the gods if they did not hear our prayers and come to our aid (1). But in order to construct the theodicy that this view calls for, it is nevertheless

necessary to draw a clear distinction between the goods that the gods give to us and the use we make of those goods (3.70). For the world is governed by an implacable determinism: events follow one another according to the law of cause and effect, in such a way that the human being is powerless to change anything in the course of events.

The cosmological thesis thus has ethical implications.² The individual is limited to giving his assent to the necessity that governs things. Stoicism simultaneously develops a doctrine of assent (which is the sole locus of interior freedom, since everything else falls under the rule of necessity), and advocates the surrendering of one's own will, which in order to be just must consent to the order of the world. Any attempt to rebel is illusory, and leads precisely to failure and the suffering it entails. As Seneca puts it, man is like a dog bound to a chariot; if he consents to his fate, he will trot along in pace with the yoke, and if he resists, he will be dragged by force: "The Fates lead those who accept them and drag those who do not." Wisdom, on the other hand, consists in conforming oneself to this rational necessity, in recognizing that one is an integral part of a harmonious whole. Epictetus thus says to God: "From now on, make of me what you will. My thoughts belong to you. I am yours. I will not rebel against anything that you have chosen for me. Lead me where you will, dress me in whatever clothes please you" (*Conversations* 2.16.42). Man is a puppet in the hands of God, he is determined by the system of causes. The meaning of human existence thus consists in giving one's consent to the divine order of the world, and in changing our desires rather than changing this order.

What happiness are we allowed to hope for? Clearly, Providence does not guarantee happiness to anyone. How, then, do we explain the fact that certain good people are afflicted with misfortune? In his treatise on *Providence*, Seneca responds to this objection. Seneca's response can be articulated in several points: 1) In the first place, the gods are "always beneficent towards those who are good" (1.5). What seems to be a tribulation is in fact nothing but the severity of a good family father who holds his children to a strict discipline. 2) Moreover, "Nothing bad can happen to a good man" (2.1). The shock of adversity does not disturb a valiant soul, because it is the soul that gives color to events: the soul's serenity and interior peace allow it to

²See Rémi Brague, *La sagesse du monde: histoire de l'expérience humaine de l'univers* (Paris: Fayard, 2001).

transform misfortune into a test. 3) Finally, even if the world falls subject to the tyranny of a despot, the wise man always knows how to escape: "His arm is all he needs to open up the path to freedom" (2.10); the possibility of suicide always remains an option for him. Freud would no doubt see in these three arguments a subtle form of bad faith, which aims to deny the persistence of suffering, and even the reality of evil, in order to keep up a beautiful metaphysical edifice. This beautiful system, which excludes the possibility of the suffering of innocents, works out the most effective arguments for denying the evidence.

The need to acquit God of evil leads in any event to a morality that does not promise any earthly good, or any external happiness, to the fortress of the soul. The only happiness one may hope for is the peace won by virtue. This attempt to "plead the gods' case" (1.1), the case of those responsible for the order of the world, leads to accepting evils as something necessary:

The events that you call horrible, grievous, and abominable, are beneficial first of all to the very ones they afflict, and then to the general run of men, which is more the object of the gods' concern than particular individuals; moreover, . . . those who are afflicted accept their afflictions and . . . if they do not accept them, they deserve their misfortune. (3.1)

The logic of Providence leads to the reduction of ethics to the will's consent. "God hardens, tests, and persecutes those that he esteems and loves" (4.7). Do we not see here, in this lofty form of pagan wisdom, the echo of arguments traditionally considered Christian?

2. The Old Testament and Providence as personal destiny

The concept of Providence, confused with imperial power, inscribed on monuments, and engraved on coins, had become a cultural banality. The Bible, as it became part of Mediterranean culture, took over this vocabulary. The biblical authors also thought that God had concern for human beings, that he watched over them and was gracious to them, but in a much more concrete manner than the Stoics' rational order. The creation of the world out of nothing implies that God has the capacity to transcend the order of the world and to change it in a miraculous way. The election of Israel prompts

this people to privilege the defense of the particular over what Seneca calls “the general run of men.”

In the book of Ecclesiastes, the Providence of a God who does nothing other than provide good things runs up against its limitations. The wisdom of Ecclesiastes explores a contradiction: on the one hand, it believes that God is just, and that he thus shares his goodness with people on earth; on the other hand, it experiences the fact that our life is brief, and insufficient for attaining happiness:

What is best for man is to eat and drink and taste happiness. . .; everyone to whom God gives wealth and property, with the power to partake of them, so that he takes his share and enjoys the fruit of their labor, has a gift from God. Thus, indeed, he no longer broods over the brevity of his life, for God fills him with the joy of his heart. (Eccl 5:17-19)

Providence can clearly be seen here: God looks after man’s material needs, through the fruits of nature and work. Providence consists precisely in forgetting the limitations of our life and our well-being. But it is contradicted by the reverse experience: It is possible for God to give wealth, goods, and honors, and not allow us to enjoy them, for suffering, sickness, and death prevent us from doing so: “All of that is vanity and evil sorrow” (6:2). Visible Providence turns out to be quite brief; it changes into vanity and suffering.

