2017

The Spirit of a Weak God: Reimagining Divine Providence After the Critique of Ontotheology

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

THE SPIRIT OF A WEAK GOD: REIMAGINING DIVINE PROVIDENCE AFTER THE CRITIQUE OF ONTOTHEOLOGY

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO

THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN INTEGRATIVE STUDIES IN ETHICS AND THEOLOGY

BY

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CHICAGO, IL

AUGUST 2017
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to begin by thanking those who directly shaped the content of my dissertation and have nurtured and developed my theological mind. The place of honor, of course, belongs to my director, John McCarthy, who guided each stage of the completion of this dissertation. He has a gift for taking my incoherent thoughts and making them sound like what I wanted to say. I would also like to thank my committee, Hille Haker and Susan Ross, for their feedback and support throughout this process. They both have consistently high standards, and their insights have raised the quality of the writing as well as the reasonableness of the arguments in every chapter. Despite the careful guidance of my director and committee, any mistakes or ill-thought statements remaining in these pages are surely my own. I had the pleasure of engaging in brief conversations with Joseph Bracken, Michael Welker, and John Caputo throughout the writing process. Their work figures prominently in my dissertation, and their encouragement at early stages of writing was a blessing. I hope they will find I have represented them generously and accurately. Finally, Angelo Canta assisted me in research on Hurricane Katrina which is included in the conclusion. His skills far outpace that of the average undergraduate student, and I wish him all the best in his future endeavors.
Financial support came from the theology department through the Richard McCormick S.J. Endowed Chair of Moral Theology Assistantship, from the Graduate School through the summer Research Mentoring Program, and from the Schmitt Foundation through the Arthur J. Schmitt Dissertation Fellowship in Leadership and Service. I am grateful for all of these sources which made full-time doctoral study possible.

Many others contributed not to the content of this dissertation but rather to my general well-being while writing. These people include my cohort: Karen Ross, Christian Cintron, and Joseph Gulhaugen. Our conversations during coursework, through comprehensive exams, and during the writing process have been a source of general support, encouragement, and, most importantly, friendship.

I would also like to acknowledge my family, especially my parents, Ted and Edie Morrison, who have always made it known to me that I am not only smart enough but also the best person they know—regardless of the context. I am also shaped by my family history. My great-great grandfather, Theodore Nevin Morrison II, was the Episcopal Bishop of Iowa, while my grandfather, Theodore Nevin Morrison IV, was kicked out of college for skipping chapel. I like to think there is a little of each of them in my work.

Finally, my husband, Tom Crosby, has contributed to the completion of this dissertation intellectually, financially, and emotionally. There is no way to properly acknowledge the support he has given me. Our discussions have influenced both my academic approach to theology as well as my personal life of faith. He always believed that I would finish. I pray that I can offer the same support to him.
For Tom, who believes that “all shall be well.”  
When I’m with him, it already is.
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INTRODUCTION

DIVINE PROVIDENCE TODAY

The doctrine of divine providence has had a place in Christian theology since the early Church, but providence itself is not originally a Judeo-Christian concept. With the exception of the apocryphal Wisdom of Solomon, providence is not developed in Scripture in either the Old or New Testament. Rather, what Christians now call providence finds its origin in the Stoic concept of fate. The gods of Stoicism were subject to the laws of nature in the same way as human beings and the rest of creation. In other words, in Stoicism, the gods were also subject to fate. By the time the early Christian Church was developing, the concepts of Greek Stoicism were accepted principles of Hellenistic culture. Christian theologians, influenced by Hellenism, found that the idea of a guiding principle was easily read back into Scripture as the guiding hand of God over individual human lives, the chosen people of God, and creation as a whole.

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1 See Wisd. of Sol. 14:3; 17:2.

2 A good overview of providential themes and passages in Scripture, which nonetheless never uses the word providence, can be found in Gennaro Auletta, “Providence” in Encyclopedia of Christian Theology, ed. Jean-Yves Lacoste (New York: Routledge, 2005), 1307-1308.

3 See especially Cicero’s On the Concept of the Gods.


5 Gregersen, “Providence,” 574.

6 The first explicit development of providence in Christian theology was probably that of Clement of Rome around 95CE. See Auletta, “Providence,” 1308; and Clement of Rome, Epistle to the Corinthians.
Of course, when Christians adopted the concept, fate/providence came to apply only to creation. The Christian God is not subject to God’s own providence but freely chooses how to guide the world.\footnote{Gregersen, “Providence,” 574.} As Christian authors began to develop the term as a specifically Christian doctrine, they also increasingly associated providence with the love and care of God rather than merely the power and wisdom of God.\footnote{John H. Wright, “Providence,” in The New Dictionary of Theology, ed. Joseph A Komonchak, Mary Collins, and Dermot A. Lane (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1987), 816.}

The concept of providence continued to persist as an important doctrine within Christian theology throughout the patristic, medieval, and reformation periods,\footnote{Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin are notable examples from each time period.} and belief in providence continues to be an important aspect of Christian spirituality. From Julian of Norwich’s “All shall be well” to the 73\% of Americans who believe God has a plan for their lives,\footnote{Paul Froese and Scott Draper, “How God Sustains the American Dream” in Wave III Baylor Religion Survey, Baylor University, September 2011, accessed April 24, 2017, http://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/153501.pdf.} providence has a strong hold on the average Christian’s imagination both historically and today.

Despite the presence of providence in Christian spirituality, contemporary theology has been comparatively silent on the subject.\footnote{This is noted in Gregersen, “Providence,” 575; and Jean-Yves Lacoste, “Providence,” in Lacoste, Encyclopedia of Christian Theology, 1311.} In 1963, Langdon Gilkey drew attention to this fact in his article, “The Concept of Providence in Contemporary Theology.” In the article he notes that theologians of his day have fallen short of explaining providence in a convincing way. He...
asks, “Why has Providence in our generation been left a rootless, disembodied ghost, flitting from footnote to footnote, but rarely finding secure lodgment in sustained theological discourse?” Of course, he has some ideas about why, namely that the doctrine of providence in liberal theology depended on a notion of progress which seemed untenable by the mid-20th century. He surmises that to many it now appears a mistake that providence was incorporated into Christian theology from Stoic philosophy at all. Yet, according to Gilkey, the consequences of removing providence would be dire. He writes that the mighty acts of God in history would dissolve and God's only role in the world would be as an inward persuasion of believers to make certain decisions "in an alien, meaningless world, and to have 'faith' in a God who is sovereign only elsewhere."

Is Gilkey overreacting? If theologians have neglected providence, perhaps it is time to move onto something else. We should hesitate, though, because although Gilkey may be right that theologians have neglected the doctrine, it is a doctrine with its fingers in so many other doctrines. Even Gilkey admits that providence continues to show up in the footnotes! It affects the way we understand hope, the incarnation, the resurrection, our purpose in life, our relationship with God, and our connection to the rest of creation. Consequently, even

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13 Ibid., 173.
14 Ibid., 184.
15 Ibid., 185.
theologians who do not speak directly of the doctrine of providence still tend to have a concept of providence latent in their work.

While initially divine providence may not seem high on the hierarchy of truths in Christian faith, a closer examination reveals that providence is foundational for Christian hope and the participation of creation in the building of the kingdom of God. It is because of an underlying belief in God’s guidance of each human person and all of creation that Christians have a convincing foundation for hope. Christians are able to give an account of their hope because of divine providence.

Nevertheless, could it be possible that the Christian understanding of God has simply changed too much for some theologians to hang onto providence? Postmodern theologians influenced by continental philosophy of religion and the critique of ontotheology may be especially likely to fall into this category. These theologians have rejected traditional attributes of God such as omnipotence and omniscience, not to mention being and power. God, after the critique of ontotheology, cannot operate as an agent in the way the God of classical theism can. Consequently, this “weak” God cannot guarantee a good end for creation. The work of John Caputo, considered “left” even among continental philosophers of religion, represents this position well and will be the central focus of this dissertation.

The main objective of this dissertation is to determine what can be salvaged of the doctrine of providence in Caputo’s weak God theology. A reimagined doctrine of providence will be introduced which preserves the central functions of more traditional models without

16 1 Pet. 3:15.

17 This description comes from John Caputo.
falling back on an ontotheological God. I will demonstrate that although theories of divine providence traditionally depend on a powerful God capable of bringing all to a good end, providence remains essential to Christian hope and participation even if God is rethought as weak. This new view of providence comes from an understanding of the Holy Spirit which is non-totalizing and dependent on creation’s response. Hope, therefore, empowers human action rather than ensuring victory despite our actions.

Over the course of defending this thesis, other questions will be addressed along the way. To begin, we must ask what the parameters of a doctrine of divine providence are. How much freedom do we have to reimagine what providence is? In which directions can it go? To end, we will also ask what the implications might be of providence reimagined in a weak God theology. What sort of ethical questions does this worldview present? Does it move us forward in being able to deal with the actual struggles of the world today?

**Method for Reimagining Providence**

The goal of this dissertation is to reimagine divine providence in the context of weak God theology. The following method will bring us to this goal. The first three chapters are descriptive. In these chapters, three articulations of divine providence are presented in detail. These theories of divine providence are all contemporary in order to ensure that they remain on an equal playing field in regard to present scientific, philosophical, and theological conceptions of the world. They also represent different varieties of Christianity: Calvinism, Thomism, and process theism. An emblematic representative of each of these fields has been chosen. Paul Helm’s work will be examined as representative of the Calvinist perspective. The Calvinist model of providence draws on a reform understanding of providence and represents
the strongest view of providence of the three. Michael Dodds’ work will exemplify the Thomistic tradition. The Thomistic model offers a Catholic, scholastic perspective on providence which comes across more moderate than the Calvinist model due to its emphasis on the harmony between divine and natural causes. Joseph Bracken’s neo-Thomist process theology will be used as a model for providence in process theism. Process theism offers a looser understanding of providence than most Christian theologies are willing to accept. These theologians can be considered peers and have all published book length works on the doctrine of providence within the last twenty-five years as well as chapters and articles dealing with providence within the last seven years. Their models do not exhaust all possible models of providence one can find within Christianity today. Instead, they are intended to reveal the diverse understandings of Christian divine providence by representing a range of models from strongest to weakest. The analysis of each of these conceptions of providence will focus on the way providence functions in the theological system, what providence can and cannot do, and the type of God required to carry out divine providence. Each analysis ends with a summary of the central elements of providence in that model. Chapters one, two, and three present the Calvinist, Thomist, and process models respectively.

After this descriptive step, a comparative approach will be taken in order to develop criteria by which to recognize providence in other varieties of Christianity. First, the models of providence will be discussed generally in terms of their overall function within the theological systems. Then, criteria for a doctrine of providence will be developed inductively from the central elements of each model. Characteristics of providence or God not found in all three varieties will be deemed inessential to the concept of providence. Characteristics present in all
three models and which support the central functions of providence will be considered essential criteria for any model of providence. Chapter four contains this comparison of the three models and the function of providence as well as the criteria for a doctrine of providence in any system.

Chapters five and six form the constructive portion the argument. In chapter five, weak God theology and the critique of ontotheology are introduced. In order to reimagine providence in the context of weak God theology, it must first be argued that there is good reason to critique the ontotheology present in Calvinism, Thomism, and process theism. The purpose of this step is not to show that there are problems with the first three interpretations of providence. Rather, the "problem" is in the understanding of God which goes along with these conceptions of providence. If there is good reason to think about God in ways which critique ontotheology and describe God as weak, then providence must be rethought under this alternative conception of God. However, little has been explicitly said about providence that takes the critique of ontotheology into account. And, there is good reason to suspect that, given the radical rethinking of God inspired by the critique of ontotheology, providence will have to be largely re-imagined in this context. The work of Caputo is introduced in this chapter to show both why God should be thought of as weak and the problems weak God theology raises for a conception of providence.

In chapter six, the criteria developed to identify providence are applied to Caputo’s weak God theology in order to show that an interpretation of providence is both possible and appropriate within Caputo’s system. Each criterion for providence will need to be re-interpreted or adjusted to theology with a weak God. The reimagined providence will begin
with Caputo’s own description of God’s insistence or call to which human beings respond. Insistence will then be re-described as the stirrings of the Holy Spirit by drawing on the work of Michael Welker. The Spirit is experienced as a call to life, especially in service of others. Responding to the Spirit offers the possibility of new life and resurrection. Consequently, the Spirit is also an offer of grace and hope.

The final methodological step will be to briefly examine the ethical implications of the reimagined divine providence. In other words, how does this understanding of providence practically affect the way one responds to the world and how does it prove more adequate than previous articulations of providence? The resistance and responses to the insistence of God during and after Hurricane Katrina will be used a case study to examine the value of providence reimagined in weak God theology. These implications are explored in the conclusion.

**Providence Today**

Christianity needs a doctrine of providence which answers today’s questions. It is unsurprising that the articulations of providence from Stoic philosophy, the patristic period, medieval period, and reformation period no longer satisfy believers. However, even contemporary articulations of providence from Calvinism, Thomism, and process theism fall short today due to their reliance on an ontotheological conception of God. Christians who desire to live responsibly in the world need an understanding of providence which holds them responsible for the presence of God in the world while still offering hope. Caputo and the reimagined providence of weak God theology will provide a reason to hope that tomorrow
might be better, that grace is possible, and that even tragedies such as Hurricane Katrina offer an opportunity to respond to the call to build the kingdom of God.
CHAPTER ONE

A CALVINIST MODEL OF PROVIDENCE

The first model of divine providence which we will explore is that of the contemporary Calvinist theologian, Paul Helm. John Calvin (1509-1564) is known for presenting a strong view of providence from which double predestination logically follows, although Calvin does not actually use this phrase.\(^1\) While Calvin’s views were not entirely unique to his day, as Helm puts it, his work on providence “is perhaps unmatched in its clarity and trenchancy.”\(^2\)

A model of providence from the Calvinist tradition is important for our discussion because it presents providence at its most robust. This model retains much of the original Stoic understanding of the word while thoroughly Christianizing the concept. Helm takes into account the concerns and questions of believers and scholars today that Calvin himself would not have encountered amongst his peers.\(^3\) Consequently, while Helm draws heavily on the primary source material, Helm’s own interpretation of the Calvinist model provides us a better means of comparison with other models than turning to Calvin’s work directly. After exploring the central themes of this strong interpretation of providence, the central elements of Helm’s work will be pulled out to begin the process of developing a definition of providence. The

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\(^1\) Paul Helm, *Calvin at the Centre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 146.


\(^3\) For example, Helm addresses contemporary analytic arguments regarding time and eternity as well as arguments for “chance” in quantum physics. One could not expect to find these discussions in Calvin’s work.
following examination will also allow us to relate the doctrine of providence to the doctrine of God. Helm’s model reveals the God of classical theism: omnibenevolent, eternal, omniscient, immutable, and omnipotent. In chapter four, these two elements of Helm’s theological system, the definition of providence and the corresponding doctrine of God, will be compared to those found in contemporary Thomism and process theism.

**Introducing Paul Helm**

Paul Helm is a British philosopher and theologian at Regent College. Coming from the Calvinist tradition himself, Helm’s work in philosophical theology falls into two categories that are relevant for our study. The first category is historical work on John Calvin and includes several major works: *Calvin and the Calvinists* (1998), *John Calvin’s Ideas* (2006), *Calvin: A Guide for the Perplexed* (2008), and *Calvin at the Centre* (2010). Helm has also edited a translation of Calvin’s *The Secret Providence of God* (2010). The second category is Helm’s own constructive work and includes *The Providence of God* (1994) and *Eternal God: A Study of God without Time* (2011). Of course, many other chapters, articles, blog posts, and speaking engagements also fall into these two categories. Since Helm’s own thoughts are thoroughly shaped by Calvin’s writings and Calvin’s writings are presented through the lens of Helm’s own thought, both of these categories of writings are used here to fill out a model of providence in contemporary Calvinism.

Although John Calvin is known as a thoroughly biblically-based theologian, Helm is a philosophical theologian. Helm’s background in philosophy of religion shapes his interest in Calvin and colors his own theological writings. When writing about Calvin, Helm rarely refers to the Scripture passages Calvin was reading and instead attempts to place Calvin within a wider
context of ancient and medieval ideas.\textsuperscript{4} One finds many comparisons between Calvin and the Stoics, Aquinas, or Descartes, even when there is no evidence that Calvin read these works directly. Helm’s point is not to suggest that Calvin was not as biblically inspired as he claimed, but rather that no one’s ideas exist in a vacuum. \textsuperscript{5} In his own constructive work, Helm of course engages with other contemporary theologians alongside the theological greats such as Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, and Calvin. He also draws heavily on arguments made in analytic philosophy. While Helm is insistent that Christian theology must be biblically-based, he also recognizes that no theology can be purely biblical.\textsuperscript{6} Consequently, his primary mode of argument is philosophical rather than scriptural, although Scripture is still normative in his work. Helm believes that theology is impossible without revelation; there can be no theology based solely on reason.\textsuperscript{7} Rather, the two must work together. For example, if one looks for insight into God in Scripture, one will find places which seem to present opposite perspectives; God’s role in providence is a case in point. Therefore, one must create some sort of rule for determining which presentation of God is primary or determinative of all the others.\textsuperscript{8} For

\textsuperscript{4} Helm, \textit{Calvin at the Centre}, 2.

\textsuperscript{5} Helm stands apart from the majority of contemporary Calvinist scholars in his philosophical rather than exegetical approach to Calvinism. Consequently, \textit{John Calvin’s Ideas} was described as “a book entirely without precedent.” M. W. F. Stone, introduction to \textit{Reason, Faith and History: Philosophical Essays for Paul Helm}, ed. M. W. F. Stone (Burlington: Ashgate, 2008), 5.


\textsuperscript{8} Helm, \textit{Providence of God}, 51-52.
Helm, and for Calvin, the following rule is used: a description of God should be understood as anthropomorphic if elsewhere in Scripture God is shown to transcend that same characteristic. In other words, only what is most divine can describe God literally. Where God appears to take on more human-like traits such as having an emotional life, a body, or a physical location in heaven, God is accommodating our own weakness. We can come to know God as responsive to our needs because of these accommodations. This rule is clearly at work in Helm’s work even when he does not explicitly reference the relevant Scripture passages. Although there has been some criticism of Helm’s infrequent use of scriptural exegesis, his work in relating Calvin’s ideas to the wider history of thought has generally been praised.

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9 Ibid., 51-54. See also John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* I.17.13. John Sanders critiques this method asking what the rule is based on. John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 67-68. Helm believes the rule comes out of the language of Scripture. In a statement which describes his own method as much as it does Calvin’s, Helm writes, “Common sense, that is, natural, unregenerate reason is an unacceptable norm for interpreting Scripture, whereas the varied language that Scripture uses about God provides us with normative theological models, ways in which God has chosen to accommodate himself to human understanding.” Paul Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 113.

10 Helm, *Providence of God*, 52-54; and Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas*, 113.


Helm’s Model of Providence

When one looks into the doctrine of providence, one quickly finds that its reach extends to a wide variety of theological topics. Helm’s model of providence is no exception. Therefore, a full model of providence must be laid out in several steps. First, Helm’s notion of general providence as it relates to all of creation will be presented. Second, God’s special providence for the Church and individuals will be discussed. These three contexts for providence (creation, the Church, and individuals) naturally lead to the problem of evil and the question of human freedom. These auxiliary issues will be discussed third. While Helm provides the strongest of the three models of providence that will be examined, providence still has limits and misapplications. Some of the common assumptions Christians make about providence, such as expecting to be able to see and understand the overarching trajectory of one’s life, do not have a place in even this strong model. Therefore, what providence can and cannot do in the lives of believers will be discussed fourth and fifth. Helm’s model of providence is based on a particular conception of God consistent with classical theism. The attributes of Helm’s God and the reasons they are necessary for Helm’s model of providence will be discussed at the end of this section.

1. General Providence

Helm argues for a no-risk view of divine providence. This means that God is not taking a risk with creation. There is no possibility that things will not turn out as God has planned. While other Christian theologians have proposed risky versions of providence in which God

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13 Helm, Providence of God, 15.
does not know exactly how things will turn out or what the path will be to the good end God
has planned, Helm believes that a no-risk model is most consistent with Scripture and the
teachings of the Church.\textsuperscript{14} In order for there to be no risk in providence, God must have full
control of creation, all the way down to the atomic level (or whatever the smallest element of
God’s concern could be).\textsuperscript{15} God has full governing rights because God is the Creator of all that
exists.\textsuperscript{16} Yet, God’s governance over creation is undetectable through science.\textsuperscript{17} There is no
direct view of God in the movement of an atom. While God is the primary cause of all that is
and is hierarchically prior to all that is,\textsuperscript{18} God is neither a part of the physical world nor in
time.\textsuperscript{19} As Calvin writes:

\begin{quote}
The sun rises day by day; but it is God that enlightens the earth by his rays. The earth
brings forth her fruits; but it is God that giveth bread, and it is God that giveth strength
by the nourishment of that bread. In a word, as all inferior and secondary causes,
viewed in themselves, veil like so many curtains the glorious God from our sight (which
they too frequently do), the eye of faith must be cast up far higher, that it may behold
the hand of God working by all these His instruments.\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{14}] Ibid.
\item[\textsuperscript{15}] Ibid., 21.
\item[\textsuperscript{16}] Ibid.
\item[\textsuperscript{17}] Ibid., 70.
\item[\textsuperscript{18}] Ibid., 71. Helm says that God’s existence before the universe is a hierarchical statement rather than a
temporal one because terms like “before” cannot apply to an eternal God.
\item[\textsuperscript{19}] Ibid., 70-71, 86.
\item[\textsuperscript{20}] John Calvin, \textit{The Secret Providence of God}, in \textit{Calvin’s Calvinism}, trans. and ed. Henry Cole (Grand
Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans, 1956), 231. Helm notes that in Cole’s edition, the last part of \textit{The Eternal
Predestination of God} was dropped and used as the introduction to \textit{The Secret Providence of God}. This quote
comes from that section. See Paul Helm, editor’s introduction to \textit{The Secret Providence of God} by John Calvin, ed.
Paul Helm (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 18.
\end{itemize}
Therefore, according to Calvin, the diverse acts of nature we witness both obscure and point us toward God. There is an orderliness to creation, which Calvin calls “common grace.” Common grace ensures that events have predictable consequences through which God sustains creation. Despite the predictability of the world, God’s providential hand ordains each act specifically, allowing for each act’s uniqueness. Nevertheless, not all acts are equally providential. In other words, not all acts contribute equally to God’s eternal plan for creation. Some moments or events, such as the Incarnation, are more important to God’s providential work than others, such as the pair of socks I wore today.

There are at least two loopholes that commonly get built into this view which Helm rejects. The first comes from William James. James proposes that although God has willed the ends, God has not determined the means. So, while God may have a plan for every last atom, God may not know all the intermediary steps and even more so for human beings. God, then, is like a chess player who knows what it looks like to win and has the skills to win every time, yet still must respond to the other player’s moves. Although the other player has a finite number of possible moves, and God knows them all, God still does not know what course the game will take. Helm finds this analogy impressive, but ultimately contrary to Scripture.

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21 Helm, Providence of God, 99.

22 Helm, Calvin at the Centre, 144.

23 Helm, Providence of God, 94.

Helm’s reading of Scripture indicates that God ordains the ends and means to those ends.\textsuperscript{25} The second loophole comes from physics and argues that chance is built into nature and provides an opening for freedom. Helm believes this is a misinterpretation of chance and that it actually does not make a case for freedom at all.\textsuperscript{26} He notes that to “arrive by chance” is not to have arrived uncaused; it just means we do not know what the cause is or perhaps, more strongly, that the cause was not physical.\textsuperscript{27} If a theologian were to suggest there are actually events without a cause, that theologian could only hold a risk-view of providence, which Helm rejects on biblical grounds.\textsuperscript{28}

As previously mentioned, the Calvinist view of providence actually retains much of the original concept from Stoic philosophy. Helm argues that although Calvin went to great lengths to reject Stoic fate, Calvin actually agrees with most of it. We will see his agreement when we discuss the question of human freedom below. However, it is on the more cosmic level that Calvin has a problem with fate. While the Stoic gods acted as primary causes in much the same way as the Christian God does, Stoicism had a pantheistic understanding of God rather than a classically theistic understanding.\textsuperscript{29} In Stoic pantheism, since the gods are a part of the world,

\textsuperscript{25} Helm, \textit{Providence of God}, 139. Helm’s take on James also serves as an illustration of Helm’s method. While he relies on philosophical arguments like James, Scripture remains an indispensable and normative source for Helm which no philosophical claim can dismiss.

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 142.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 142, 143.

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 143. Elsewhere Helm entertains the possibility that there could be events which are of absolutely no consequence to God (perhaps at the quantum level) that could be left to chance. However, he remains skeptical of the position. See Helm, \textit{John Calvin’s Ideas}, 94-95.

\textsuperscript{29} Helm, \textit{Calvin at the Centre}, 241.
they are subject to fate just as everything else is. God, however, is not subject to God’s own providence but freely chooses how to guide the world. The place of God is compromised in the use of the word fate.

2. Special Providence

While providence extends to all of creation, human beings, especially those who make up the Church, hold a special place in God’s plan. God’s special revelation includes God’s providence as extended to individuals and the Church. Helm’s model of special providence cannot be understood apart from the Fall. Since all acts are ordained by God, the Fall and the crucifixion must be understood providentially. Both of these events play an indispensable role in redemption and salvation which is the end God provides for the elect. Consequently, understanding special providence involves an explanation of the Fall, the crucifixion of Christ, and the meaning of predestination.

Helm understands the Fall in a historic way, even if it is not literally historical. He claims scientific accounts do not really matter for a theological understanding of providence. Theologically, he claims, Scripture tells us that sin entered the world through a fall rather than through immaturity or some other means. The concluding curses that God places on creation are now a natural part of our world, although the goodness and orderliness of the world,

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31 Helm, *Calvin at the Centre*, 143.

32 Helm, *Providence of God*, 100.

33 Ibid., 97.

34 Ibid.
known as common grace, were not completely abolished.\textsuperscript{35} Common grace enables human beings to make responsible or irresponsible decisions because the outcomes are predictable.\textsuperscript{36} Despite the presence of common grace, one cannot help but wonder why the Fall happened if God’s providence is all-encompassing. Helm argues for an “\textit{O Felix Culpa}” view of the Fall. This means there are greater goods which come from the Fall that could not have come otherwise. The greater goods are two-fold. First, evil is a means of human development. On the whole, there is more good in the world because of temporary suffering.\textsuperscript{37} As Helm writes, “Without weakness and need, no compassion; without fault, no forgiveness, and so on.”\textsuperscript{38} Second, since the world is orderly, good should be rewarded and evil punished.\textsuperscript{39} Some evil in the world, then, is meant as a consequence or punishment of previous ill deeds.\textsuperscript{40} While more will be said about the presence of sin in the discussion of the problem of evil below, Helm hopes to reconcile both ideas in Christ.\textsuperscript{41}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 98-99.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 100.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 202-203, 206-207, 213.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 213.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 209. Calvin was likely more comfortable with God’s justice displayed through punitive acts than most contemporary Christians. Still, Helm retains the concept arguing that the experience of evil allows for a greater experience of mercy in redemption. See Helm, \textit{John Calvin’s Ideas}, 93; and Helm, \textit{Providence of God}, 215.
\textsuperscript{41} Helm, \textit{Providence of God}, 214.
\end{flushright}
If the Fall and its aftermath was a time of heightened providential activity, the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Christ are the supreme act of providence. Christ redeems humanity from both of the effects of the Fall. By living as a model of righteousness, Christ undoes the need for suffering as a means for human growth. By conquering sin and death, Christ restores the full order of the world and removes the need for punitive evil in the world. The Fall becomes a “Happy Fall” in the resurrection of Christ, and the resurrection would lose its meaning without the Fall.

Of course, not everyone receives the full benefit of Christ’s redemptive work. Not every person is saved. No person can be saved on his or her own, but since providence includes predestination, God can ensure that a given individual is saved. Calvin writes, “All are not created on equal terms, but some are preordained to eternal life, others to eternal damnation; and, accordingly, as each has been created for one or other of these ends, we say that he has been predestinated to life or to death.” While one naturally speculates about whether or not one is part of the elect, Calvin and Helm point out that it is important to remember that not only one’s end, but also the means to that end are providential (see Helm’s response to James’ chess player above). Therefore, rather than wondering about our end we should focus on

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42 Recall that Helm does not believe providence is always equally present. Some moments or events are more important to God’s providential work than others. See Helm, Providence of God, 94.

43 Helm, Providence of God, 110.

44 Ibid., 214.

45 Ibid., 119-120.

46 Calvin, Institutes III.21.5.
whether we are currently living out God’s commands in communion with Christ. Since providence is teleological, meaning events build on one another toward an end, the claim that one’s actions do not matter because the future is fixed is untenable. In the end, it is our sinfulness that condemns us, not God’s will. Therefore, while the logical consequence of Calvinism is double predestination, God is responsible for salvation whereas human beings are responsible for their own damnation.

3. The Problem of Evil and the Question of Freedom

While we have already pointed in the direction of the problem of evil and the question of human freedom several times, these two topics need to be addressed directly. The problem of evil is partly explained by the “O Felix Culpa” interpretation of the Fall and Resurrection of Christ. Still, the Fall remains an unsatisfactory explanation for human sinfulness today in light of God’s providential guidance over all their actions. How could God allow this, or even cause this? Calvin and Helm rely on “the secret providence of God” to address this problem. God’s complete control raises a further question, though. Even when acting righteously, are a person’s actions really free? Does a no-risk view of providence rule out the possibility of human freedom? Helm believes human freedom is compatible with divine determinism when each are properly understood, and he attributes this position to Calvin as well.

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47 Helm, Calvin at the Centre, 147.

48 Ibid., 243.

49 Ibid., 146.
If God is good, then God’s will should bring about goodness in the world. Yet, the Calvinist model of providence insists that all acts are ordained by God, not just good acts. There is nothing that providence fails to reach. Happenings in the world which do not seem to follow God’s commands are part of the secret providence of God. Ultimately, we do not know God’s plan. All we know is that it is good and is for the good of the Church. We also know God’s revealed will, which includes the commands of God found in Scripture. These commands do not tell us all the details of God’s plan, though. Like the Fall, sometimes God’s will includes things which break God’s stated commands, but actually contribute to a greater good.\(^{50}\) In these cases, a person breaks God’s revealed commands and therefore sins, but God’s will is still upheld.\(^{51}\) This view is necessary to ensure that sinful acts do not bring about any risk that God’s plan will be thwarted. The doctrine of two wills (revealed and secret) is not an invention of Calvin’s, although it caused much confusion for Calvin’s readers.\(^{52}\) While God wills what God commands in a general sense, God also wills certain evil acts in a particular sense. If God did not, they would not occur. Note that God does not just permit evil, but willingly permits evil.\(^{53}\) However, when God willingly permits evil, God’s intentions are still good. Helm explains, “God decrees evil by a wise and all good intention that is hierarchically higher than the evil intention of the creature’s,” and so, “what God decrees is an evil intention that is not his own intention,\(^{54}\)

\(^{50}\) A few examples from Calvin, *Secret Providence of God*, ed. Paul Helm: For the Fall as righteous see page 70, for false prophets as God’s instruments see page 79, for the wicked used for good see page 106.

\(^{51}\) Helm, *Providence of God*, 48


\(^{53}\) Ibid., 26-27. See also Calvin, *Secret Providence of God*, ed. Paul Helm, 81.
for his intention in decreeing evil is not itself evil.” God’s providence is always fulfilled in the name of goodness and justice, but the particular course it takes is often surprising, or even disquieting, to us. Providence guarantees that evil has meaning, but God’s willing permission does not free human beings of responsibility. This is possible through compatibilism. Compatibilism is the position that human freedom is compatible with “some form of determinism.” In compatibilism, freedom is defined as the ability to do what one wishes, not the ability to choose between two options. So long as one has knowledge of possible consequences, considers the action one’s own, and has the hypothetical ability to do otherwise had the conditions been different, the person can be held responsible. A lack of awareness (perhaps due to being asleep), being forced against one’s will, or being asked to do something which is impossible are all conditions which remove responsibility. Note that actually being able to choose another course of action is not a requirement for responsibility in compatibilism. This

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56 Helm, Providence of God, 161.

57 Helm, Calvin at the Centre, 228; and Helm, Providence of God, 67.

58 Helm, Providence of God, 186, 187, 188-189.

59 Ibid.
conception of human freedom does not sit easily with most people today. It sounds as if God is manipulating people, but still holding people responsible for their actions. While Helm does not want to portray God as manipulative or coercive, he does not believe that influence removes responsibility so long as one consents to the action. Some, such as John Sanders and J. R. Lucas, have argued that a personal relationship with God is not possible if God acts in such sufficiently influential ways. Helm counters by arguing that all of our relationships entail varying degrees of manipulation. While sometimes manipulation is harmful, often it is not. He lists words such as “rescue,” “rehabilitate,” “cure,” and “free” as ways of manipulating another positively.

The Stoics held a very a similar view of human agency. As stated, the gods were personified scientific principles, and fate was the working out of those principles. The Stoics still had a concept of human responsibility, though. All actions are partly influenced by external causes. However, one can still be held responsible if the action was at least partly caused by an inherent desire. One does not have the ability to choose between various outcomes, but neither is one coerced because the cause came from within. Here Christian providence and its ancestor, Stoic fate, find common ground.

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61 Helm, Providence of God, 149.

62 Helm, “Grace and Causation,” 111.

63 Helm, Calvin at the Centre, 234-235.

64 Ibid., 236-239.
There is an imbalance between good and evil which allows all good human acts to be attributed to God while the human remains responsible for evil. Helm explains:

According to Scripture, there is an important asymmetry between acts of moral evil and acts of goodness. In the case of evil, whatever the difficulties may be of accounting for the fact, God ordains evil but he does not intend evil as evil, as the human agent intends it. In God’s case there is some other description of the morally evil action which he intends the evil action to fill. There are other ends or purposes which God has in view. In the case of goodness, God not only ordains the goodness, he is the author of it, not only in the sense that he ordains it, but in the sense that he is the cause of it.65

This asymmetry has important ramifications for human beings. Since all good acts are the work of God, humans are not praiseworthy for their good acts. A person’s actions may be praiseworthy, but the credit goes to God for providing the grace necessary for the action.66 However, since humans are responsible for breaking God’s commands, although ordained by God, humans are blameworthy for their evil acts. This is because Calvin and Helm have an overall negative, if hopeful, view of human nature.67 Helm explains that when it comes to accepting God’s grace, human beings are neither inclined toward acceptance nor neutral in their approach. Rather, “the position is more serious than that, not a position of neutrality, but of indifference or hostility, not of being able to say either Yea or Nay but of invariably saying Nay until inclined by grace to say Yea.”68 Calvin attempts to explain this seeming unfairness

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66 Helm, *Calvin at the Centre*, 260.