Thus, even while celebrating God as the provider of all goods, the Bible does not intend to deny the sufferings of the just man, in the name of a rational ideal. It is precisely by pointing to this scandal, in a lament addressed to God, that Job eulogizes divine solicitude: “You have accorded me life and favor [*eleos*], and your solicitude has preserved my breath” (Job 10:12). But, in difficult or dangerous moments, Job prefers to call on God’s saving action rather than on an ordering intelligence or even a Providence. The statement cited here is, moreover, not a general truth, but a prayer of thanksgiving for God’s merciful interventions in Job’s personal history. And above all, the act of giving thanks is here the flip side of the complaint that it underscores: Job claims to be bitter, disgusted with life, and asks whether God does not wish to destroy this marvelous work of his called man. Providence is here that of a God who hides himself before a man who suffers, a man who seeks God and is unable to see his justice.

The heart of the problem thus lies in the mystery of divine freedom. The Psalms praise the greatness and the benevolence of God: "Yahweh is good to all, and his mercy extends over all his works" (145:9). "All look to you to give them their food in its time; you give it to them, they gather it up; you open your hand, they are filled with good things; you hide your face, they grow frightened; you take away their breath, and they perish" (104:27-29). God takes an interest in his creatures, giving them being and life, and providing for their needs; but when he turns away from them, and abandons them to their own forces, the creatures fall back into nothingness. Divine benevolence is not subject to the necessary order of the world: what God has given in his sovereign freedom, he can freely take back. Divine action introduces ruptures into the continuity of causes and effects, and faith arises from reading these ruptures as divine interventions. Thus, the miracle keeps the order of the world from being a rigid order.

The precise term "Providence," clearly borrowed from Greek literature and philosophy, is mentioned on three occasions in the Bible, all of them in the (Greek) book of *Wisdom*. This book is a meditation on God's clemency with regard to the pagans (the Egyptians):

The entire world lies before you . . . like a drop of morning dew. . . . But you have taken pity on all because you can do all things (*panta dunasai*), you close your eyes to the sins of men in order that they might repent. Indeed, you love everything that exists, and you are not disgusted by any of the things you have made, for if you had hated something, you would not have formed it. (11:22-25, in the Septuagint)

The book of *Wisdom* assures the believer: If divine omnipotence infinitely transcends the order of this lowly world and makes use of it as he wills, it is for all that no less informed by divine wisdom and love, which do not desire its death and destruction, even if they are able to bring it about. *A contrario*, the book of *Wisdom* admits—against the Greek philosophical tradition—that there exists a place in the world that lies in some respect outside of divine Providence: hell, in which the impious are "banished from eternal Providence" (17:2). Without being subordinate to it, divine generosity gives itself freely into the order of the world, but the just suffering of sinners implies that they exclude themselves in a certain respect from that generosity. It is thus in confronting Providence with divine justice that we must

interpret the passage: “The Lord takes care (*pronoiei*) of all” (6:7). More precisely, human actions are inserted into a causal order willed by God and ordered toward the salvation of all: “This ship was devised by the thirst for gain, and was constructed by the wisdom of the craftsman, but it is your Providence, Father, that governs it (*diakubema pronoia*), for you have forged a path unto the sea . . . showing that you are able to save all things” (14:2-4). This text will become for certain medieval theologians: “You govern *all things* by your Providence.”³ In this form, it will be able to be grafted onto the Stoic notion of Providence.

On God’s part, freedom, love, and omnipotence, and on man’s part, a recognition of the suffering of the just: all of these elements make divine Providence a personal relation, experienced by man as his destiny and vocation, and not as the simple necessity of a best possible rational order.

3. The New Testament: man, the birds of the heavens, and the lilies of the fields

It is remarkable that the New Testament never employs the term “Providence,” given that its authors were probably familiar with it, at the very least through the Book of Wisdom. On the other hand, the Gospel has no shortage of texts on divine benevolence and solicitude. The verse from a psalm—“He gives beasts their pasture, he gives to the ravens’ hatchlings what they cry for” (147:9)—in Luke becomes on Jesus’ lips:

Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And which of you by being anxious can add a cubit to his span of life? If then you are not able to do as small a thing as that, why are you anxious about the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass which is alive in the field today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you, O men of little faith! And do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, nor be of anxious mind.

³Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (=ST), I, 22, 1.

For all the nations of the world seek these things; and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, seek his kingdom, and these things shall be yours as well. (Lk 12:24-31)

Christ's discourse here constitutes the cornerstone of the theology of abandonment to divine Providence. Does this mean that Christ preaches something like the philosophical concept of Providence? In order to understand the significance of what is intended here, we must return to the context in which these two declarations occur. In Luke, Christ calls his disciples to this abandonment in order to detach themselves from the goods of this world: above all, he is responding to a question that one of them had put to him: "Master, tell my brother to share his inheritance with me" (12:13). Our two texts are framed by an exhortation: "Fool! This very night your soul will be asked of you. And then what will come of what you have prepared?" (12:20), and by a command: "Sell your belongings and give them as alms" (12:33). We stand within a period of waiting for the imminent end of time: it is useless to worry about the world; instead, one must make preparations for the master's return. In the parallel text of Matthew, Providence is explicitly related to the demand to live without worrying about tomorrow, to live for the present and not for the future: "Thus, have no worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be filled with its own concerns; each day has troubles sufficient for itself" (Mt 6:34). Christ is here preaching a "blessed imprudence": this is more an affirmation of the salvation of man (who passes through the destruction of the present world) than a thesis on the ordering of the cosmos. As such, it resolves the difficulty of Ecclesiastes: far from bringing us happiness, the goods of this world (food, drink, clothing) bring only anxiety; peace, or the absence of anxiety, can occur only through a certain indifference to these goods.