67 Helm rightly notes that this perspective is not required by compatibilism. One could take the opposite perspective that humans should be praised for their good actions but not blamed for their evil actions. Helm suggests Susan Wolf’s work as an example of this. See Helm, *Calvin at the Centre*, 261-262; and Susan Wolf, *Freedom within Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 79.

68 Helm, “Grace and Causation,” 112.
through the story of Job. He asks how it can be that Satan and those who robbed Job are guilty
while God is not, and he answers that we distinguish acts by their intention and end. Those
who committed the evil acts are condemned based on the end toward which the act was
committed. God, however, only has good ends and stands as judge, bringing goodness out of
sin.69

4. What Providence Can Do

Helm highlights a number of benefits for believers in the model of providence which he
proposes. He explains that providence brings about “humility, adoration, soberness, trust in
God, gratitude for favorable outcomes, patience in adversity, incredible freedom from worry
about the future, submission to God, confidence in him, relief, freedom from anxiety,
fearlessness, comfort and assurance.”70 These are the reasons that Calvinists see providence as
a central doctrine and one that brings meaning and hope to life. According to Helm, to believe
in God’s providence is to understand life in new ways.

First, a belief in providence frees one from anxiety. A risk model of providence can lead
to distress over whether a good end will come. Even in the chess-player analogy one never
knows whether an event is working towards God’s checkmate or prolonging the game. In a no-
risk model of providence, one can be sure that every single thing that happens was ordained
by God.71 Not only that, but every single thing that happens is for our good. “We know that all

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70 Helm, Calvin: A Guide, 112. Helm is summarizing the benefits mentioned in Calvin, Institutes I.17.2-11.

71 Helm, Providence of God, 230.
things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”72 It may not be until one’s life is over that one can see how everything worked for good, but one can still take comfort in knowing that it is good because Scripture tells us so.73 This means that, in a sense, even one’s sins ultimately work for the good. They do not as sins, but the results of those sins do still work providentially.74 The same can be said for evil more generally. Helm writes, “Christians can rest assured that the evil is part of the ‘all things’ which work together for their good, to further their conformity to the image of Christ.”75 Our experience does not always show this to be true, but Helm insists that a Christian’s belief in providence should come from a reliance on Scripture, not empirical data.76

Second, a belief in providence motivates one to action. This counter-intuitive view is shared by both Calvin and Helm. While it may seem that a foreordained future would lead one to complacency, Helm reminds his readers that not only the end is foreordained, but also the

72 Rom. 8:28.

73 Helm, Providence of God, 127.

74 Ibid. Helm is criticized on this point by Sanders who finds it problematic that in Helm’s model there can be no tragedies. See Sanders, God Who Risks, 160, 255-257. More accurately, Helm’s model only requires that there be no ultimate tragedies, no tragedies viewed from the perspective of eternity. An event in isolation can still be viewed as tragic. See Helm, Providence of God, 141-142, 223. One could also argue that goodness can only be measured from an eternal view. In a speculative piece, Helm notes a problem raised in Aquinas’ work that God does what is best overall, but not necessarily what is best for every part, except when considered in relation to the whole. This seems to require God to always act globally and never act directly out of concern for an individual. Helm suggests that although there may only be one end which has eternal value, there may be temporal ends, which do not contribute to the eternal end in a linear fashion, which also glorify God (but not forever). If this were the case, God could decree some things simply for their own sake. Since this is a speculative piece, it is unclear whether or not Helm is committed to this view or merely sympathetic to it. See Paul Helm, "All Things Considered: Providence and Divine Purpose," in Comparative Theology: Essays for Keith Ward, ed. T. W. Bartel (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2003), 100-101, 107.

75 Helm, Providence of God, 231-232.

76 Ibid., 223.
means.\textsuperscript{77} The end can only come about along with the means. Since we do not know what the future holds, we cannot rebel against the future that God has foreordained.\textsuperscript{78} Christians are simply called to live out the commands of God, God’s revealed will, to the best of their ability.\textsuperscript{79} This means that Christians should live as if providence does not extend to the future but rather only provides meaning for the past.\textsuperscript{80} Calvin writes, “Wherefore, with reference to the time future, since the events of things are, as yet, hidden and unknown, everyone ought to be as intent upon the performance of his duty as if nothing whatever had been decreed concerning the issue in each particular case.”\textsuperscript{81} When we remember that the providence of God is secret, idleness is not an appropriate response to belief in providence.

Third, a belief in providence increases one’s hope for the future. Although the providence of God is secret, the Christian does have knowledge that the end will be good.\textsuperscript{82} This knowledge increases the Christian’s hope for the coming kingdom revealed in Scripture.\textsuperscript{83} Calvin was concerned that people were too dazzled by earthly matters. He worried they might cling to their earthly life but saw hope in the greater good of providence as an antidote to their

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 219.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 229.
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 232-233.
\textsuperscript{80} Helm, \textit{Calvin: A Guide}, 110-111.
\textsuperscript{81} Calvin, \textit{Secret Providence of God}, in \textit{Calvin’s Calvinism} trans. and ed. Henry Cole, 236. Helm notes that in Cole’s edition, the last part of \textit{The Eternal Predestination of God} was dropped and used as the introduction to \textit{The Secret Providence of God}. This quote comes from that section. See Helm, editor’s introduction \textit{Secret Providence of God}, in \textit{Calvin, Secret Providence of God}, ed. Paul Helm, 18.
\textsuperscript{82} Helm, \textit{Providence of God}, 231.
\textsuperscript{83} Helm, \textit{Calvin: A Guide}, 112.
obsession with earthly affairs.\textsuperscript{84} Helm notes that a contrary perspective on life is also possible: people may look to heaven as a way to cope with the sufferings of earthly life.\textsuperscript{85} Either way, a belief in providence can help put life in perspective.

5. What Providence Cannot Do

Despite the benefits of following Helm’s model of providence, providence cannot do all things. There are limitations to what providence can provide to the believer as well as misapplications of the doctrine. The main limitation, which is frequently overlooked by believers and is therefore also a misapplication, is that providence does not provide an overarching plan for one’s life. A second limitation/misapplication is that one cannot change the course of God’s plan through prayer.

The seemingly most common use of the doctrine of providence by Christians is actually a misapplication of Helm’s Calvinist model. Providence is frequently cited when something unexpected or fortuitous occurs. These moments are sometimes referred to as “Godincidences.”\textsuperscript{86} Helm calls these cases of “immediate providence”\textsuperscript{87} and strongly cautions against this kind of thinking. An example that Helm provides shows why. A salesman misses his train. As a result, he begins talking with an old friend who ends up placing a large order. The salesman might describe missing the train as providential because it enabled the sale. Later on,

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 112-113.

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 112.


\textsuperscript{87} Helm, Providence of God, 124.
the salesman takes his increased sales as a sign that he should expand his business. Unfortunately, he expands too quickly and goes bankrupt. At this point, the salesman may no longer view the missed train as providential (although he still might). On the one hand, some events that initially seemed fortuitous are later viewed negatively. Likewise, many moments that we come to see as blessings only appear that way long after the fact. Helm calls this “retrospective providence.” On the other hand, and more importantly, we should not expect to be able to recognize God’s providential work in our lives. There is no guarantee that providence will be born out in prosperity, happiness, health, or freedom from tragedy. If God’s providence extends to all things, then even those moments which seem completely benign or even the opposite of providential are working for our good and are in that sense blessings. Therefore, we may not see any pattern to God’s work in our lives. Negatively, this means that if we do see pattern in our life, we can only hold onto it in a tentative way, but positively, not seeing a pattern is no reason to lose faith. Helm suggests the story of Job as a source of comfort – when our lives do not make any sense, God’s providence is still at work.

To call something like missing a train “providential” should not mean that it was lucky or brought about temporary good fortune. Missing a train can only be providential in the sense

88 Ibid., 124, 125
89 Ibid., 125.
90 Ibid., 126.
91 Ibid., 127.
92 Ibid., 128.
93 Ibid.
that it contributes to a much larger framework which encompasses not only the resulting sale and bankruptcy (in the example above), but also one’s eternal end and the glory of God.\textsuperscript{94} The vast majority of the time we are not in a position to see how missing a train contributes to eternal values. In theory, since things of eternal value are already known and ordained by God, the future can be known. But, for human beings, that kind of knowledge would require special intervention by the Holy Spirit, which Helm says we have no reason to expect.\textsuperscript{95}

The second limitation or misapplication of providence has to do with petitionary or intercessory prayer. If prayer is understood as a dialogue, it requires that both parties be indeterministically free.\textsuperscript{96} To engage in prayer is to presume that one or both parties might change one’s mind or actions as a result of the prayer.\textsuperscript{97} At its most extreme, God becomes a “sugar-daddy” who gives us blessings \textit{because} we asked for them.\textsuperscript{98} However, a no-risk view of providence does not allow God to respond in that way. All future actions are already foreordained. Still Helm insists that the efficacy of prayer is clearly supported by Scripture, and so must play a part in a Scripture-based model of providence.\textsuperscript{99} Helm’s solution is to move

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{94} Ibid., 129.
\item \textsuperscript{95} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{96} Ibid., 147.
\item \textsuperscript{97} Vincent Brümmer argues that this kind of freedom is necessary for personal relationship. Helm disagrees because we are always “manipulated” to a certain extent by our relations. See the above section on compatibilism and also Paul Helm, “Prayer and Providence,” in \textit{Christian Faith and Philosophical Theology: Essays in Honour of Vincent Brümmer}, ed. Gijsbert van den Brink, Luco J. van den Brom, and Marcel Sarot (Kampen, Netherlands: Kok Pharos, 1992), 103-115.
\item \textsuperscript{98} Helm, “Asking God,” \textit{Themelios} 12 iss. 1 (1986): 22.
\item \textsuperscript{99} Helm, \textit{Providence of God}, 153.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
away from an understanding of prayer as a spiritual (magical?) force and instead view prayer as any other part of God’s revealed will with which a person might engage.\textsuperscript{100} If a person prays, then that prayer has been ordained by God just like any action. Oftentimes, our prayers fulfill a previously established warrant.\textsuperscript{101} For example, God might establish a warrant which says, “If Sarah prays for rain during a drought in the summer of 2015, it will begin to rain.” Then, God may also foreordain both the praying and the raining. The prayer, in this case, does not physically cause the rain but is a necessary foreordained condition. The potential upside to Helm’s view is that it does not suggest that the drought was ever Sarah’s fault. If rather than sending rain God continues withhold rain, this is not due to a lack of fervent prayer on Sarah’s part because prayer does not function as a direct cause.\textsuperscript{102} In a no-risk model of providence, prayer is just one of the ways that God brings about what God has already decided.\textsuperscript{103} If God has already decided not to send rain, praying harder will not help.

Most of the time, petitionary prayer asks God for something about which the reception is uncertain. I pray for healing because I do not know when or if healing will come. However, in some cases a Christian might pray for something which is certain, such as praying for the kingdom of God. In this case, the warrant model that Helm favors makes less sense. The coming of the kingdom of God is not conditional, it is inevitable. Helm gets around this by

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{100} Helm, \textit{Providence of God}, 153; and Helm, “Asking God,” 23.
\item \textsuperscript{101} Helm, \textit{Providence of God}, 156; and Helm, “Prayer and Providence,” 111.
\item \textsuperscript{102} Helm, “Prayer and Providence,” 110.
\item \textsuperscript{103} Helm, \textit{Providence of God}, 159.
\end{itemize}
suggesting that this type of prayer is not really petitionary at all. Rather, it is an expression of desire for what is to come or an affirmation that one submits to God’s will.\footnote{Ibid., 158.}

6. Doctrine of God

All of the basic elements of Helm’s Calvinist model of divine providence have been presented above. Of course, a doctrine of providence never exists in isolation from other Christian doctrines. Most important for this project is the way the doctrine of providence is related to the doctrine of God. In order for Helm’s no-risk providence model to function, God must have certain attributes. Helm’s conception of God is that of classical theism. Therefore, God is omnibenevolent, eternal, omniscient, immutable, and omnipotent. God’s omnibenevolence must be questioned in any doctrine of providence because of the presence of evil. However, in Helm’s model, God’s intentions are always good. Helm insists time and time again that God is good and that God’s goodness is the motivation for what God wills.\footnote{See for example, Paul Helm, \textit{Eternal God: A Study of God without Time}, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 176.} Therefore, God’s providence is for the good. Furthermore, since all that happens is ordained by God, God’s goodness is also effective. Helm points to a number of Scripture passages in support of this claim (Rom. 1:6, 9:11; 1 Cor. 1:9; 2 Cor. 4:6; Eph. 2:5, 2:8, 4:4; 1 Thess. 1:4; 2 Tim. 2:25; 1 Pet. 1:23), although counterexamples can also be found.\footnote{Helm, \textit{Providence of God}, 50.} The remaining four attributes will be discussed in turn.
For Helm, God is an eternal timeless being, in the tradition of Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin.\textsuperscript{107} In \textit{Eternal God: A Study of God without Time}, Helm hopes to distinguish his position from process theologians, theologians like Jürgen Moltmann, analytic philosophers of religion, and other Christians who have argued that God is in time or at least operates in time, some of the time.\textsuperscript{108} To be eternal means that God only “acts” in a timeless way. Although God’s eternal purpose is enacted through time, the whole of creation is sustained through a single timeless decree.\textsuperscript{109} God’s eternity is important for providence because “only a timeless God can be both strongly immutable and omniscient.”\textsuperscript{110} We will see below that omniscience and immutability are both necessary for Helm’s model of providence.

God’s omniscience is complete in Helm’s model and prevents risk from playing a role in providence. Weaker versions of omniscience suggest that God knows all there is to know (which might not include the future), that God can see all future possibilities (the chess player analogy), or that God can see the future. In Helm’s model, omniscience is stronger than all these options. God not only foreknows the future, but actually foreordains the future.\textsuperscript{111} This means that God does not merely know what is going to happen but also effectively wills it to happen. Divine foreordination is what distinguishes Christian providence from fate, an

\textsuperscript{107} Helm, \textit{Eternal God}, xi.

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 62-63, 71.

\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 94.

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 129.
important point for Calvin and Helm. If Jane is currently watering plants, it does not follow that her fate was to water plants. Jane is not forced to water plants because God could see into a predetermined future and that is what Jane was doing. Rather, God knows Jane is watering plants because “Jane is watering plants” is only true if God foreordains it. The difference is not so much in the person, as it is in God. Jane does not have indeterministic freedom in a fatalistic model or Helm’s providential model. However, in the fatalistic model, God is also bound to fate; whereas in the providential model, God is free. While Helm admits that here the Scriptural evidence is less clear, following his own rule, the characteristic which transcends human qualities should be given precedence. In addition, Helm claims that omniscience is a prerequisite for providence. He writes, “For even if it is possible to argue that what is future to us is indeterminate, it is not possible to couple this with a belief in the divine control of the future. So that in so far as theism requires belief in divine providence, the indeterminacy of the future, a future indeterminate to both God and his human creatures, is inconsistent with it.”

God’s immutability logically follows if God is eternal and omniscient. If all that happens is foreordained by God from eternity, then God’s mind will never change. If God’s mind did

\[\text{\textsuperscript{112}}\text{Ibid., 141.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{113}}\text{Ibid., 142.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{114}}\text{Helm, }\textit{Providence of God}, 47.\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{115}}\text{Helm, }\textit{Eternal God}, 124.\text{ An interesting evaluation of theories of divine foreknowledge which do and do not allow for an indeterminate future can be found in Christopher Hughes, “No Way Out?,” in Stone, }\textit{Reason, Faith, and History}, 47-68.\text{ In this essay Hughes asks whether or not Helm is correct that future indeterminacy is incompatible with divine foreknowledge. He concludes that while it }\text{may} \text{be possible for an eternal God to hold the two together, great difficulties arise.}\]
change, it would imply that something occurred that led God to take into account something new. This is impossible if God is eternal. A timeless God does not learn, and what God has foreordained will not change.

God’s divine foreordination, rather than divine foreknowledge, implies that God also has power. There is no place for dualism or uncertainty about whether God or Satan will win in Helm’s model of providence. Since God’s decrees are always effective, God can rightly be called omnipotent and free. To say that God is free does not mean that God interacts unpredictably with the universe. Instead, it means that God is not subject to any external force apart from God’s own goodness. God’s freedom does not come from being able to choose between various possibilities, as it does not make one freer to be able to choose what is wretched. Rather, God is free because God cannot be coerced or hindered. Furthermore, God is self-sufficient; God does not need creation in order to be God.

What, then, can be said about the Scripture passages which describe God as weak? Helm says that there is a “divine weakness in providence” which is why human experience does not plainly show God’s providence. However, God is not weak in the sense that God can suffer or be corrupted.” The weakness of divine providence is found on the cross (See 1

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119 Ibid., 194.