This discourse presents itself as an *a fortiori* argumentation. What God does for the lowliest of creatures, the birds and the lilies of the fields, he is able to do for the most excellent creature, man. But this *a fortiori* reasoning reverses itself in a paradoxical way: the most important thing, here, is not to be nourished or clothed like the pagans (for that is "what the nations of the world seek after," Lk 12:30), but to seek the Kingdom of God. Thus, to the one who knows that the Kingdom of God is near (or in our midst), material goods ("our needs," 12:30) will be given in addition. Christ thus announces to his disciples: 1) that they should not concern themselves with this world, but with the other; and 2) that the goods of this world, which we need,

will be given to us in addition. But what does “in addition” mean in this case? Will the Kingdom provide the same food and clothing as that which we find in this world? Or are these goods given to us in a different mode, in such a way that their content is ultimately insignificant? Moreover, if we analyze the comparison all the way to the end, it does more to disquiet than to reassure: the destiny of the flowers of the fields is to be thrown into the fire in order to be burned. If we consider this comparison in relation to man’s destiny, it means that the one who follows Christ ought to have no anxiety about tomorrow, even if tomorrow holds the possibility that one may be thrown into the fire. More important than the uncertain reality (of tomorrow) is what one must be willing to risk, the possibility of death or brutal suffering. What one risks may not turn out to be the actual content of the day to come, but the possibility that such a day may come is something we must reckon with: verse 25 recalls explicitly what threatens us: “Who among you, through worry, is able to add a thing to your age (or size? *hèlikian*)?” The absence of care is not being carefree. Placing our concerns into God’s hands, concentrating on the Kingdom, does not mean we are kept from the possibility of an imminent death. When we take a close look at it, this text, which has become too familiar, unsettles more convictions in us than it seemed to do at first glance.

The parallel text of Matthew likewise rests on an *a fortiori* reasoning: “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And yet, not one of them will fall to earth without the permission of your Father. As for you, even the hairs on your head are counted. So do not be afraid; you are worth more than a multitude of sparrows” (10:29-32). But this passage is inspired by the same feeling of urgency and tragedy. It illustrates the following principle: “The disciple is not above the master . . . if they called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more the people of the household” (10:24-25). Divine Providence does not preserve people from painful trials; quite to the contrary, Christ promises his disciples that they will undergo the same trials as their master. They will be, like him, handed over to the Prince of this world.

Divine Providence gives to man only the most essential of consolations when he is undergoing a trial. For what is at issue is ultimately what is most essential to the human being, his inviolable soul: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body, but who cannot kill the soul” (28). It ends in the same assurance of divine intercession at the moment of judgment: “Whoever declares himself for me before men, I too will declare myself for him before my Father who is in

heaven" (32). And it concludes with the same appeal to spiritual battle: "I have not come to bring peace, but the sword" (34).

Faced with these absolute stakes that the encounter with the Kingdom of God represents, our life and death are in play, and material goods are laughable. To be detached from material goods guarantees precisely that one no longer has any unsatisfied needs: "When I sent you without a purse, nor beggar's pouch, nor sandals, did you lack anything?" (Lk 22:35). The demand for detachment is reinforced at the precise moment in which it is time to give a final fight, an eschatological battle against the forces of evil. It is, indeed, at this decisive moment of battle that one must sell one's goods and take arms: "But now, let the one who has a purse take it, and so too the one who has a pouch, and let one who does not have a sword sell his coat so that he may buy one" (36). Are these expressions symbolic, or are they traces of an earthly messianism in Luke's work? However it may be, they depict universal hostility, and the necessity of committing all of our human forces in the fight against evil.

We can get a better sense of the rejection of anxiety in the light of Matthew 10:19: "When they hand you over, have no fear about what to say or how to say it, for in that hour what you will say will be given to you; indeed, it will not be you who is speaking but the Spirit of your Father speaking in you." As Christ understands it, Providence is not the certainty of passing unharmed through the fire, but rather the presence of the Spirit who will allow us to give witness before our judges.

Despite a difference in vocabulary and distinct orientations (a call to detachment for Luke 6, and the announcement of persecution for Matthew 10), the two discourses on "Providence" possess the same structure and the same dramatic significance. The discourses are strictly related. At the source of both texts, we find the imminence of trials: the present world must be abolished so that a new world may arise, in a birth that is not without labor pains. But these promised trials are subject to a more comprehensive and reassuring principle: if God is concerned about the smallest things in the order of nature, then if there is something even higher at stake, he will be present at their side. They ought not to be afraid or have anxiety about the world, for at the ultimate horizon of their spiritual struggle stands the God who saves; the Spirit is given to them as a consoler and advocate (*paraclete*) before their judges.

Christ does not connect the question of the origin of evil with divine solicitude. In Luke's Gospel, his contemporaries question him about the enigma of evil: why are there martyrs of faith, people destroyed in bloody massacres, why are there innocent victims of natural catastrophes? Jesus' answer has two parts. The first part wrests the disciples away from the rigid logic of culpability, which justifies unjust and incomprehensible occurrences by making them the providential chastisement of sin. He declares the innocence of the victims and shows that they are not paying for any past crime. "And do you think that these eighteen people killed by the collapse of the tower of Siloam were more guilty than anyone else in Jerusalem? By no means, I tell you" (Lk 13:4). But this recognition of the absurdity of history, ultimately the source of the greatest wisdom, seems afterward to become cruel and threatening, fraught with the wrath of a vengeful God, as Christ continues: "If you do not repent, you will all perish in the same way" (5). Far from inserting the misfortune of some into a chain of providential decisions, and reintegrating them into a greater good for those who listen to his word, Christ makes them the first victims of an imminent final judgment, and an example of the chastisement that will fall to their contemporaries if they do not repent. Far from providing for man's most fundamental need, which is to live, divine Providence seems ordered to death: those who have not yet perished in natural catastrophes and wars are simply being preserved for a coming judgment.

But can we remain content with this obvious interpretation? This passage is followed by the parable of the man with the fig tree: in this parable, Christ gives a reprieve to believers: he reminds us that, even if the fig tree is sterile, God will not cut it down immediately, but will give it an opportunity to produce fruit: "Leave it alone for another year, so that I may cultivate the ground around it and fertilize it. Perhaps it will give fruit in the future. If it does not, you may cut it down" (13:9). The terrible judgment on the innocent killed at Siloam must be understood in turn as an element of divine pedagogy: that which at first appears to be a sign of injustice and divine wrath, namely, the suffering of the innocent, seems to be such a sign because we are finite and sinners, incapable of understanding the divine plan ordered by charity. But what we do not understand remains the wisdom of God and his plan of love. We must therefore reverse our reading, and understand that the death of these people, even if it occurs through incomprehensible—and, by us, unbearable—ways, always occurs in view of the Kingdom of God, and calls us to conversion so that we

may prepare ourselves for the Kingdom. Divine Providence does not fix for us a bed of roses; in a way that we cannot understand, God calls us through charity to charity. That is why he calls some now and extends the life of others, in order to allow them, by different paths, to enter into his Kingdom.

The Gospel of John (in a scene likewise connected with Siloam) explores the same paradox in a different manner. To a theoretical question about divine justice—“Why was this man born blind? Did he sin, or was it his parents?” (Jn 9:2)—Christ does not give a theoretical response other than to overturn all values: “I have come into this world in order to provoke judgment (*krima*): so that those who cannot see may see, and so that those who see may become blind” (9:39). This crisis is the only valid judgment, one that carries out the essential discernment. For the reversal is the *judgment*—in which one would claim to be assured of being justified and would justify the suffering of the other as a punishment—*that condemns us*: “If you had been blind, you would not have sinned; but now that you say ‘we see!’ your sin remains” (9:41). But this non-response to the fundamental question (the enigma of evil) is accompanied by a practical response: Christ has fought evil, and he has conquered it through the healing of the one born blind.

Although it does not speak of Providence, the message of the New Testament transforms the Old Testament concept (and *a fortiori* the philosophical concept) in a profound way:

1) God’s intervention in history is promised to human beings because he wants to save them. The coming of the Son transforms all things from top to bottom. Within the horizon of divine love, it acquires the form of the gift of his Spirit.

2) His action surpasses the opposition between the promise of material goods and the suffering of the just: what Christ promises to the just and to believers is precisely tribulation. At the moment in which the Kingdom of God is going to come, they will be plunged into torments in view of the final battle. The universe will be handed over to the Prince of this world. The trial promised to the just seals the transition to the new state of being children of God: consider the trial of Genesis 3 (the sin of Adam), for example, which involved the definitive acceptance of becoming a child and not merely a creature, a part of the world. Christian Providence thus does not spare Christians adversity.

3) Divine concern seeks to assure human beings peace of soul. God has taken upon himself, not only human suffering, but also human anxiety. If anxiety is an essential dimension of existence in the world (this world is anxious about itself, tomorrow has its own anxieties), Christians, who are not part of this world, are not subject to it: there is such a thing as “blessed imprudence.” Christian Providence is not a statement about the order of the world, but an exhortation to depart from the world (or to enter into the Kingdom).

4) This does not absolve each disciple from doing everything in his power to recognize the Kingdom of God, to receive it, and to bring it about around him. In these tragic conjectures, Christ appeals to human freedom. He makes the person responsible for the good of the other.

The absence of concern for tomorrow does not prevent the believer from being concerned about God, the other, and himself. Man will cease to be concerned about his ‘self,’ without forgetting to be concerned about himself (about the essential thing, namely, salvation). Christ therefore enjoins his disciples not to ask God to fulfill their needs (as the pagans do with their concept of Providence), but to abandon themselves to the power of God whose sovereign benevolence ‘brings fulfillment to his beloved while he sleeps’ (as the Psalm says). Divine goodness does not assure believers that they will be victors in this world. Providence is not to be understood from the perspective of an abstract and rationalistic God, but rather from the perspective of Christ, who is the model of all relationship to divine Providence (“the disciple is not greater than the master”). It must therefore be read from a perspective that is at once christological and trinitarian: the Providence experienced by the Son is clearly that of the Father, who knows our needs. It culminates with the gift of the Spirit.

II. In the Realm of Metaphysics: Providence or Theodicy?

Ought we to infer that the hand of God comes to a stop before evil? But then, where is Providence? In order to respond to this difficulty, theology navigates between two pitfalls, a rationalistically metaphysical theology and the philosophy of history. The first runs the risk of confining divine Providence to an abstract and inaccessible transcendence, the second of reducing it to its incarnation in human freedom.