120 Helm, *Providence of God*, 224.

121 Ibid.
Cor. 1:18-31).\textsuperscript{122} There is a power of God that is manifest in weakness; it is a strength found in the refusal of power. This does not mean that all instances of weakness reveal God. Helm writes, “It is mistaken to claim, therefore, that the power of God is seen manifested through what Gutiérrez refers to as ‘the power of the poor in history’.”\textsuperscript{123} Political weakness (or political power) does not express God’s power because God’s power is precisely not political—that is why it looks foolish to us.\textsuperscript{124} Yet, “the ‘weakness’ of God is power” and “it has the power of God as its presupposition.”\textsuperscript{125} Consequently, when Helm speaks of divine weakness, it in no way challenges God’s omnipotence.\textsuperscript{126}

**Elements of a Doctrine of Providence Drawn from Helm**

A number of elements form the framework of Helm’s Calvinist model of providence. In chapter four, these elements will be compared to those drawn from a Thomistic model and a process model. Elements shared by all three of these models of providence will be deemed essential to any doctrine of providence, unless a convincing argument can be supplied for why the element is not necessary to maintain a doctrine of providence within a particular

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., 225.

\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., 227-228. Helm goes on to say, “To suppose that such poor, simply in virtue of their poverty, are not corrupted by self-interest is sheer sentimentalism.” Helm, *Providence of God*, 228. This is a mischaracterization of Gutiérrez and the preferential option for the poor. As Elizabeth Johnson puts it, “The sole reason for this partiality is divine love, which freely sides with the poor not because they are more saintly or less sinful than others, but because of their situation. The purpose of this divine partiality is to heal, redeem, and liberate the situation so that the dehumanizing suffering will cease. Precisely in this partiality is the goodness of divine love revealed to be truly universal, because it includes the nonpersons whom the powerful and wealthy thought did not count.” Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 74.

\textsuperscript{124} Helm, *Providence of God*, 227.

\textsuperscript{125} Ibid., 228.

\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., 224.
theological framework. While we will find that not all elements drawn from Helm’s model are shared by Thomistic and process models of providence, at this point we will list all possible elements drawn from Helm’s model alone (summarized in table 1 and explained below).

## Table 1. Elements of a Calvinist Model of Providence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Elements of Doctrine</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Source of the doctrine</td>
<td>1. Providence is biblically-based and requires revelation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God and the meaning of providence</td>
<td>2. God can be described with classical attributes: omnibenevolent, eternal, omniscient, immutable, and omnipotent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Providence is motivated by God’s goodness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Everything is for the good and there can be no ultimate tragedy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. God not only foreknows, but also foreordains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. There is no risk or chance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. God’s providential plan will not change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range of providence</td>
<td>8. Providence includes all things (down to atomic level)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9. Providence includes the Fall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10. Providence includes predestination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11. Providence includes the means as well as the end</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12. Christ is the supreme example</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effect of providence on human beings</td>
<td>13. Humans are responsible for sin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14. Providence provides freedom from anxiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15. Providence provides hope for the future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16. Providence leads to action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elements not required by model</td>
<td>1. Not all acts must be equally providential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Humans do not need indeterministic human freedom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Providence does not need to be observable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are sixteen elements which make up this model of providence. The first is that providence must be biblically-based. One cannot gain an understanding of providence without the aid of revelation. The remaining fifteen can be broken down into three categories:
elements related to God and the meaning of providence, elements related to the range of providence, and elements related to the effect of providence on human beings.

The meaning of providence in Helm’s model is closely tied to who God is. In this model God takes on the classical attributes. God is omnibenevolent, eternal, omniscient, immutable, and omnipotent. Helm finds these attributes to be both supported by Scripture and necessary for providence. Since God is omnibenevolent, providence is motivated by God’s goodness. Consequently, everything that happens as a result of God’s providence is for the good which rules out the possibility of ultimate tragedy. Since God is eternal, omniscient, and omnipotent, God not only foreknows what is going to happen (meaning God can see the future), but also foreordains what is going to happen (meaning God effectively wills what is going to happen). There is no risk in this model of divine providence since all has been ordained from eternity. Finally, since God is immutable, God’s providential plan will not change.

The range of providence in this model is fully extended. Providence guides all things and all parts of things down to their atomic make-up. Providence also includes all events, even those which appear to thwart God’s plan (although God’s plan can never really be thwarted in a no-risk model of providence) such as the Fall. In fact, for Helm the Fall is a central providential moment because of its role in allowing for human redemption. Providence also includes predestination. However, not only the end but also the means are provided by providence. Therefore, one is not predestined in isolation from the actions of one’s life. First and foremost, though, providence includes Christ. Christ is the supreme example of divine providence.
Providence has several effects on human beings. First, it holds human beings responsible for sin. When God’s commands are broken, even though the action is ordained by God, the human being is still responsible for the evil act. While God’s intentions are always good, the intentions of human beings are not. Nevertheless, providence has several positive effects for human beings. If one knows that everything is ordained by God and working for the good, one is freed from anxiety in this life. Furthermore, by orienting one toward one’s final end, providence provides hope for the future and the right perspective on the value of earthly life. Lastly, providence should lead to action rather than idleness because both the means and ends are ordained by God.

Notably, Helm leaves out some possible elements from his model of providence. These are perhaps as instructive as the elements he includes. According to Helm’s model, all actions or events do not need to be equally providential. Some events play a greater role in God’s overall providential plan than other events. Helm also argues that human beings do not need indeterministic freedom. It is enough if humans are simply free in the sense that they are able to act as they wish. Although all of one’s acts are foreordained by God, they are foreordained in accordance with one’s will. Therefore, actual alternatives are not necessary for one to do what one wills to do. Finally, providence does not need to be observable. Since the source of the doctrine of providence is Scripture rather than experience, one does not need to see a pattern in one’s life to have faith in providence. In fact, in this model one should not expect to see observable evidence of God’s providence.

Some theologians are uncomfortable with the use of compatibilism in Calvinist theology. These theologians find other ways of articulating God’s providence in relation to
human freedom. From the Catholic, Thomistic tradition, Michael Dodds argues that genuine choice and chance do not have to compromise God's providential guidance of the world. We turn to his articulation of providence next.
CHAPTER TWO

A THOMISTIC MODEL OF PROVIDENCE

The second model of divine providence comes from the Thomistic tradition. Thomistic theology is grounded in the work of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), although Paul Helm already made some use of Aquinas in his Calvinist approach. Unsurprisingly, then, this chapter will have many themes in common with the previous chapter. Nevertheless, the particular concerns of Aquinas and our primary interpreter of Thomistic theology in this chapter, Michael Dodds, open up important new directions in providence especially concerning chance and human freedom.

The Thomistic model of divine providence presented here does not represent the entire field of Thomism/Neo-Thomism, much less the even wider variety of perspectives which have come out of Catholicism as a whole. Nevertheless, the particular version of Thomism presented here through Dodds' work provides a helpful middle position between Helm’s Calvinist model and the process model which will be presented in chapter three. While the sources and types of interpretation do not allow for a perfect one-to-one comparison between this model and the previous one, as much as possible the presentation of the central themes follows the same order as in the previous chapter. A new collection of elements of the doctrine of providence will be built out of the Thomistic model of providence at the end of this chapter.
Introducing Michael J. Dodds, O.P.

Michael J. Dodds, O.P. is a Dominican priest and theologian, ordained in 1977, who teaches theology at the Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology in Berkeley, CA. His focus has been primarily on theories of divine action and the relationship between theology and contemporary science. His work in relating science to theology informs his work on providence, and consequently this model utilizes a unique frame of reference to address the question of providence. Even where Dodds agrees with Helm, his approach to the question of providence is different. Furthermore, Dodds stands apart even amongst Thomistic scholars for his use of the whole corpus of Aquinas' writings rather than just the *Summa Theologiae* and *Summa Contra Gentiles*.¹

Dodds has two book-length works that relate to the question of providence. The first, *The Unchanging God of Love: Thomas Aquinas & Contemporary Theology on Divine Immutability* (2008 – 2nd edition) is primarily a work on the doctrine of God but includes a section on the implications of divine immutability for providence. The second, *Unlocking Divine Action: Contemporary Science & Thomas Aquinas* (2012), likewise includes a chapter on the implications of a return to an Aristotelian/Thomistic approach to divine causality for providence. Both these works, as well as his other writings in the form of booklets and articles, are grounded in Dodds’ reflections on the relationship between theology and science. His work

is based on three assumptions about the world and theology. First, he says we must assert that knowledge of the world is possible. If we do not, science is impossible. Second, the fields of science and theology can dialogue with one another. In general, Dodds agrees with those who argue that science answers “how” and theology answers “why.” However, he does not go so far as to say that by asking different questions they fail to dialogue. Rather, Dodds suggests that the categories of “how” and “why” are not hard and fast. “How” is intrinsically related to “why,” and theology sometimes goes beyond “why” questions when it makes factual claims (for example, about the historical reality of Jesus). Third, Dodds claims that “there can be no fundamental contradiction between truth as discovered by reason and as revealed by God.” This last assumption informs the interpretation of Scripture. While Scripture can and does reveal information that goes beyond the realm of science and reason, any interpretation of Scripture which directly contradicts science must be a misinterpretation.

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4 Ian G. Barbour’s fourfold categorization of perspectives on science and religion is clarifying here. Barbour’s first category is that of conflict. In this category either religion is rejected (scientific materialism) or science is rejected (Biblical literalism). The second category is independence. Dodds’ view here, that science and religion operate in separate domains, is an example of the independence category. The third category is dialogue. This category suggests that science and theology can constructively dialogue through analogy and limit-questions. When Dodds insists that “how” is related to “why” and when he suggests the domains of science and theology sometimes overlap, he is placing himself in the dialogue category. The fourth category, called integration, seeks a more systematic relationship between science and religion. Integration is characteristic of process theism and natural theology. See Ian G. Barbour, *When Science Meets Religion: Enemies, Strangers, or Partners* (New York: HarperOne, 2000), 2-3, 150-180.


6 Ibid., 7.

7 Ibid., 8.
assumptions in mind, Dodds seeks a renewed portrayal of Aquinas which speaks directly to the scientifically oriented minds of the 21st century.

**Dodds’ Model of Providence**

In Dodds’ model of providence, general providence is discussed through a retrieval of Aristotle’s four causes: efficient, material, formal, and final. Dodds’ theory of general providence explains how God can be the primary cause without infringing on causality as described by contemporary science. God’s particular plan for human beings, special providence, will then be discussed. The reflections on divine causality in relation to human causality raise important questions about the presence of evil in the world and the nature of human freedom, which will be discussed next. As in the previous chapter, this section will end with a clarification of what providence can and cannot do in this model as well as how providence relates to the doctrine of God.

1. **General Providence**

Dodds approaches the question of providence through a love of Aquinas and the insights of contemporary science. Influenced by Aquinas, Dodds interprets the question of how God guides creation as a question of causality. While today many people tend to think of causality only in the form of direct efficient causes which are observable and predictable, Aquinas did not understand causality so narrowly and offered an expanded notion of causality based on Aristotle. Dodds finds that a review of Aristotle’s four causes is a helpful way to open one’s mind to the variety of causalities encountered in the world, which are not only of philosophical interest but are also increasingly accepted by the scientific world. First, efficient cause is expanded beyond the immediate agent to also include those who guided the agent.
For example, a sculptor is the cause of the sculpture, but so is the sculptor’s teacher. Second, the efficient cause works in view of the final cause, or the intended end. Although the final cause is a cause, it is in no way a force. Third, the material cause holds the potential for all that a thing is capable of being or becoming. Finally, the formal cause determines what a thing is. For Aquinas, the formal cause of all things resides in God. One of Dodds’ main goals in his writings is to recapture an expanded notion of causality for the present day.

While Helm only mentions quantum physics in passing, Dodds offers a sustained engagement with the possibilities opened up by quantum physics, chaos theory, the Big Bang, evolution, genetics, and emergence. Contemporary science has allowed for a re-expansion of our conception of causality. What is genetics but a formal cause? Is not the Big Bang the material cause that provides the potential for all that is? By looking to expanded forms of causality, one can better imagine how God can be the cause of all things without infringing upon creaturely efficient causes. However, there are two main ways these new scientific insights, in conjunction with Aquinas’ use of Aristotle’s theory of causality, can be used theologically, and Dodds is very clear about which he prefers. Many theologians have tried to

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8 Ibid., 28.
11 Dodds, *Philosophy of Nature*, 47.
12 Dodds, *Unlocking Divine Action*, 12, 23.
13 Ibid., 53-93.
14 Dodds credits Ernst Mayr with this idea. See Dodds, *Unlocking Divine Action*, 100.
insert God into new scientific frameworks in such a way that natural causes are still able to function as science predicts. As an example, some have turned to the uncertainty principle of quantum physics as the place where God may be the final arbiter. Dodds points out that it is unclear whether intervention at the sub-atomic level would really allow God to guide the world in a meaningful way. Furthermore, if no natural cause is needed, perhaps making God the efficient cause is problematic.

According to Dodds, this kind of approach does not fully take into account that, as the source of all creation, God is not a cause alongside other causes. Consequently, instead of inserting God into the scientific framework, Dodds uses the scientific expansion of causality analogically to think through how God might work in the world. In other words, God does not work through the causal gaps of quantum physics, but understanding the indeterminacy of quantum physics can help us to understand how God does work. Dodds writes, “The primary mode of divine causation is creative and constitutive, not controlling and compelling. God is not rival or auxiliary to created causes, but rather the One who makes all causes be causes.”

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17 Dodds, *Unlocking Divine Action*, 145.

18 Ibid., 164.
Since God is a transcendent cause rather than a natural cause, God can only be spoken of analogically.\textsuperscript{19} However, analogically, divine causality can be thought of as simultaneously final, formal, and efficient. Although final causality does not involve any force, God is present as the final cause because everything acts in accordance with its nature.\textsuperscript{20} In other words, everything moves toward its natural end which is to participate in God’s goodness. With Aquinas, Dodds places the formal cause in the mind of God. The formal cause prevents reductionism, ensuring the whole is more than the sum of its parts.\textsuperscript{21} God working as an efficient cause poses the most potential difficulties. Here Dodds takes the separation of theology and science seriously. Science, he says, cannot make any claims about God acting as a transcendent efficient cause.\textsuperscript{22}

There are two models that together describe the way God acts in the world as a transcendent efficient cause. First, God can be thought of as the primary cause who works through secondary causes. In this model creatures have their own causality and act in accordance with their own potential. Still, the primary cause enables the secondary as the source of the creature’s being and causality.\textsuperscript{23} When an action has a primary and secondary


\textsuperscript{20} Dodds, \textit{Unlocking Divine Action}, 181.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 183-185.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 189.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 190-191
cause, the act belongs fully to both agents.\textsuperscript{24} Second, God can be thought of as the principal cause who acts through instrumental causes. In this model, the act of the instrumental cause goes beyond the natural potential of the instrument.\textsuperscript{25} Dodds gives the example of a piece of chalk which can naturally make a mark. Used as an instrument, though, a piece chalk can write words, which is beyond the natural capacity of chalk. The cause of the words lies wholly in the chalk and wholly in the author.\textsuperscript{26} Since God’s causality is always mediated through secondary and instrumental causes, the shape of God’s providential plan remains hidden from us. We are unable to directly see God working in the world or determine the final ends of God’s creations.\textsuperscript{27}

In sum, God guides the world providentially as primary and principal cause in addition to providing a final and formal cause. God is present in these ways in every single action that takes place. On this point, Dodds agrees with Helm. Providence runs all the way down to the atomic level. However, Dodds and Helm are about to part ways sharply. For Helm, the logical consequence of risk-free providence was determinism. Dodds is unwilling to go that route and maintains a space for chance and freedom. While the topic of freedom will be dealt with more fully below, a brief word is important here to get the basic direction of Dodds’ model of

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 192.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 193.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
\end{flushright}
providence. Again turning to Aquinas, Dodds explains that the use of secondary causes by God includes chance and freedom because God determines not only what will happen but also how it will happen.\textsuperscript{28} In one of Aquinas’ commentaries on Aristotle, Aquinas argues that because God’s will is different from our human wills, God can will an event without removing its contingency:

There is likewise a difference to be noted on the part of the divine will, for the divine will must be understood as existing outside of the order of beings, as a cause producing the whole of being and all its differences. Now the possible and the necessary are differences of being, and therefore necessity and contingency in things and the distinction of each according to the nature of their proximate causes originate from the divine will itself, for He disposes necessary causes for the effects that He wills to be necessary, and He ordains causes acting contingently (i.e., able to fail) for the effects that He wills to be contingent. And according to the condition of these causes, effects are called either necessary or contingent, although all depend on the divine will as on a first cause, which transcends the order of necessity and contingency.\textsuperscript{29}

Simply put, God not only wills each event but also whether it will happen by necessity, by free choice, or by chance. This proposal is foundational for Dodds’ model of providence.\textsuperscript{30} It maintains both free will and chance despite also ensuring that everything happens according to God’s will. In a sense, then, there is no chance from the perspective of God, but chance is

\textsuperscript{28} Dodds, \textit{Unlocking Divine Action}, 210, 217. See also the diagrams on pages 207 and 208.