Leibniz's thought can be considered the culminating point of rationalism in theology. For Leibniz, the world created by God is the best of all possible worlds. Thus, evil works together with good, just as, in a painting, the shadows set the bright regions into relief and contribute to the beauty of the whole. Evil is therefore justified by the good that it serves to balance, in conformity with a preestablished harmony. But is it possible to suppress the scandal of the suffering of the just indefinitely? Doesn't there come a point at which such a scandal becomes unbearable? We know what answer Voltaire gives to Leibniz's work: *Candide*, in which the innocent hero experiences all of the atrocities of the age all the while proclaiming, like a refrain, that it is "the best of all possible worlds." Of course, this satire does not suffice to refute Leibniz's metaphysics. It merely echoes it back in a tone of biting irony. In its own way, it is an Enlightenment version of Job's lament, and calls to criticism all the theological justifications of evil. And yet, as a philosopher, Voltaire could go no further than to affirm a supreme being, a God who is impersonal and ultimately indifferent to human suffering.

The other attempt at a response is that of a metaphysics that translates Leibniz's harmony into temporal terms, and presupposes that history is progressively achieving a form of secular equilibrium. For Vico, history possesses a finality and is evolving toward an end. It presents itself as a "civil and rational theology of divine Providence."⁴ History has a meaning that unfolds in time, because historical fact and truth are convertible ("*factum et verum convertuntur*"). It is Hegel, in particular, who gave his credentials to the theory according to which history realizes Providence. God, the first cause, follows his own end in history, by means of secondary causes. The Holy Spirit is identified with the spirit of universal history, which progressively realizes the Kingdom of God on earth under the form of the modern State (not far from what we call the Providential State!). The tribunal of reason has become the tribunal of history. Failures, wars, and catastrophes are nothing but a ruse of reason, which imposes its meaning beyond finite consciousnesses and sometimes in contradiction to them. But in this progressive incarnation of the Spirit, religion and revelation are no longer anything but one historical moment among others (*Encyclopedia*, §§483-86). Moreover, the notion of progress in history, which Hegel

⁴See Giovanni Battista Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca: Cornell, 1984), 111.

presupposes, seems difficult to admit after the barbarisms of the past century. And above all, these collective crimes appeal explicitly or implicitly to a Hegelian logic: explicitly, in the case of Marxism, which claims to be nothing but the materialistic reversal of the movement of Hegelian history; implicitly, in the case of the various nationalisms, which co-opt the ideal of the Kingdom of God and secularize it into a nation or empire (the “thousand-year Reich”).

Thus, while Providence initially purported to clear God of evil, if it must ultimately be incarnated in history, then we apparently have to hold it responsible for the worst atrocities. This is what Hans Jonas asserts: “If we can say that God is at once absolutely good and absolutely omnipotent, and that nevertheless he tolerates the world such as it is, we are speaking about a completely unintelligible God.”⁵ To avoid making God the author of evil, we would logically have to opt for atheism (or the death of God), in order to cut out the principle of this tragic history at its root. Insofar as it appropriates the attribute of Providence from philosophy, Christian theology seems to wed itself to the resulting avatars and to condemn itself to sharing the lot of the philosophical concept of God. The only other possibility seems to be to relinquish Providence, to affirm that God is innocent of evil because he does not intervene in history. If God exists, he must be impotent. “My own response is the opposite of the one in the book of Job: while Job invokes the *plenitude* of the power of the creator God, my response is his *renunciation* of power.”⁶ Such is Hans Jonas’ remarkable analysis, which was inspired by the Jewish Kabbala. We have to choose between a provident and sadistic God or a good and impotent God.

Let us stress immediately that the first position reproduces in the metaphysical realm the bargaining we find in ancient superstitions: I will believe in God provided that he listens to me, otherwise, I will hold him responsible for my misfortunes and I will turn away from him. The second position runs smack up against the Bible’s affirmations. It implies at the very least a radical demythologization, and risks stripping God of what is essential to who he is: namely, charity, the will to save all men.

⁵Jonas, *Le Concept de Dieu après Auschwitz*, 31.

⁶*Ibid.*, 39.

III. A Return to the Theological Core

1. Dismissing certain presuppositions

Ultimately, all of these analyses have a paradoxical presupposition in common: in order to make God innocent of evil, we have to make him an indifferent spectator, a creator who abandons nature and history, which amounts to viewing him as the indirect source of evil in history, and ultimately as all the more responsible for it. And above all, this justification empties the Christian faith of its meaning, insofar as faith acknowledges, at its heart, an innocent and suffering Messiah.

Scripture itself affirms God's innocence, in the book of Wisdom: "There is no deadly poison in what God has wrought" (1:13-15); "It is through the devil's jealousy that death has entered into the world" (2:24). On this point, Augustine's and Thomas Aquinas' philosophical analyses seem incontrovertible: we cannot say that God willed evil, suffering, and death, even if they are written into our historical nature. Evil does not come from God's jealousy or from an evil creator, but from human freedom. And the mistake would be to believe that God is directly the cause of everything that happens, as if Providence did not operate through the order of nature and through human freedom, as if the first cause short-circuited all secondary causality. But does it follow that God takes no interest in the fate of human beings?

Let us also keep in mind, in all honesty, that the passages cited above are offset by others: "I, the Eternal One, I form the light and I make the darkness, I make peace and I create evil (*kaka*)" (Is 45:7); "Is there any evil (*kakia*) in a city unless God has produced it (*epoiesèn*)?" (Am 3:6). Here, the production of darkness and evil is placed on the same plane as that of the light and goodness, while the whole effort of theology since Augustine has been set on making evil an indirect, differential effect that is not willed by God. Perhaps we can content ourselves with a prophetic interpretation of these texts, and say that they announce God's string of scourges on a people that has fallen asleep in the indolence of royalty? If these passages cannot of course be understood in the sense of an evil God, they at least serve to warn us that we may not subordinate God to our idea of the good. They urge us, moreover, to recognize that there is a difference between the evil that we do, which is caused by our freedom, and the evil that we suffer, which can perhaps be explained by the necessities of our nature.