\textsuperscript{30} Taking Aquinas in a somewhat different direction, Elizabeth Johnson proposes a Thomistic model of providence which is open to risk. She writes, “The future remains genuinely open: God does not act like a bigger and better secondary cause to determine chance atomic events or initial conditions of chaotic systems. Randomness is real, for God respects the structure of creation while at the same time weaving events into providential patterns toward the realization of the whole.” Dodds would agree with much of this statement although he does not see chance as involving any risk or self-limitation on God’s part. See Johnson, “Does God Play Dice?,” 16.
real in the world.\textsuperscript{31} Similarly, nothing happens by necessity from the perspective of God, although God’s will is unfailing. Dodds says these are category mistakes rather than inconsistencies; necessity and contingency apply only to the realm of beings.\textsuperscript{32} Dodds is insistent that chance is not an illusion or due to ignorance.\textsuperscript{33} Likewise, one can speak in a real sense of being “lucky” when human choices result in an unforeseen but happy consequence.\textsuperscript{34} Neither chance nor luck is properly a cause.\textsuperscript{35} However, God can still work through the non-causality of chance as a secondary cause without any harm to providence.\textsuperscript{36} In a similar fashion, God can use human freedom as a secondary cause without risking the providential plan.\textsuperscript{37}

2. Special Providence

While God can use all of creation as a secondary cause, human beings hold a special place in the doctrine of providence for both Aquinas and Dodds. Dodds writes, “If God’s love reaches out to all, it reaches out most especially to his human creation for whom God wills nothing less than his own goodness.”\textsuperscript{38} Providence extends to all of creation in so far as all of

\begin{footnotes}
\item[31] Dodds, \textit{Unlocking Divine Action}, 224.
\item[32] Ibid., 224-225.
\item[33] Ibid., 217. See also, Dodds, \textit{Philosophy of Nature}, 55.
\item[34] Dodds, \textit{Philosophy of Nature}, 54-55.
\item[35] Dodds, \textit{Unlocking Divine Action}, 220. See also Dodds, \textit{Philosophy of Nature}, 54 and Dodds “Search for a Better way,” 92-94.
\item[36] Dodds, \textit{Unlocking Divine Action}, 222. For more on chance in relation to evolution, see Michael J. Dodds, O.P., \textit{Theological Anthropology} (Oakland, CA: Western Dominican Province, 2014), 78-80.
\item[37] Dodds, \textit{Unlocking Divine Action}, 225.
\item[38] Ibid., 264.
\end{footnotes}
creation is sustained by God. However, all of creation is sustained with the eternal end of
human beings in mind.39 While providence is granted to humans for their own sake, the rest of
creation is guided for the sake of humanity.40 The part of providence which pertains to eternal
life, known as predestination, only applies to human beings.41 This special relationship and
special goal of providence is made possible through our union to God as the body of Christ.

The union of human beings and God in the body of Christ begins with the Incarnation.
The Incarnation is the central event of God’s providential action and “the highest expression of
God’s will to share his goodness with creatures.”42 When God becomes a human being, all the
attributes of God remain intact in the divine nature of Christ. God does not really “become” in
the sense of changing. Since God is immutable, the divine nature of Christ is immutable, and

39 Ibid., 241. Dodds’ focus on human creation comes from Aquinas. See for example, Aquinas, Summa
Contra Gentiles III, c.95.5, which reads, “Now, we showed above that God loves His creature, and the more that
any one of them participates in His goodness which is the first and chief object of His love, the more does He love
it. So, He wills the desires of a rational creature to be satisfied, for, compared to other creatures, it participates
most perfectly in divine providence.”

40 See Thomas Aquinas, Quaestiones disputatae de veritate, trans. Robert W. Mulligan, S.J. (Chicago:
Aquinas writes, “It must be said, therefore, that brutes and their acts, taken even individually, fall under God’s
providence, but not in the same way in which men and their actions do. For providence is exercised over men,
even as individuals, for their own sake; but individual brutes are provided for merely for the sake of something
else—just as other corruptible creatures are, as mentioned previously. Hence, the evil that happens to a brute is
not ordered to the good of the brute but to the good of something else, just as the death of an ass is ordered to
the good of a lion or that of a wolf. But the death of a man killed by a lion is directed not merely to the good of
the lion, but principally to the man’s punishment or to the increase of his merit; for his merit can grow if he
accepts his sufferings.” He goes on to say, “God does not care so much for brutes that He would impose a law
upon men for the sake of brutes, commanding men to be good to them or not to kill them; for brutes have been
made for man’s use. Consequently, providence is not exercised over them for their own sake but for the sake of
men.”

41 Dodds, Unchanging God of Love, 192-193.

42 Dodds, Unchanging God of Love, 198.
the Incarnation does not change God.\textsuperscript{43} However, by uniting with a human nature, humanity is changed.\textsuperscript{44} There is no experience of humanity closer to God than that of Jesus,\textsuperscript{45} but all of humanity can find similar union with God. Dodds points to the story in Matthew 25: 31-46 to explain this change.\textsuperscript{46} When Jesus identifies himself as the hungry, the thirsty, etc., it is not God who has changed and become a person in need. Rather, the complete unity of God with the suffering means that the situation of the suffering is new. Humanity has been elevated. Since Christ’s love unites humanity as the body of Christ, our own human experiences are also Christ’s.\textsuperscript{47} This unity makes Dodds’ model of providence inherently anthropocentric.\textsuperscript{48}

Humanity holds a special purpose and end in which the rest of creation is merely instrumental.

3. The Problem of Evil and the Question of Freedom

Since Dodds hopes to maintain both freedom and chance while insisting that God has a risk-free providential plan, the problem of evil and the functioning of human freedom are important topics to address. On the problem of evil, Dodds’ model of providence looks similar to Helm’s. However, on the question of human freedom, Dodds explicitly rejects Helm’s turn to

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 200.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 201.


\textsuperscript{46} See Dodds, \textit{Unchanging God of Love}, 226 and Dodds, “Thomas Aquinas, Human Suffering,” 335.

\textsuperscript{47} Dodds, “Thomas Aquinas, Human Suffering,” 341.

\textsuperscript{48} The anthropocentrism in Dodds’ Thomistic model of providence is discussed further in chapter four.
compatibilism. Dodds’ understanding of freedom includes real choice, although the decisions we make are only properly free when they are oriented to God’s goodness.\(^{49}\)

Dodds’ ultimate answer to the problem of evil is that it must remain a mystery which we encounter in the cross.\(^{50}\) Still, he offers a few suggestions on directions and dead ends as he sees them. With Helm, he affirms that in some way evil must contribute to a greater good,\(^ {51}\) although he is less specific about what that greater good might be. Dodds rejects any interpretation of evil that suggests a limit to God’s power, either by God choosing self-limitation or by necessity.\(^ {52}\) Any limitation on God would put providence at risk. As a possible direction for understanding evil, Dodds turns to the preservation of creaturely causality, including human freedom. Natural evil can be seen as a byproduct of creaturely causality. While it is not intended by God, God allows it for the greater good of real causality in the world.\(^ {53}\) Moral evil, or sin, is a more complicated matter. Dodds, along with Aquinas and Augustine, understands evil to be a privation of the good. It is a lack which has no actual being of its own. Consequently, God, as pure act, has no part in its production.\(^ {54}\) When a person sins, the act, as an action, can be attributed to God and is under God’s providential control. However, the act, as a sin, cannot be attributed to God because it does not have its source in

\(^{49}\) Dodds, *Theological Anthropology*, 60.

\(^{50}\) Dodds, *Unlocking Divine Action*, 230.

\(^{51}\) Ibid., 231.

\(^{52}\) Ibid., 237.

\(^{53}\) Ibid., 238.

\(^{54}\) Ibid., 239.
being but rather in the person alone.\textsuperscript{55} Dodds is not willing to go as far as Helm in saying that God “willingly permits” evil. Rather, God permits evil, but neither wills it nor prevents it.\textsuperscript{56} Although Dodds has already insisted that permitting evil in this way will not disrupt God’s providential plan, we must still ask why God would permit evil if it is not intended. Dodds answers that God’s intention for human freedom takes precedence.\textsuperscript{57} God refuses to impinge on creaturely causality even though human freedom acted upon in accordance with human nature inevitably leads to moral evil.

Helm’s model of providence offered only a severely modified version of human freedom. A person is free only in the sense that one can do what one wants, not in the sense that one can choose. There is no indeterministic freedom in Helm’s model. This view is in part driven by the concern that if people acted freely, God would learn what they did and therefore change. Dodds, citing Helm, rejects this position.\textsuperscript{58} According to Dodds, since God is transcendent and eternal, God’s knowledge is not like ours. While our knowledge comes only after the fact of the object of our knowledge, God’s knowledge comes prior and creates the object of knowledge.\textsuperscript{59} Dodds explains, “Because he is eternal, he sees past, present, and future in a single intuition. Regardless of how things may change in time, therefore, his

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 240.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{58} See Dodds, \textit{Unchanging God of Love}, 185, 190.

\textsuperscript{59} Dodds, \textit{Unchanging God of Love}, 186.
knowledge of them does not change." Dodds believes that we are faced with real choices, but just as we know what we chose after the fact, God knows what we chose for eternity because God exists outside of time. In other words, God knows the future in the same way we know the past. So, human freedom does not imply that God gains new knowledge. Furthermore, the contingency of events remains intact. A free choice remains a free choice even after a decision has been made and can no longer be changed. The free choices of human beings as instances of indeterministic freedom (at least from the perspective of creation and human beings) are secondary causes which follow God’s providence as readily as any other type of act. Dodds’ model of providence rejects the idea that the providential plan can change as a result of human choice.

For Dodds, losing indeterministic human freedom creates too many new problems. He notes that our own self-reflection leads us to recognize instances where we could have acted differently or not acted at all. Even acts which are sinful, and therefore not properly speaking free, are a hint or an indication that we are actually free. Furthermore, both day-to-day life and Scripture are filled with “counsels, exhortations, commands, prohibitions, rewards and

60 Ibid., 112.

61 Ibid., 186-187.

62 Ibid., 191.

63 Ibid., 190.

64 Dodds, *Theological Anthropology*, 55.

65 Ibid., 60.
punishments,” which would lose their meaning without the freedom to act differently. Without freedom, what would be the purpose of rewards and punishments? Nevertheless, while Dodds insists we make many choices along the way, he ultimately agrees with Helm that the human will is not free in regards to its final end. Since the will is created by God, it has a natural inclination to the good. This means that with a perfect vision of God, we would always choose God. However, since we lack the beatific vision, our actions are often lacking in goodness and we are capable of rejecting God. Although our natural and rightful end is in God, Dodds suggests there are several paths to that end. While God already knows which path we will choose, the choice remains a real choice on our part. Still, for those who favor a model of providence like that of William James’ chess player analogy, Dodds’ sense of freedom may not be strong enough.

4. What Providence Can Do

Dodds’ model of providence offers an especially helpful take on two issues that have not been fully explored in the categories above. First, Dodds’ understanding of divine action offers an explanation for what miracles are and how they can be understood in the 21st century world. Second, Dodds explains how providence is a source of hope for the Christian

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66 Ibid., 55.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid., 57.
69 Ibid.
and the related implications for how believers in God’s providence should understand the world.

Miracles raise questions for any theologian who takes science seriously. To believe in miracles is to believe that science cannot explain everything that happens in the world. This is a stronger statement than merely not being able to predict what will happen due to chaos theory or quantum physics. Theologians must also contend with the unevenness of miracle stories. Why are there so many in the Bible and so few miracles today? Were they just misunderstanding what was happening? Or, was God more active back then? Dodds attempts to answer these questions by again turning to God’s causality in the world. Recall that according to Dodds, God acts through secondary and instrumental causes. A secondary cause is simply an agent with its own natural causality which acts according to its nature. An instrumental cause, however, acts beyond its natural capacity. Dodds suggests that a miracle occurs when God uses nature as an instrumental cause. An object or person used as an instrumental cause does not break the laws of the universe, but does push them beyond what would normally be possible. A piece of chalk will not naturally ever write words, although it can make a mark. Likewise, an aggressive cancer will not usually heal itself, although the body does have a natural capacity for being cancer-free. The dignity of the instrumental cause is maintained by never acting in direct contradiction to the instrument’s nature. While this does not satisfy every question one might have about the presence or absence of miracles in the world today, it does explain the lack of certain divine interventions we may have hoped for.

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God will not remove human freedom, chance, or the ability of creatures to act according to their natures in order to rearrange the universe.

The doctrine of providence’s most important function in Christianity is as a source of hope. In Dodds’ model of providence, hope is secured by positing an end for all things, although we often do not know what the end will look like for ourselves, much less for rocks or atoms. The fact that everything will reach its end is a reason to hope, not despair. For Dodds, a hopeless world would be one of endless progress, which is really no progress because progress can only be measured relative to an end. He imagines Sisyphus pushing the boulder up the mountain, time and time again. In the world of Sisyphus, God may empathize with human suffering, but God does not offer a way out. Providence brings about an end and promises a final victory of good over evil. The end is not an end like death, though, where everything stops and loses its being. The end is dynamic. Dodds calls it the “dynamic stillness of abiding love.” In this state, nothing can shake, frighten, or disturb us. Dodds ends with the poem “Nada te turbe” by Teresa of Avila to describe what the “dynamic stillness of abiding love” might be like. Her vision is the end of providence and the source of Christian hope.

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72 Dodds, *Unchanging God of Love*, 196.

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid.

75 Ibid., 198.

76 Ibid., 243. The words to Teresa of Avila’s poem are: *Nada te turbe* / *nada te espante* / *Todo se pasa* / *Dios no se muda.* / *La paciencia todo alcanza.* / *Quien a Dios tiene* / *nada le falta* / *Solo Dios basta.* In English translation by the composer Joan Szymko: *Let nothing disturb you* / *nothing frighten you,* / *All things are passing.* / *God never changes.* / *Patience obtains all things.* / *Whoever has God lacks nothing.* / *God is enough.*
5. What Providence Cannot Do

There is one topic that Dodds repeatedly clarifies throughout his works: how God responds to humanity. Dodds’ model of providence allows God to act in the world through secondary causes and even act in miraculous ways through instrumental causes. In addition, Dodds’ model grants human beings real freedom to choose between options. Given that, one might assume that God also acts in response to human freedom. One might assume that God responds to a person’s freely offered prayers or that God could intervene to mitigate human suffering. Yet, Dodds says that to say God responds is misleading. There is never a change of plans from God’s perspective. Furthermore, while creation depends on God’s providence for existence, God does not depend on humanity and remains unchanging even when addressed through prayer or confronted with suffering.

If God does not respond to prayer, why do Christians pray? Aquinas addressed this same question in regards to the Epicureans and Stoics who felt prayer was useless if it had no effect on God. Dodds understands prayer in the same way as Helm. Prayer is one of the secondary causes which God works through. Therefore, from the perspective of God’s transcendence, all prayer finds its primary cause in God. It is really God who prays in us. From the perspective of the person praying, prayer may still be freely chosen. Still, the prayer can

77 Ibid., 188, fn122. See also Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* III, c. 96.9.

78 Dodds, *Unlocking Divine Action*, 245.
never change God, only the person. Dodds says that prayer reveals our dependence on God and conforms us to Christ. It is a way of cooperating with God’s providential plan.

More problematic for contemporary theologians, even those who are otherwise sympathetic to the Thomistic tradition, is the question of whether or not God responds to human suffering. Edward Vacek writes that if God loves us, God’s actions must be modified by our actions. Elizabeth Johnson suggests that the God of pathos from the Hebrew tradition is at least sometimes a more adequate model of God than the God of impassibility from the Greek philosophical tradition. However, Dodds answers “no” in order to preserve God’s immutability. If God never changes, then God cannot respond to human beings. For Dodds this does not mean God is unloving or absent in our suffering. Rather, Dodds argues, the most empathetic and loving presence comes when a person forgets him/herself. When a child is in danger, a parent forgets his or her own safety and thinks only of the child’s suffering. The parent does not suffer with the child; the child’s suffering is the parent’s suffering.

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79 Ibid., 246.
80 Dodds, Unchanging God of Love, 189.
81 Ibid., 187. Dodds cites a section of Vacek’s work which reads, “God does not solely love God’s own self. Rather God loves us, and that means that who we are and what we do make a difference to God. God’s being and action are modified by us and our actions.” See Edward Collins Vacek, S.J., Love, Human and Divine: The Heart of Christian Ethics (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1994), 124.
83 In Dodds own words, “This account of divine compassion denies any reaction of suffering in God distinct from the suffering of God’s creatures, but does not for that reason imply any lessening of God’s love.” Dodds, “Thomas Aquinas, Human Suffering,” 338-339.
84 Dodds, “Thomas Aquinas, Human Suffering,” 339. See also Dodds, Unchanging God of Love, 227-228.
with God. God does not suffer with us and in that sense have an emotional response to our suffering, but God certainly does know our suffering through the humanity of Jesus and our union with Christ in the Church.\textsuperscript{85} Dodds further explains, “In speaking of Jesus, we will not predicate of God some hypothetical sort of ‘divine suffering,’ itself alien to our human nature and experience. We will rather predicate of God a human suffering like our own.”\textsuperscript{86} There is no advantage, according to Dodds, to a God who suffers as a divine being because that has nothing to do with suffering as a human being. Comfort can only come from a God who understands human suffering. Therefore, there is no reason to abandon the immutability of God’s being for the sake of a loving response. God’s immutability actually perfects God’s love.\textsuperscript{87}

Dodds’ model of providence does not include a response to human beings in any sense that implies a change in God due to the actions of human beings. God’s providential plan remains unchanging despite the free choices of human beings, their sufferings, and their prayers.

6. Doctrine of God

The development of Dodds’ model of providence comes after his commitment to certain divine attributes, not the other way around. Notably, his book on divine immutability was written before his book on divine action. Consequently, understanding Dodds’ doctrine of

\textsuperscript{85} Dodds, “Thomas Aquinas, Human Suffering,” 341.

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 334.