Finally, by what logic do we claim to make God innocent of evil? The endeavor presupposes that man subjects God to conditions: we have already summoned God before a tribunal and we imagine ourselves capable at once of accusing him (in the first moment) and then acquitting him (in a second moment). The accusation presupposes that we begin with a pagan philosophical conception of divine Providence, to which we add an infinite demand for the immediate satisfaction of our desires. Thus, we have begun by projecting a false or fantastic understanding of omnipotence (which is not the power to do all things, but that of governing the world and history toward salvation) onto an abstract concept of God. And we have abdicated human freedom, excusing ourselves from our responsibilities. The acquittal implies that we consider God to be an external object, subject to our reason and thus to our judgment, as though we stood above him, faultless and beyond reproach. It means that we have made the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob into what Nietzsche called a “moral God,” a God who conforms to the construct of our values and our moral judgments, by demanding that he conform himself to our idea of goodness. But is this the proper way to think of God? Shouldn’t we move beyond theodicies and think through at a more profound level what divine Providence means?

2. Christian Providence as drama

This inexorable logic compels us to choose between Providence and theodicy: either we give up God’s justice and maintain his omnipotence, or we make God innocent of evil in history, and give up Providence. In order to avoid this impossible contradiction between the divine attributes, it seems necessary to move beyond this logical construction, and to return to the biblical sources of the notion of Providence.

A first stopping-point here is the possibility for freedom to resist Providence. Let us not forget that, before Hegel, from the Fathers up until the Middle Ages, the end of history was pictured as marked by the certain but unforeseeable advent of the Antichrist.⁷ In Scripture, Providence is presented, not as the irreversible machinery which drives

⁷For example, Haymon of Halberstadt, *Latin Patrologies* 177, 779; Bonaventure, *Hexameron* XV, also lays out the “twelve mysteries” of the Antichrist.

human forces progressively toward the advent of the Kingdom, but as a drama, in constant tension with a resistant power: namely, the “Adversary” (*katechon*, 2 Thes 2:4), which is a mysterious expression designating a free force that holds off the end of time and prevents its perfect realization. This term implies that a bad freedom, which resists divine Providence, is possible. It compels us to abandon the horizon of Hegel and Marx, to think of Providence in a way different from a simple theodicy that unfolds in history.

Eschatology is not a theory of progress: it designates the immediate proximity of our final end. It is precisely because the Kingdom is at hand that the resistance of freedom is unleashed against it (“Many Antichrists have appeared. It is by this that we know that the final hour has arrived,” 1 Jn 2:18). Conversely, where freedoms align themselves with God, the end of time is directly before us. For the Christian, the coming, the crucifixion, and the resurrection of Christ are actual here and now, in a presence offered to our freedom, which it may accept or reject. But does this end, which is ever invisible and ever imminent, make the invocation of Providence pointless? No, not if we keep in mind the tension between Christ and the Antichrist: this tension is like a force that keeps the end in suspension, it holds in check the accomplishment of absolute good or evil in an ongoing drama.⁸ It is only thus that we avoid confusing Providence with Hegel’s teleology. Providence is thus the action of the Spirit, of divine grace, an action altogether different from the visible disposition of the things of the world. Man is thus invited to be disponible, to open himself in his own freedom to the divine freedom of the grace that is not of this world. Providence, confronted with radically free evil, therefore does not principally regard the system of the world, but human freedom.

According to Paul, the love of God orders all things in view of the good of those he wishes to save:

We know that all things work for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that he might be the firstborn among many

⁸Carl Schmitt thus said that the notion of the Antichrist is the “sole possibility for understanding history in a Christian manner, and finding it useful” (“Drei Stufen historischer Sinngebung,” *Universitas* [1950]: 927-31).

brothers. And those he predestined he also called; and those he called he also justified; and those he justified he also glorified. (Rom 8:28-30)

If we take this text in its strictest sense, it implies a reversal of priorities with respect to the Providence of the philosophers. To be sure, it says that all things exist for the good (the Latin reads *omnia in bonum*; and Julian of Norwich will say: "All shall be well"). This does not mean that "all things are for the best in the best of all worlds," but that the divine goodness orders all things in view of the good of human beings, whom divine love chooses freely and sovereignly: this is the mysterious notion of "predestination." What comes first here is the love of God, which precedes the love of men. God calls to salvation and to justification "those whom he foreknew," for they are the "ones that love him." Thus, "predestination," i.e., the "plan" of divine salvation, God's gift of a happy fate to those whom he loves, is first in the order of ends. Providence, or the "working together of all things," is nothing but a means to this end. And this "foreknown" destiny consists essentially in being conformed to Christ. What is at issue here for those who are faithful to Christ is to become the image of Christ, to become other sons of God after the Firstborn. If Providence implies predestination, it leads to Christ and Christ alone; it does not allow us to follow any other way but him. By promising the good to human beings, God does not spare them evils.

In order to be faithful to Paul's remarks, and in order to head off the difficulties that would arise from any philosophical theodicy, we would have to untangle the knot that has been tied around three problems: divine perfection, the evil committed by man, and the evil he suffers. We would have to understand Providence within the horizon of God's love for man, and to see it as a means and not as a pre-established framework of salvation. We must therefore view Creation and Providence within the perspective of God's love for man and even within the perspective of man's predestination.⁹ Man is responsible for the evil (and the good) that he commits, and he cannot delegate his responsibility to God. We thus avoid justifying suffering by making God responsible for it. Thus, the scandal of the suffering of the innocent is not eliminated, any more than is the cross, which is the paradigm of such suffering.