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 339.
God is crucial to understanding the conclusions he draws about providence. Since Dodds and Helm are both influenced by Aquinas, it is unsurprising that they discuss the divine attributes in similar ways. Again, God will be described as omnibenevolent, eternal, omniscient, immutable, and omnipotent, albeit with some discrepancies on what those terms mean.

Dodds’ describes God’s omnibenevolence as an agapic love freely given to creation. It is not a merited love given in accordance with a creature’s goodness, but a love which is constant. In other words, God’s love is not a response to goodness, but rather a part of God’s essence. This is seen most clearly in the Incarnation which, while not changing God, allows human being to unite with God. God’s agapic love is a central theme running through all of Dodds’ work, and Dodds rejects any notion of providence which would restrict God’s love. In this way, omnibenevolence is the motivation for maintaining real human freedom in the world. To restrict freedom would restrict the love God shows for intelligent creatures. In Dodds’ own words, “Ultimately, to tell the story of divine action, we must use the language of love.” Nevertheless, Dodds’ description of God’s love is focused on love for human beings. Without denying that God loves all of creation, he is direct in stating that both God’s love and God’s providence are directed especially at human creation.

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89 Ibid., 198, 201.
90 Dodds, *Unlocking Divine Action*, 264.
91 Ibid.
Since God is transcendent, we can only understand God’s being analogically. While our being exists within a continuum of time, God’s being is eternal. Eternity is a simultaneous whole, but we are not capable of fully imagining it because only God is eternal. God’s existence outside of time is important for Dodds’ model of providence because it ruptures the univocal understandings of causality which have led to conflicts between science and religion in the past. For Dodds, God’s eternity gives God the freedom to act through secondary causes rather than alongside or in competition with them. For providence, this means we will not see blatant acts of God in the world, but we can still rest assured that not only necessary acts, but also free choices and events which happen by chance are contributing to God’s providential plan.

Dodds and Helm both affirm that God is omniscient, but here their understandings of the term carry very different implications for providence. Both agree that since God is outside of time, there is no past and future for God. Consequently, God knows everything that is going to happen. Both also agree that God’s providential plan is unchanging and ordained by God. For Helm, this means that all events happen by necessity. Dodds disagrees that compatibilism is the best way to understand God’s causality. Instead, Dodds maintains that God ordains not only what will happen, but how it will happen. God can ordain an event as necessary, free, by chance, etc. Although God knows what will happen, within the order of secondary causes real freedom and chance still exist without altering God. Dodds is aware that theologians such as

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92 Dodds, *Philosophy of Nature*, 86.

93 For Dodds’ take on Helm on this point see Dodds, *Unchanging God of Love*, 185.
Helm find indeterministic freedom in conjunction with an omniscient God to be illogical.\(^94\) Nevertheless, Dodds insists that just as people know what will happen after the fact, by extension, if God is outside of time this same type of knowing could apply before a free event happens.

While Helm preserves God’s immutability through a deterministic view of divine causality, Dodds attempts to preserve immutability while maintaining indeterministic human freedom. Dodds writes, “God can know changeable things without changing.”\(^95\) Dodds also suggests that there is no reason for us to hope for a God who changes. Since God is an eternal being who transcends our order of causality, we have no way of knowing what divine mutability would even be. It would not make God more relatable. Furthermore, because of the Incarnation, God already relates to us fully. Immutability is essential to Dodds’ model of providence because it provides an end point. Resting in God is only possible because God is constant. Nevertheless, God is also dynamic, and there is a sense in which God could rightly be said to be mutable for that reason.\(^96\) However, Dodds believes immutability serves as a better description because those who speak of God as changing tend to limit God, often by arguing for a God who is self-limiting.\(^97\)

\(^{94}\) Dodds, *Unchanging God of Love*, 190.

\(^{95}\) Ibid., 185.

\(^{96}\) Ibid., 153.

\(^{97}\) Ibid.
Finally, God is omnipotent. As primary cause, all events are ordained by God in their particular mode. In addition, providence is ordered toward an end point in which all evil, the absence of being and goodness, will be defeated. Like Helm, Dodds also addresses the question of God’s weakness. Is there a sense in which God can be thought of as weak? Dodds says “yes,” but only in the human nature of Christ. Through Christ, God experiences human weakness as God’s own, while God’s divinity remains omnipotent. It is paradoxical, but it is the only way for God, with the classic divine attributes, to become human while still remaining fully God. Dodds expresses this paradox:

One in Christ in the power of his love, we are led into the mystery of God: the wholly transcendent God who is completely immanent in his people; the omnipotent God whose strength is made manifest in weakness; the impassible God who ‘suffers and dies’; the unchanging God who identifies himself with each of his suffering people, making their suffering truly his own in love.  

Consequently, while it would be inappropriate to describe God as weak in God’s own nature, through the Incarnation God does know human weakness. Nevertheless, this understanding of weakness has no effect on God’s ability to carry out providence. Dodds’ inclusion of weakness does not suggest any risk or lack of control on God’s part.

Elements of a Doctrine of Providence Drawn from Dodds

Dodds’ model of divine providence draws on a Thomistic understanding of God as well as a sophisticated exploration of the meaning and varieties of causality. These elements work together to form a model which is less deterministic than Helm’s but still risk-free. The elements of Dodds’ model are summarized in table 2 and discussed below. We will see that

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certain elements of Helm’s model are deemed unnecessary by Dodds while new elements are also added.

Table 2. Elements of a Thomistic Model of Providence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Elements of Doctrine</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Source of the doctrine</td>
<td>1. Providence is based on revelation but cannot conflict with contemporary science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God and the meaning of providence</td>
<td>2. God can be described with classical attributes: omnibenevolent, eternal, omniscient, immutable, and omnipotent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Providence is motivated by God’s agapic love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. God’s causality operates on a transcendent level, not in the gaps of scientific causality</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. There is no risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. God’s providential plan will not change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range of providence</td>
<td>7. Providence includes all things (down to atomic level)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8. But, all providence is for the sake of human beings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9. Predestination includes general providence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10. Providence includes actions as well as their mode: necessary, contingent, free, by chance, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11. Christ is the supreme example</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effect of providence on human beings</td>
<td>12. Humans are responsible for sin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13. Humans experience real chance and indeterministic freedom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14. Providence provides hope for the future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elements not required by model</td>
<td>1. God does not need to “respond” to human beings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The fourteen elements essential to Dodds’ model of providence are divided into the same categories as Helm’s. First, the source of the doctrine can be again found in Scripture although, for Dodds, dialogue with contemporary science is also important. The meaning of providence, range of providence, and its effect on human beings make up the remaining thirteen elements.
In this model of providence, the classical attributes of omnibenevolence, eternity, omniscience, immutability, and omnipotence are used to describe God although we can only understand their meaning in an analogical sense. The agapic love of God is an especially important attribute of God. All these terms help to position God as transcendent which prevents God from becoming a God-of-the-gaps, even as contemporary science reveals new gaps for God to fill. God’s transcendent causality is the primary cause of all that is, even free choices and chance events, so there is no risk in this model. Providence cannot be thwarted, and there is no need for it to adapt to the decisions made by human beings.

Providence’s reach extends to all of creation because God is the primary cause of all being. However, God guides the world for the sake of human beings. The eternal end of human beings is the real purpose of providence. Consequently, one could say that general providence is actually a subcategory of predestination in this model. God guides the world by working through secondary causes which God wills in both their end and mode. God not only wills what will happen, but also how it will happen. In this way, freedom and chance are maintained. The primary example of God’s providential action in the world is the Incarnation. Since Christ unites human beings with God, and providence is for the sake of human beings, all providence hinges on Christ.

Since God is a transcendent cause, human beings do not experience providence in a flashy way. Human beings are still responsible for sin and still experience free decisions, chance, and lucky encounters. However, providence does ground Christian hope because it offers the assurance of an end in which good will conquer evil and human beings will be able to rest in God.
Interestingly, in Dodds’ model of providence, which is motivated by agapic love, God does not respond to human beings on account of their prayers or suffering. Any changes that occur can only occur in creation or in the human nature of Christ.

While both Helm and Dodds adhere to the traditional attributes of God, some process theologians have challenged conceptions of God’s omnipotence and omniscience by claiming they are inconsistent with both experience and scripture. Joseph Bracken offers us an alternative with his Trinitarian process model of providence. His model providence is explored in the next chapter.
CHAPTER THREE

A PROCESS MODEL OF PROVIDENCE

The third model of divine providence is a variation of process theism. Process theism includes a range of theological perspectives which all draw inspiration from the philosophical work of Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947). Whitehead’s philosophy, which is driven by creativity, novelty, and attention to contemporary scientific principles, is inherently open to risk and consequently stands at the opposite end of the spectrum from a Calvinist model while still offering a robust concept of providence.

The process model of divine providence presented here, that of Joseph Bracken, is most accurately described as an amalgamation of Thomism and process philosophy. His continual reference to traditional Thomistic themes facilitates comparisons between this model and the previous models. It also ensures that this model is an explicitly Christian process theism. Again, the material will be presented under the same headings as previous chapters with essential elements highlighted at the end.

Introducing Joseph A. Bracken, S.J.

Joseph A. Bracken, S.J. is a Jesuit priest, theologian, and professor emeritus at Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio. His life’s work is dedicated to developing a Trinitarian process theism by combining insights from Aquinas and Whitehead. Where Michael Dodds attempts to present a contemporary Thomistic model which remains as faithful as possible to Aquinas,
Bracken freely revises both Aquinas and Whitehead for his own constructive project.

Bracken has written many books and even more articles over the course of his career spelling out various facets of his Trinitarian process theism. In his writings, he has two primary goals in mind. First, Bracken attempts to articulate why process theism offers a good corrective to Thomistic metaphysics. Bracken is aware of critiques coming out of continental philosophy which have questioned the use of metaphysics in relation to God altogether. While sympathetic to their concerns, Bracken believes it is not metaphysics per se that is problematic; Christian theology has just been using the wrong metaphysical framework.¹ Second, as a Catholic theologian, Bracken is concerned with addressing the traditional Christian doctrines that many articulations of process theism (such as those of Charles Hartshorne or John Cobbs) dismiss or alter beyond recognition for the average Christian. These doctrines include the Trinity, the Incarnation, and eschatology. Three recent books in particular are used in this chapter’s presentation of Bracken’s process model of divine providence:


Bracken hopes his model will be consistent with contemporary science and tries to base all his arguments on a dialogue between faith and reason rather than faith alone. Yet, his belief in divine providence and thus his motivation for articulating a coherent model of providence comes from his faith. In defense of including a chapter on providence he writes:

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While I concede that there is no direct empirical verification for belief in God and workings of Divine Providence in this world, I would argue that there is also no direct empirical evidence that belief in God and the workings of Divine Providence is false. From a strictly empirical point of view, neither belief can be vindicated as obviously true.  

Consequently, like the models of Paul Helm and Dodds, this model ultimately relies on revelation.

**Bracken’s Model of Providence**

Bracken’s model of providence is based on a revised understanding of Whitehead’s actual occasions, societies, and divine initial aims. These three concepts form the foundation of general providence in this process model and will be explained in the first part of this section. The following sub-sections answer more particular questions about human beings, the presence of evil and freedom, and what providence can or cannot do. Here, Bracken rethinks traditional Thomistic doctrines in light of process theism in order to show that Christian doctrine is strengthened by a process understanding of the world. Of particular importance for Bracken is explaining how a Trinitarian God can be understood in process terms. The relationship between providence and Bracken’s doctrine of God is described at the end of this section.

1. General Providence

Despite being a strong advocate for process theism, especially among Catholics, Bracken is still willing to revise Whitehead’s work in order to better explain Christianity in terms of this new metaphysical framework. Still Bracken’s foundation remains firmly process-

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oriented and begins with Whitehead’s actual occasions, societies, and initial aims. The biggest obstacle to understanding Bracken’s process worldview is the vocabulary which Bracken modifies from Whitehead and revises throughout his own writings. I have indicated in the text and footnotes where several terms refer to the same concept.

The central shift in thinking that Whitehead’s process philosophy introduces is that actions are more real than things. The basic building blocks of all there is are not super tiny things, but what Whitehead calls “actual occasions.” An actual occasion is a momentary existence at the subatomic level. Bracken also refers to actual occasions as “momentary subjects of experience.” Because we are in time, an actual occasion never persists for more than a moment. Just as I am not quite the same in this moment as I was a moment ago (my state of mind takes all my previous states of mind into account, cells have died and been built, blood and oxygen have shifted their location within my body, etc.), nothing, whether alive or not, is static. Everything is in process: a succession of actual occasions. The biggest intellectual leap that Whitehead and Bracken ask us to make is that actual occasions, in their moment of

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5 Bracken, Christianity and Process Thought, 15.
existence, make a decision on how to act. The spontaneity and unpredictability physicists find at the subatomic level is evidence of this decision-making capability. Of course, Whitehead is not suggesting that electrons are self-aware. Whitehead explains, “The principle that I am adopting is that consciousness presupposes experience, and not experience consciousness. . . . Thus an actual entity may or may not be conscious of some part of its experience.” So, while we expect a conscious creature to have experiences, act, and decide, Whitehead does not believe this precludes the possibility that non-conscious creatures also have a minimal, but sufficient capacity to respond to their environment. As Bracken explains in simple language, “Tables and chairs, to be sure, are not alive, but their subatomic components are in their own way alive, passing on a given pattern of existence and activity from moment to moment so as to guarantee that the table or chair does not collapse when we put something on it or sit on it.”

Tables, chairs, and any other objects larger than a subatomic particle are really collections of actual occasions which Bracken calls societies or “structured fields of activity.” In Whitehead’s philosophy, the world is made up of societies. Each society remains organized

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8 Bracken, *Does God Roll Dice?*, 7.

9 Bracken, *Christianity and Process Thought*, 17.

10 Ibid., 16-18. Whitehead referred to societies as “structured societies.” Bracken, *Christianity and Process Thought*, 16. Recently, Bracken has modified his vocabulary claiming “systems” is a better word than “structured field of activity” because “it [systems] is more obviously an objective reality over and above the dynamic interrelationship of its constituent parts or members.” Bracken, *World in the Trinity*, 111.
basically the same from moment to moment, but it is never identical to its past self. The passing of each actual occasion which makes up the society results in typically minute changes that allow societies to maintain their identity while still slowing evolving over time.\(^\text{11}\) This same process accounts for the changes we see in both living and non-living aspects of the world. A caterpillar in a chrysalis changes rapidly compared to the slow erosion and transformation of a mountain, but each is changed through the same process—momentary occasions which maintain the organization of the whole while still slightly altering it.

Societies take on a life of their own in Bracken’s process theism.\(^\text{12}\) The actual occasions from moment to moment organize the society, but the society becomes more than the sum of its parts.\(^\text{13}\) The society develops its own agency in concert with its individual members, allowing the society to combine with other societies into a complex hierarchical system.\(^\text{14}\) In the human body, for example, each atom is already a society, but the atoms are also sub-societies of cells, which are sub-societies of organs, and so one. These are societies which overlap vertically. However, the resulting person is also part of societies such as a family, a nationality, and a work-place. These societies overlap horizontally.\(^\text{15}\) While the actual occasions

\(^{11}\) See Bracken, *Christianity and Process Thought*, 15-18; and Bracken, *Does God Roll Dice?*, 9.

\(^{12}\) Balancing the “one and the many” is Bracken’s most sustained and important contribution to process philosophy. The actual occasions (the many) and the society they form (the one) each simultaneously influence one another without either one becoming the dominant agent. Expanding this idea to the relationship between God (the one) and creation (the many) allows for a panentheistic understanding of the God-world relationship. See Bracken, *One in the Many*.

\(^{13}\) This is a development and modification of Whitehead’s original description of a structured society. For Whitehead, the society functioned as an aggregate without taking on its own agency.


\(^{15}\) Bracken, *Does God Roll Dice?*, 57.
which makeup these overlapping societies only last for a moment, the societies maintain an 
identity over time (for example, a foot remains a foot). Of course, as the actual occasions or 
sub-societies change, the unifying element of the society may also change.\textsuperscript{16} The result of 
these overlapping systems is both a bottom-up and a top-down causality.\textsuperscript{17} The actual 
occasions act on the whole through bottom-up causality; they sustain the whole and make it 
what it is. At the same time, the society itself takes on its own agency and acts top-down on 
the individual members by limiting and directing their possible actions. It is, after all, the 
society which persists through time and which allows us to identify a nation or person as in 
some sense the same nation or person as five minutes ago. In Bracken’s own words:

\begin{quote}
The constituent actual entities of the moment exercise efficient causality by reaffirming 
or slightly revising the ‘common element of form’ already present within the society to 
which they belong. The society in virtue of that same common element of form, 
however, exercises formal causality by imposing necessary constraints upon the activity 
of each new set of actual entities.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

The whole is determined by the parts, but the whole also determines the possibilities of the 
parts.

The vertically highest society in which we participate is what Christianity calls “the 
kingdom of God.”\textsuperscript{19} The kingdom of God is where the worldly societies of atoms, people,

\begin{footnotes}
\item[17] Ibid., 87-88, 109-110.
\item[18] Ibid., 109-110.
\item[19] Bracken, \textit{Does God Roll Dice?}, 108. Bracken writes, “For me, as one who believes in the Christian 
doctrine of the Trinity, the ultimate and all-inclusive field of activity is the kingdom of God, the participation of all 
creaturely actual entities and the societies to which they belong in the divine field of activity, the communitarian 
life of the three divine persons.”
\end{footnotes}
nationalities, planets, etc. overlap completely with God’s field of activity. Consequently, we “live and move and have our being” within God,\(^{20}\) while remaining distinct from God and God from us.\(^{21}\) Since the kingdom of God, like all things, is understood by Bracken as a society or field of activity, it necessarily remains dynamic while maintaining its identity over time.\(^{22}\) Furthermore, since the kingdom of God overlaps with God’s own field of activity, it shares in what could be called God’s omnibenevolence, or consistently good use of creative potential.