⁹Karl Barth, *Dogmatik*, vol. 3, no. 3 (Zurich, 1961), 4.

The third reference point: we can no longer understand Providence in the sense that God remains unaffected, indifferent to the suffering of human beings, as the rationalistic philosophical theologies imply. On the other hand, we also cannot admit that God empties himself out in the suffering of the world to the point of self-negation (Hegel), which leads logically to the death of God. It is important to recall that God entered into history in order to do battle with evil and to withstand its blows. It is in this sense that we have to measure the free (and not necessary) engagement of the absolute in history, through the Son. It is likewise important not to ignore the Son's return to the serenity of the Father. Thus, in order to understand Christian Providence, we have to start, not from the divine essence, nor from man and his needs, but from the Trinity, from the play of love between the Providence of the Father and the gift of the Spirit, which is central in the gospel texts on divine Providence. It is within this space that we can locate the place left open by the one who speaks of it in a paradigmatic way; it is there that we can find Christ's place, and to see in him the model of our own.

3. Christ and the Father's Providence

The views of Providence that are not centered on the freedom of the divine persons cannot understand it in a genuinely theological (i.e., trinitarian and christological) sense. In Hegel, the necessary unfolding of the Absolute, which enters into history by denying itself, implies that everything negative can be reclaimed in the positive (through the negation of negation). But this coherent system does not allow us to understand the contingency of freedoms engaged in evil or fighting against it, nor to affirm that there is such a thing as senseless suffering.

Providence does not truly appear as the action of divine freedom except from the perspective of Christology. Only the life of Christ makes manifest the attribute of Providence in all of its richness. For it is the Son himself who is the Providence of the Father: "Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will acknowledge him before my Father who is in heaven" (Mt 10:32). God's freedom intervenes in history through the person of Christ, who is the culmination of God's benevolence towards his people. His Providence freely humbles itself by becoming incarnate, it "empties" itself of its

divinity (Phil 2) in order to engage in action: to forgive, to heal the sick, to proclaim salvation, to suffer the incomprehensible resistance of hostile freedoms, and finally to endure suffering and death. Christian Providence is not simply an essential attribute of divinity, it is first of all the Providence of Christ who has willed to stand alongside human beings.

Here, the objection to Providence gets overturned: far from ignoring the suffering of the innocent, God has come to fill it with his presence:

There is no sea deeper than God's plan which allows the evildoers to prosper and the good to be put to the test; nothing is so deep, nothing so profound; it is in this sea that all the unfaithful suffer shipwreck: upon these depths, upon this abyss. Do you wish to plumb its depths? Do not leap over the cross (*lignum*) of Christ; and you will not sink. Bind yourself to Christ. . . . He himself wanted to be put to the test on earth for precisely this reason.¹⁰

The enigma of evil has not been eliminated but rather indwelt by Christ.

Providence can likewise be explained from the vantage of trinitarian theology. Divine benevolence is concretely manifest through the Providence of each divine Person, and in their freedom. The Father willed the salvation of the world, and of all of humanity, in the Son and through the Son. He wills only the good, and desires that all human beings be saved. Even if he foresees finite freedom from the beginning, he is unable to resign himself to the loss of his creature, to evil, or to death. Providence is thus presented as a gift of self, in which the divine giver effaces himself before the freedom of the other: the Father effaces himself before human beings, he sends the gift of his Son (made man) and allows human beings to welcome him or to reject him in their freedom. It is thus because Providence already gives himself in the gift of a freedom that there is a freedom of the Son. Providence designates a freedom that cannot be conceived in advance, because it surpasses all of the goodness we can imagine, and because it is brought about in surprising ways, including under the contrary appearance of failure, of suffering, and of mourning—trials that Christ himself underwent. Now, if the Father gives his Son and gives him the

¹⁰Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 91.8.

freedom to carry out his will for salvation (his Providence), this makes possible a distinction between the freedom of the Father and that of Christ. There is a moment in which “my will” is distinguished from “your will,” a moment in which the Providence of the Father is inaccessible, incomprehensible to the Son. Christ, and God through him, have been put to the test on earth. This situation is translated into the experience of the shadows that imprison man, through the loss of the Father, and with him, the loss of all light. The Son accepts to endure the invisibility of the Father and of his Providence. Thus, for the abandoned Son, absolute non-sense is added to the apparent failure of the task he had undertaken. On the cross, he has the genuine experience of being abandoned by the Father.¹¹ He dies *in the abandonment by God* (Mt 27:46; Mk 15:34). In order that he may take it upon himself and bear it in truth, the Son thus has an inner knowledge of the human situation, in which divine beneficence cannot be seen.

The Son distinguishes his will from the Father’s (“Preserve me from this cup”) as he accepts it: “Let not my will but yours be done.” The fulfillment of Providence thus comes about at the heart of anguish and tribulation, when the Son’s freedom accepts the abandonment of his own will. The agony of Gethsemane finally expresses the union of distinct wills, and it is in this respect a paradigm for man. The Son thus consents to offer himself freely for the salvation of the world: his nourishment consists in “doing the will of the Father” (Jn 4:34). Providence is made real in reconciling the unforeseeable freedom that cannot be subject to an external necessity, and the superior—and spontaneous—necessity of the gift of self by means of which the Son surpasses all human wisdom. In this union of contraries—necessity and freedom—divine Providence surpasses all human wisdom.¹²

¹¹On this, see especially Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, trans. Aidan Nichols, O.P. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1990); *Theodrama IV: The Action*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994); and the commentary by Antoine Birot, “Drame divin, côté du Père,” (French) *Communio* 26, no. 4 (1999): 97-114.