The participation of all societies in the vertically higher society of the divine is what Bracken calls providence.\(^{23}\) Since the kingdom of God includes all societies, nothing in this world is excluded from eternal life.\(^{24}\) Furthermore, since societies are made to join together, “all creatures will be incorporated into the divine matrix in terms of their relations to one another during life.”\(^{25}\)

The final concept, initial aims, brings us to the workings of the doctrine of providence in Bracken’s model. In order to act, an actual occasion must have creativity—the ability to bring about something novel. For Whitehead, creativity is a given; it is a fact of the universe present


\(^{21}\) Bracken, Does God Roll Dice?, 9-10.

\(^{22}\) Ibid., 10.

\(^{23}\) Ibid., 57.

\(^{24}\) Bracken, Christianity and Process Thought, 114; Bracken, Does God Roll Dice?, 145; Bracken, World in the Trinity, 125; and Bracken, Society and Spirit, 141.

\(^{25}\) Bracken, Christianity and Process Thought, 115.
in each actual occasion as an “initial aim.” For Bracken, creativity is given by God; it is grace.\textsuperscript{26} In other words, creativity is the creative force of God. Although creativity itself is morally neutral, God and God’s initial aims are inherently good.\textsuperscript{27} God provides each actual occasion with an initial aim which is two-fold. First, the initial aim offers the awareness of the possibility of creativity. Second, the initial aim provides a direction, luring us and all societies toward a good use of creativity rather than an evil use.\textsuperscript{28} Nevertheless, actual occasions, whether they contribute to a human society or rock society, have a measure of freedom in their actions. This means that all of creation is responsible for evil uses of creativity.\textsuperscript{29} More will be said about this below in the discussion of evil and freedom. For now, it is sufficient to understand that through the luring power of initial aims and the top-down causality of societies, in particular the top-down causality of the kingdom of God which overlaps all societies, God is constantly reordering the world to prevent chaos and bring about a good end.\textsuperscript{30} Bracken explains God’s guidance:

God does not maintain order within the world of creation by making things happen one way rather than another in terms of divine efficient causality. God maintains order by continually reconfiguring the pattern of finite events within the world of creation in terms of divine final causality. Thus, while creatures, finite subjects of experience, have


\textsuperscript{27} Bracken, \textit{Does God Roll Dice?}, 55.

\textsuperscript{28} Bracken, \textit{Christianity and Process Thought}, 20-21.

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 24-25

\textsuperscript{30} Bracken, \textit{Does God Roll Dice?}, 29.
the final say in terms of what de facto happens within the world of creation, God has the final say in terms of what it all means both for the present and for the future.\textsuperscript{31}

This on-going providential work often remains hidden to us even while we are its primary agents. Trust is required because “something eminently worthwhile is being worked out through the cosmic process even if we human beings, with our strictly limited goals and values, often find it hard to realize and properly appreciate.”\textsuperscript{32}

2. Special Providence

Since all of reality is composed of actual occasions coming together in different societies, human beings are not as distinct from the rest of creation as they are in the two previous models. Consequently, Bracken does not make any reference to a “special providence” for human beings. Still, something can be said about the particular type of society that human beings are. Furthermore, Christian process theologians must make some sense of God’s incarnation as a human person. Although these factors do not make up a unique providential path in this model, the human person will be focused on in this section, as it was in the previous two chapters. The next section will discuss evil and freedom as it relates to all of creation.

Like all complex creatures, human beings are a collection of societies which emerge out of the momentary subjects of experience known as actual occasions.\textsuperscript{33} While the actual


\textsuperscript{32} Bracken, \textit{Does God Roll Dice?}, 29.

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 73.
occasions hold the bulk of agency, the societies themselves set parameters for the actual occasions and allow for continuity of identity over time. The actual occasions which make up a person are also guided by God’s initial aims which attempt to lure the actual occasions and society as a whole toward a good use of creativity.\textsuperscript{34} In a human being, the pull of divine initial aims is one’s conscience and one’s actions take on moral significance.\textsuperscript{35} The initial aims cannot determine our actions, and in any instance we can accept, reject, or modify the initial aim we received.\textsuperscript{36} Whatever we decide, our own field of activity continues to overlap with that of the kingdom of God, although we cannot see it in its fullness. That means God is present with us and suffers through our failures.\textsuperscript{37} Bracken writes, “There is no predestination in view of a divine plan for ourselves as individuals or as members of the human race.”\textsuperscript{38} In fact, in Bracken’s model, there is no heaven or hell “out there” to which one could be predestined. Bracken has not done away with eschatology, though.

The lack of an individual eschatology is one of the central challenges to developing a Christian process theism out of Whitehead’s ideas. Bracken is dissatisfied with Hartshorne’s Whiteheadian conception of the afterlife which is as an immortalized contribution to God’s memory without any individual subjectivity.\textsuperscript{39} Instead, Bracken attempts to reconcile a more

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 129.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{37} Bracken, \textit{Christianity and Process Thought}, 21.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{39} Bracken, \textit{Society and Spirit}, 138.
traditional Christian eschatology with Whitehead’s metaphysics. Since our own fields of activity already overlap with the kingdom of God, one joins the kingdom by being opened to its already present reality upon death.\textsuperscript{40} Those who have allowed their lives to be guided by God’s initial aims will experience the beatific vision to the extent they have prepared themselves to love God.\textsuperscript{41} Those who consistently reject the divine initial aims throughout life will have developed themselves into a society whose identity is based in that rejection. Therefore, the rejection will continue after death despite God’s continued presence.\textsuperscript{42} With no promise of a good end for ourselves or others, Bracken’s worldview could be scary, but he sees it as hopeful. Although change is typically slow, while we are alive, every moment is an opportunity for something new.\textsuperscript{43}

Just as Bracken reconciles Christian eschatology with process theism, he also redescribes the incarnation in process terms. The human and divine natures of Christ are two overlapping fields of activity in which Christ participates.\textsuperscript{44} Since these fields perfectly overlapped throughout Jesus’ life, while other humans periodically (or often) stray from God’s

\begin{footnotes}
\item[40] Bracken, \textit{Christianity and Process Thought}, 109.
\item[43] Bracken, \textit{Christianity and Process Thought}, 22.
\item[44] Bracken, \textit{Does God Roll Dice?}, 128. In \textit{The World in Trinity}, Bracken explains that the divine field and human field are mutually influencing and engaged in a sort of dialogue rather than one dominating the other. See Bracken, \textit{World in the Trinity}, 130-131; 133-134.
\end{footnotes}
initial aims, Jesus always accepted them.\textsuperscript{45} The purpose of the incarnation in Bracken’s model finds its roots in the theologies of Abelard and Duns Scotus.\textsuperscript{46} God’s great desire to share in our lives was the impetus for the incarnation and Jesus heals the rift between fallen creation and God through his example and transformative love. By creating new communities, new societies, during his time on earth, Jesus set the stage for good use of creativity in the world.\textsuperscript{47} As those communities continue to spread, and mutually influence one another, new actual occasions are increasingly likely to continue to follow the pattern.\textsuperscript{48}

3. The Problem of Evil and the Question of Freedom

While one might expect the problem of evil to be less of a problem in a process model, the questions of theodicy still arise. So long as God is understood as Creator, we will ask why God did not create the world differently. As in the previous chapters, the problem of evil is closely related to the free choices that are made. In this model, freedom, albeit in a limited form, is extended to all of creation, both living and non-living.\textsuperscript{49} It is with freedom, then, that we will start.

As mentioned in the discussion on general providence, all actual occasions can act either in accordance with their environments or against their environments. An actual occasion

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 129. See also Bracken, \textit{Christianity and Process Thought}, 32-40 for a summary of how Jesus actions reflected the divine initial aims and right use of conscience.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 138. See also, Bracken, \textit{Christianity and Process Thought}, 98.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 133.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 134.

\textsuperscript{49} Bracken, \textit{Christianity and Process Thought}, 24.
is not free to do absolutely anything because of the environmental limitations. Most often a
given actual occasion will act in accordance with its environment.\textsuperscript{50} For example, an actual
occasion which is part of a foot will usually contribute to the foot society. Sometimes though,
modifications are made and the whole society is affected. This may happen because a divine
initial aim was luring the actual occasion, or the society as a whole, in another direction. Or,
the modification may have been a rejection of the divine initial aim in favor a personal goal,
conscious or unconscious.\textsuperscript{51} Human beings follow basically the same process, except we are
more aware of the options before us. We do not just experience our environments, but also
consciously reflect on them.\textsuperscript{52} The difference is a matter of degree, not kind. Human beings are
more responsible for their actions than rocks, but both have responsibility.\textsuperscript{53}

Extending responsibility to non-living things raises questions about how one can
distinguish between good and evil. How can one tell when a rock is a good rock? Bracken does
not provide a full morality here, but he does suggest that, most of the time, a good use of
creativity is an unselfish use. When we do things for others and build relationships, that is
good.\textsuperscript{54} When we do things only for ourselves, that is evil.\textsuperscript{55} For the rock, then, it is good when

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 30.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid. See also Bracken, \textit{World in the Trinity}, 199-202.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{53} Bracken, \textit{Christianity and Process Thought}, 31; Bracken, \textit{Does God Roll Dice?}, 28; and Bracken, \textit{World in
the Trinity}, 203.

\textsuperscript{54} Throughout Bracken’s works, he emphasizes environmental sustainability. He advocates for personal
sacrifice for the good of the ecosystems we inhabit as an example of contributing to the whole rather than only
ourselves. See, for example, Bracken, \textit{Does God Roll Dice?}, 182-183; and Bracken, \textit{World in the Trinity}, 208.

\textsuperscript{55} Bracken, \textit{Christianity and Process Thought}, 11; and Bracken, \textit{Does God Roll Dice?}, 136.
it contributes to other vertically and horizontally overlapping societies. This is because the whole is more than the sum of its parts. Good overcomes evil when we collaborate with God on the highest society—the kingdom of God. Nevertheless, it is not easy to distinguish between natural evil and natural good. This is in part because events which look evil in the short term can look different when a longer view is possible.

In our lives, though, we will all encounter evil in our societies. Since societies have a top-down influence on their sub-societies/actual occasions, they tend to perpetuate the evil that is already inherent in the system. Bracken calls this original sin. However, while the cause of original sin is usually seen as individual, Bracken’s original sin is inherently communal, more akin to social sin. He describes it as the origin of racism and sexism—structures of sin in which one participates without being solely responsible. Our response to evil in the form of social sin, natural evil, or tragedy is meant to be a self-giving love. Bracken cautions that a good

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56 Bracken, *Does God Roll Dice?*, 29.

57 Bracken, *Christianity and Process Thought*, 31. These guidelines can only ever be guidelines. As Bracken writes, “In general, evil (both natural and moral) arises when the individual actual entity makes its self-constituting decision in the light of an immediate rather than a long range goal. I say ‘in general’ because the anticipated higher-order ‘good’ of a process/system (e.g., a totalitarian form of government) may actually be destructive rather than creative in its mode of operation.” See Bracken, *World in the Trinity*, 202.

58 Bracken, *Does God Roll Dice?*, 19. Here Bracken suggests that animal extinctions, when taken in the context of the whole span of evolution, no longer seems evil.

59 Ibid., 134.

60 Ibid., 135.

61 Bracken, *Christianity and Process Thought*, 44.

62 Ibid.
end does not justify tragic means, but he also recognizes that tragedy has a way of bringing out novel depths of love one might not otherwise have reached.\textsuperscript{63}

But what about God’s responsibility? Since Bracken has reframed creativity as a grace rather than a fact of the world, God is the cause of all creativity used for evil.\textsuperscript{64} However, Bracken claims that God does not have to agree with how that creativity is used. God does not know whether the initial aims will effectively lure a society.\textsuperscript{65} The future is open in a way that is not possible in Dodds’ Thomistic model. Rejecting Thomism, Bracken writes, “Hence, even though the creature in question is making what it considers to be free decision, that free decision is incorporated into a world order which is not free because it is known and willed by God in its entirety without any possibility of alteration.”\textsuperscript{66} In Bracken’s model, one is free not only from one’s own perspective, but also from God’s perspective. Nevertheless, Bracken is forced to admit that God is partly responsible for evil in the world.\textsuperscript{67} Bracken believes the evil is worth it because it allows us to bring novel goodness into the world.\textsuperscript{68} “Creativity is what makes us (and indeed all of creation) godlike.”\textsuperscript{69}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Bracken, \textit{World in the Trinity}, 195.
\item Bracken, “Response to Elizabeth Johnson,” 729.
\item Ibid. See also, Bracken, \textit{Society and Spirit}, 64.
\item Ibid., 728.
\item Bracken, \textit{Christianity and Process Thought}, 25.
\item Bracken’s model has no conception of evil as punishment from God, as we saw in Helm’s model.
\item Bracken, \textit{Christianity and Process Thought}, 27.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
4. What Providence Can Do

While Bracken’s process model of providence initially appears to be a weaker understanding of providence, the flexibility of this model is apparent in what providence can do. Since God’s providential plan is not preordained from the beginning of time, there is room for interventions. In Bracken’s model, God organizes the chaos that could result from too much novelty and sometimes performs miracles for the good of the community. People, too, can affect the plan through prayer for themselves and others.

Since our own fields of activity overlap with God’s, and since creativity is a gift from God, there are several ways in which God can influence the path of creation. The divine initial aims lure us in the right direction, the top-down causality of vertically higher societies places limits on our choices, and God can act more directly through miracles. Consequently, Bracken assures his readers that “unexpected events do happen in this world of ours simply by chance, but in the end God’s will and whatever we creatures spontaneously choose to do will be reconciled, and all will be well.”

However, it should be noted that while Bracken speaks confidently of an ultimate triumph of good over evil throughout his works, he does admit in Christianity and Process Thought that we cannot really know whether or not God’s plan can be foiled.

Although they are not the normal working of things, miracles are a way in which God can redirect a community toward its initial aims. Quoting Keith Ward, Bracken writes, “Divine

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70 Bracken, Does God Roll Dice?, 13.

71 Bracken, Christianity and Process Thought, 77-78.
miracles, in other words, are not so much expressions of divine power but of divine wisdom, using unusual events in the natural order to manifest ‘in an extraordinary way in the physical realm the underlying spiritual basis and ultimate purpose of the cosmos.’”

While God respects the physical properties of the world, God also has a goal for the end which physical science cannot grasp. If miracles are a possible component in divine providence, what kind of miracles might we expect? And, why do some people experience miracles while others do not?

Bracken repeats his refrain here that the whole is greater than its parts. Therefore, God doesn’t grant miracles based on individual need, but rather only when the miracle will contribute to the whole. The purpose of the miracle always transcends the individual, even when we cannot clearly discern its ripple effect. Speaking of the healed leper, Bracken writes, “That is, Jesus was giving him on the occasion of a healing miracle a much deeper faith in the long-term Providence of God for himself and for others whom he knew and loved.”

While God may be able to intervene in miraculous ways, “the normal pattern of divine activity in the world seems to be that of urging creatures to make the more sensible decision, to take the more prudent course of action in a given set of circumstances.” In order to do this, human beings can pray. The purpose of prayer, then, is not to change the circumstances

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73 Ibid., 214.

74 Ibid., 215.

75 Ibid., 216.

76 Bracken, *Christianity and Process Thought*, 87.
but rather to better hear the divine initial aims—in other words, to better listen to one’s conscience.\textsuperscript{77} While attending to the gentle lure of God is not an easy task, it is also not an impossible one.\textsuperscript{78}

Prayer which motivates one’s own change of heart is typically the easiest to understand. Bracken’s model also offers a rationale for praying for others. Prayer for others works when we tap into the kingdom of God which is the society in which we all participate.\textsuperscript{79} Our prayers are fresh energy for the divine initial aims. Nevertheless, “the power of God’s love works through persuasion, not coercion. Even with the help of our prayers for others, initial aims from the divine persons do not overpower the free will of human beings, but only persuade and inspire them to move in a certain direction.”\textsuperscript{80} Our prayers have a real effect in this model and can actually alter one’s ability to follow the divine initial aims.

\section*{5. What Providence Cannot Do}

Despite the power of prayer and the possibility of miracles in this model, there are limitations to providence. As in the previous models, divine providence does not ensure that one will be able to see, in one’s own life, the guidance of God. Unlike the previous two models, in Bracken’s process model, God cannot not see the path of providence either.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 87, 90.
\item \textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 88.
\item \textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 90.
\item \textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 95.
\end{itemize}
God has a plan to lure all societies to the good. However, the exact path that plan will take remains unknown even to God because any given actual occasion may or may not follow the divine initial aims. This is a plan with risk. So, God has the long-view, but exercises very little efficient causality. In contrast, human beings, as conscious creatures, exercise a lot of efficient causality. But, we have very little ability to see where we are going.\textsuperscript{81} Bracken writes, “So the divine persons exercise providence over our individual lives and over the direction of the cosmic process as a whole, but they do it indirectly through the provision of divine initial aims with which we must cooperate if we are to gain a stronger sense of purpose and direction in our lives.”\textsuperscript{82} The result is that providence is meandering—which, Bracken points out, is pretty much the way it appears when we look at history.\textsuperscript{83} Believers are tasked with trying to trust God. Just as Job was unable to understand the calamities that befell him, we will often be as challenged by our relationship with God as we are comforted.\textsuperscript{84}

6. Doctrine of God

Bracken’s writings on providence actually start with his attempt to develop a Trinitarian process doctrine of God. Bracken’s model of the Trinity continues the concepts of societies and fields of activity which we have already seen. Each person of the Trinity is like a society with its

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 83-84.