¹²As Hans Urs von Balthasar puts it, borrowing the expression from Schelling, the category that opens our understanding to God is that of the “unforeseeable” (*Unvordenklich*), “that which we cannot think of in advance”—the word is not used here in the usual sense of “immemorial.” See *Theodramatik II/2: Die Personen in Christus* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1978), 171-72. [For an English translation, see *Theo-Drama*, vol. 3: *Persons in Christ*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco:

But we have to situate this Providence toward Christ in turn within the perspective of the Trinity. It is the influence of the Spirit that urges Christ to give himself, to become Providence for human beings. It is likewise the Spirit, as we have seen, that he promises to human beings, in order to assure them, when they are compelled to confess their faith in the midst of persecutions, that God will be at their side to defend them and to inspire them with the appropriate words to say. It is, yet again, the Holy Spirit who acts in history, and who allows this history, in spite of its failures and tragic crimes, to become a history of salvation.

Providence must therefore be understood as a drama of love, the drama of divine love in human history, a drama already assumed by Christ. The tragedy of the love of the Cross is the echo, in our history, of the drama of divine love lived out in eternity, in which the Father, by giving us his Son, gives us everything.

4. Man in divine Providence

The disciple is not greater than his master. He cannot avoid the incomprehensible and unjustifiable any more than the master can. The way in which Christ has incarnated Providence, in the proper sense, ought to serve as a model for human beings to live, as they can, in dependence on Providence. Human beings may thus expect that they will not be spared the unleashing of hostility, or injustice, or suffering, or death. Created and historical realities, in all of their tragic dimension (rejection of the divine will, abandonment without consolation, revolt, suffering, and death), are carried, embraced, and surpassed by the divine plan of salvation for all. Christ has already assumed these realities, and thus he has already saved them. Providence is neither indifferent nor triumphalistic, its goal is not to protect man from discomfort, nor to make him undergo evil. It seeks, rather, the essential good for human beings. But it gives this good to us according to our proper modality, which is freedom. God awaits from us precisely that we act to bring about the good that the other needs. It is thus through freedom that we are able to do the good, and through allowing ourselves, like Christ, to be moved by the Spirit.

Man has to situate himself in between two idolatrous images of Providence: a “stop-gap” Providence, which intervenes in order to save man when he suffers lack and despair; and a moral and historical Providence, in which the progress of history leads unconsciously to the cheerful tunes of tomorrow. Standing before these two idols, the Christian can only mutter that neither seems to him appropriate for expressing the object of his faith: an active presence, a dynamizing influence, in his most profound depths, proposed to his freedom, in both what he does and in what he suffers. This ultimate version, which is more adequate but perhaps less familiar, presupposes that Providence is accomplished within human freedom. It gives to each human being the infinite responsibility of being the instrument of divine beneficence toward the other.

Several conclusions follow from this:

1. The Christian notion of Providence is fundamentally different from the notion inherited from the philosophical tradition, despite a similarity of vocabulary and function. Its distinctiveness arises because of the trinitarian faith, which alone allows us to conceive the relationship between God and the world without contradiction and without evasion.

2. It is important to recall that God, far from withdrawing into the starry heaven lying inaccessiblely over our heads, is present in each circumstance of the concrete life of individuals. The believer is not able to live under the watchful eye of God if he does not think that this watchful eye is accompanied by an active help. The believer must envision God, not as an eye, but as a hand.¹³ This would moreover coincide with the most ancient iconography.

3. Providence is ordered by Love, which is the essence of God, but which is also stamped with freedom. As a free will, it cannot be foreseen in advance, and is situated beyond our immediate needs. It calls man to move beyond an image of omnipotence at the service of all his desires.

4. Providence operates at the heart of human wills, through collaboration with our freedoms and our love of God, and in the battle against sin. With respect to the powers of darkness, it represents one of the poles that make up the tragedy of the human drama.

5. Providence is thus not exemption from all evil—neither from physical evil, because it bears on the salvation of the soul and not

¹³John Calvin, *De aeterna Dei praedestinatione*, 1552, CR 8, 347.

of the body—nor from moral evil, because our freedom and that of the other are responsible for it. Providence does not exclude the experience of abandonment and subjection to the powers of evil, which Christ himself endured. Evil is not something to be integrated into a theodicy, but something to be fought. It does not lie in the theoretical order, but is an object of our practice.

6. Becoming incarnate in our freedoms, Providence presents itself, not as an indicative, but as an optative, not as a statement of fact, but as a wish. It is the very object of the prayer of the Our Father: “May your will be done, give us today our daily bread,” and so on.¹⁴ And it is made real the moment we do what we say, turning toward the other the beneficence that we receive from God (“Forgive us our trespasses, *as we forgive those who trespass against us*”). Providence binds us to the other in proportion to what it promises to us.

Our world is neither the best of all possible worlds, nor the worst. It is simply tragic. But that does not prevent the fact that, as Paul says, “all things work together for the good.”*—*Translated by David Christopher Schindler.* G

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¹⁴J.-Y. Lacoste, “Providence,” *Dictionnaire Critique de la Théologie* (Paris: PUF, 1998), 950-52.

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