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 84.

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 85.

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 133-134. See also Bracken, \textit{Christianity and Process Thought}, 23.
own field of activity. These three fields overlap and are mutually influencing. All of creation, through grace, can also participate in the Trinity through the shared field known as the kingdom of God. Bracken calls this a panentheistic model because all of creation is encompassed by the kingdom of God while both God and worldly sub-societies maintain independent agency. This is, of course, only a model and not a literal description of the Trinity. Using this model, we can see how Bracken modifies each of the classical attributes of God included in the previous two models, namely, God as omnibenevolent, eternal, omniscient, immutable, and omnipotent.

In Bracken’s model, God is omnibenevolent, although Bracken does not actually use that term. God’s omnibenevolence comes from God’s always good use of creativity. Creativity is the driving force of life and novelty for the world and for God, but while creation uses creativity for both good and destructive ends, God’s use of creativity is always positive growth. Furthermore, God’s divine initial aims lure creation into participation in that goodness. Bracken writes, “God is the Ethical Ultimate, that transcendent personal being who consciously steers creativity in the right direction for all other finite beings.”

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86 Bracken, World in the Trinity, 110. Maintaining creaturely independence is important for Bracken because, he claims, alternatively the world is just an instrument for God’s own life. Bracken accuses of Charles Hartshorne of presenting this kind of problematic, one-sided panentheism in Society and Spirit, 138-139.

87 Bracken, Does God Roll Dice?, 18, 55.

88 Bracken, Christianity and Process Thought, 20.

89 Ibid., 19.
Bracken does describe God as eternal, depending on what one means by eternal. Bracken means that for God, past (which extends before the Big Bang), present, and future (which extends beyond the collapse of the universe) exist simultaneously.\(^90\) God can also interact within time. Eternity and time are simply two different fields of activity for God.\(^91\)

However, even eternity remains dynamic. The past, present, and future all mutually influence one another.\(^92\) Operating in eternity allows God the perspective to see the long-view of providence which we are unable to see from within the perspective of time.\(^93\) Nevertheless, God cannot determine precisely what will happen in the future because it is constantly revised by the present.\(^94\) Likewise, God’s initial aims for each new actual occasion are constantly revised.

As is probably clear by now, in Bracken’s model God is neither omniscient nor immutable. While God knows and sees far more of the world and possible consequences of actions than we can or any other entity can, God does not know how a particular actual occasion will use the gift of creativity. God has a very good understanding and control of what is going on, but Bracken falls short of using the word omniscient.\(^95\) God is mutable in two

\(^{90}\) Ibid., 78.
\(^{91}\) Ibid., 79.
\(^{92}\) Ibid., 81-82.
\(^{93}\) Ibid., 77.
\(^{94}\) Ibid., 82. See also, Bracken, “Response to Elizabeth Johnson,” 729-730.
\(^{95}\) Bracken, *Does God Roll Dice?*, xv.
senses. First, God is changed by the changing world in ways in which God cannot predict. Second, God continues to grow in positive ways through God’s own use of creativity. Bracken’s God is infinite in potential, but grows and changes in actually. Still, Bracken suggests in a footnote that there may be a sense in which the persons of the Trinity are immutable. The possibility of an immutable aspect of the Trinity is also mentioned in Bracken’s review of Dodds’ book *The Unchanging God of Love: A Study of the Teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas on Divine Immutability in View of Certain Contemporary Criticisms of This Doctrine* (1986).

Bracken, critical of Dodds’ belief that love without mutability is possible, writes:

> Perhaps the divine "to be" should be rather understood as the divine nature, the source of the divine being and activity, whereby the three divine persons are subsistent in their relations to one another. In this way the divine persons could be considered mutable, capable of growth, in their relations with one another and with their creatures, even as the divine nature is still conceived as immutable in its mode of operation.

This compromise with Dodds is consistent with Bracken’s description of God as infinite in potential while finite in actuality. God’s essence may be immutable while God’s Trinititarian existence as three persons is mutable.

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96 Bracken, “Response to Elizabeth Johnson,” 729.

97 Bracken, *Does God Roll Dice?*, 17; and Bracken, “Response to Elizabeth Johnson,” 727.


In Bracken’s model, God only persuades and lures, and thus is not omnipotent.

Comparing his view to that of Aquinas, Bracken writes:

God, accordingly, is clearly not omnipotent in the classical sense of unilaterally making some thing happen. But God is still powerful insofar as God can be and presumably is in many cases persuasive with respect to the self-constituting decision of an independently existing finite subject of experience.\(^{101}\)

God does not engage in shows of power nor does God force any creature or thing to act in a particular way. In fact, Bracken speaks of a God who suffers with us and is often frustrated by our actions.\(^{102}\) Influenced by Jürgen Moltmann, and in contrast to Dodds, Bracken understands self-giving love as inherently a suffering love.\(^{103}\) To love is to be vulnerable to the pain of others and to the pain of experiencing one’s love rejected. Therefore, if God were unable to suffer, God would be unable to love us.\(^{104}\) In the end, though, Bracken never seriously doubts God’s ability to lure creation to a good end.

**Elements of a Doctrine of Providence Drawn from Bracken**

Bracken’s model of divine providence modifies both traditional Christian doctrines as well Whitehead’s process philosophy for a unique approach to providence. The elements below constitute a model in which God and creation cooperate toward a good end without a planned path. Therefore there is risk along the way which we did not see in the previous two

\(^{101}\) Bracken, “God’s Will or God’s Desires,” 75-76.

\(^{102}\) Bracken, “Trinitarian Spirit Christology,” 756.

\(^{103}\) Bracken, *World in the Trinity*, 194. See also, Bracken, review of *Unchanging God of Love*, 357.

\(^{104}\) Bracken, *World in the Trinity*, 194. To suffer-with is to express empathy. Consequently, to love someone also means to share in their joy. For more on self-giving love between the persons of the Trinity and between people on earth see Joseph A. Bracken, “The Challenge of Self-Giving Love,” *Theological Studies* 74, no. 4 (December 2013): 856-871, accessed July 14, 2016, ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost.
models. The elements of Bracken’s model are summarized in table 3 and discussed below. We will see that this model is more flexible and less anthropocentric than the previous models.

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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10. Christ is the supreme example of following the initial aims</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effect of providence on human beings</td>
<td>11. Humans and non-humans are responsible for sin/evil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12. Humans and non-humans experience real chance and indeterministic freedom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13. Providence provides hope for the future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14. Prayer can help one follow the initial aim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15. Prayer can increase the good energy of a society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elements not required by model</td>
<td>1. God is not omniscient, immutable, or omnipotent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Actions of actual occasions are not pre-ordained or willed by God</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The fifteen elements essential to Bracken’s model of providence are categorized in the same ways as the previous models for ease of comparison. First, the origin of the doctrine of providence can only be found in a pre-assumption of Christian faith. In other words, it requires a prior acceptance of revelation. The meaning, range, and effects of providence make up the remaining fourteen elements.
Only two of the classical attributes of God remain in this model, and eternity is understood differently here. God as eternal does not exist outside of time, but rather God exists both within time and in a field where past, present, and future coexist. Nevertheless, the role of creativity is what really sets this model apart. God’s use of creativity is always good, but ours is not. Consequently there is risk in this model and the path to the ultimate victory of good over evil is constantly being revised.

Like the previous models, God’s providence extends to all things, which in this case means all actual occasions and the societies they form. All societies are oriented toward the same end, which is incorporation into the kingdom of God. Since the divine initial aims are merely persuasive, reaching that end requires the cooperation of societies and especially human beings who are capable of making conscious choices. We can look to Jesus Christ as an example of perfectly following God’s divine initial aims.

Since human beings are societies just like all other things, the effect of providence on human beings is not very different from the effect of providence on all other types of societies. Freedom is available to greater and lesser extents in human and non-human societies, but all societies are responsible for their actions and thus responsible for the sin and evil in the world. Extending the kingdom of God as well as freedom and responsibility to all things makes this the least anthropocentric of the three models we have seen. However, providence also effects human beings in a unique way as a source of hope and impetus to pray. God’s luring providence is a source of hope in spite of the selfish actions of societies. Through prayer for ourselves and others we can learn to follow the divine initial aims and bolster the good use creativity in our societies.
In this model, God is not omniscient, immutable, or omnipotent and the actions of societies and actual occasions are not willed by God. Rather, God is responsive to the freely used creativity that God has provided for the world. The providential plan changes as a result of the choices made and God’s reacts to both our triumphs and our failures. God’s love for creation is expressed by sharing in both our joy and our suffering.

Bracken’s process model of providence, Dodds’ Thomistic model of providence, and Helm’s Calvinist model of providence offer three different Christian articulations of how God guides creation. The next chapter explores how the elements of each model compare and develops a set of criteria which are necessary for any Christian doctrine of providence based on the shared elements between the three models. The criteria are meant to illuminate how providence functions within a theological system and, therefore, the value of providence within theology.
CHAPTER FOUR

CRITERIA FOR A DOCTRINE OF PROVIDENCE

Many writers on the doctrine of providence turn to the story of Job as an example of the central tension providence creates in a systematic theology. The story of Job suggests that although God may have a plan for creation, human beings are neither privileged to know that plan nor able to look back and see evidence of the plan. Righteousness is no guarantee of a good life and neither is a supposedly omnipotent, omnibenevolent God. As Gennaro Auletta writes in his encyclopedia entry on providence, “The horrible events of the 20th century encourage a view of history that is more tragic than providential. We must still answer Job, and understand the response given to him in Jesus Christ.”¹ Since providence is difficult to see and understand, it must serve an important purpose within theology. There must be good reasons this doctrine has persisted despite the frequent tragedies of finite existence.

The previous three chapters examined three different models of Christian divine providence, each relying on a different strand of the Christian tradition, namely, Calvinism, Thomism, and process theism. These models offer answers to the question of the function of providence within a theological system. By examining the function of providence, we hope to move beyond the incidental similarities and differences of each model to uncover the purpose

of providence in Christianity. The second section of this chapter returns to the main elements of the doctrine in each model in order to develop a general set of criteria for identifying the doctrine of providence in line with the function of providence discussed in the first section. Where all three of these otherwise diverse models coincide and contribute to the function of providence, we have an element of the doctrine of providence which we can also use as a criterion to test for the presence of providence in other theological systems. There are two main goals for this chapter. First, examining the function of providence in the three models will reveal why providence is important in a theological system at all. This section will discuss the close relationship between providence, eschatological hope, and participation. Second, the criteria culled from the three models of providence will later be used to develop a doctrine of providence within John Caputo’s theological system2 (see chapter six).

**The Function of Providence: Eschatological Hope and Participation**

To make use of our three models of providence, we must look beyond mere description to analysis and comparison. For that, we must ask a question that is deeper than we have asked thus far: What is the function of the providence within a system? The question is deeper because it requires more than a detailed description of the theory of providence under discussion. Understanding the function of providence requires understanding the motivations for describing providence in particular ways.

The starting point for answering our question—what is the function of providence within a theological system?—is one of the central answers given by the models themselves.

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2 Caputo refers to his work as a theopoetics rather than a system. Despite this, here and elsewhere I use the term “system” to mean any collection of theological interpretations, whether or not they are systematic/logical or poetic.
All three models agree that providence is related to eschatological hope. Paul Helm, describing the Calvinist take on providence writes, “In a way which is largely foreign to modern Christian spirituality, Calvin believes that the ills of this life should prompt us to hope for the life to come, not of course to prompt us to project a life to come out of thin air, in the sense proposed by Feuerbach and Marx, but to intensify hope for what the Christian is convinced on good grounds is to come.”³ Michael Dodds approaches the question from another direction describing the hopelessness of a world without the providential victory of good over evil. He gives a vivid yet bleak depiction of that world:

[God] must continue to exist forever, without power or hope of vanquishing evil completely. Indeed, he has no guarantee that he himself will not one day be overcome by evil. So, he lives on, sharing in the ephemeral joys of his passing creatures, but carrying as well the ever more oppressive memory of every tear-stained face, of every cry of fear of pain, of every fallen sparrow. He is perhaps the ‘fellow sufferer who understands,’ but has precious little hope to offer his unhappy friends.⁴

Joseph Bracken adds that if “we do our best to remain faithful to divine guidance,”⁵ we can hope that things will work out for ourselves, those around us, and future generations.⁶

The hope is “eschatological” because it is primarily a hope for the end—the end of time, struggle, sin, etc. While the fact that God is guiding the actions of creation now could


⁴ Michael J. Dodds, O.P., Unchanging God of Love: Thomas Aquinas & Contemporary Theology on Divine Immutability, 2nd ed. (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America, 2008), 197. When Dodds writes this passage he is directly critiquing Joseph Bracken and process theism. See Dodds, Unchanging God of Love, 197n156.


⁶ Bracken, Christianity and Process Thought, 138-139.
already be comforting, providence provides hope due to the anticipated destination more than
the journey. Too many have a life reminiscent of Job’s for providence to provide hope of
immediate amelioration. Thus, a journey filled with the “ills of life” that Calvin mentions is no
reason to stop hoping.\(^7\) Put another way, providence does not imply that things will go well for
one right now. Even if all things are for the good, there may be tragedy in the short term. None
of the models of providence from the previous three chapters claims that God provides an arc
for life that one can see.\(^8\) Referring to the story of Job, Bracken notes that “we cannot always
fathom how God is ordering what happens in this world in terms of a larger scheme of
things,”\(^9\) but we can learn to trust in God’s mysterious presence.\(^10\) Helm similarly writes, “Even
if Christians can discern no overall meaning to their lives, or to any part of them, it would be
unwarranted to conclude from this that all things are not working together for their good.”\(^11\)
According to Helm, the story of Job, especially read in conjunction with the crucifixion and
resurrection, is a reminder that God is in control of even chaos and wickedness.\(^12\) Given that, I
believe the eschatological focus of providence is fairly obvious. What is less obvious is the
“hope” part of “eschatological hope.”

\(^7\) Helm, *Calvin: A Guide*, 112.

\(^8\) See Paul Helm, *Providence of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 126-127; Dodds,
*Unchanging God of Love*, 196; Bracken, *Christianity and Process Thought*, 133.

\(^9\) Bracken, *Christianity and Process Thought*, 133.

\(^10\) Ibid., 134.

\(^11\) Ibid., 134.

\(^12\) Ibid., 222-223.
The word “hope” is typically used in situations of expectation before the outcome is known. However, it is more than wishful thinking. To hope means that one believes the outcome is possible—often to the point that one behaves as if the outcome is already certain. But we never hope after we already know the outcome and, consequently, we never hope for something we know with certainty will occur. Imagine a woman who strongly hopes that she will get pregnant this month. While she is unlikely to share her hoped-for pregnancy with many others, she might buy pregnancy books, arrange travel plans around her expected due date, or perhaps even start a gift registry with desired baby items. She will act as if the pregnancy is inevitable before it really is, yet she will not keep hoping for it after a positive pregnancy test.\(^\text{13}\) Then, she is certain and celebrates in gratitude. Yet, the theological hope that Helm, Dodds, and even Bracken describe is a hope with certainty.

The hope that Helm’s model offers seems to have more in common with the woman after the pregnancy test than before. Helm’s theological hope is a mix of gratitude that one has been put on a good path and anticipation for the good end to come. In Helm’s model of providence, the eternal God foreordains all that is to come in time from a stance outside of time and hierarchically prior.\(^\text{14}\) All those predestined to share in eternal life with God are already predestined. Furthermore, since God foreordains the means as well as the end, I can have confidence, even certainty, that if I have faith in God and live out God’s commands, I am

\(^{13}\) Of course, she will hope for many other things (that she does not miscarry, that the baby is healthy, etc). Hoping that one is pregnant is not eschatological; it is not Ultimate or once-and-for-all. Regardless of the outcome, there will still be much to hope for.

predestined to a good end. Within this model, to say, “I hope to participate in the kingdom of God” does not make sense unless “hope” is understood as certain. Recall that when Helm discusses prayer for the kingdom of God, he says it is not really a petitionary prayer because it is inevitable.\textsuperscript{15} For eschatological hope in an uncertain sense to exist, we would have to suspend God’s goodness and suppose that God has foreordained that some people who genuinely have faith are still at risk of damnation. God’s relation to time, that is, completely outside of it,\textsuperscript{16} requires that one hope with certainty for the eschatological vision and act in accordance with what one perceives as the means to the desired end.\textsuperscript{17} Certain hope is a certainty in the form of a promise, since we exist within time and cannot actually see the end, but it is a promise made by one who by definition never breaks a promise.

Dodds offers a slightly different understanding of God’s relation to creation although the description of eternity is the same. In a Thomistic model of providence, God’s eternity allows us to experience our actions as free although God knows what will happen and has, in fact, willed it. God’s eternity is a part of God’s transcendence which allows human beings and God to function as non-competing causes. Nevertheless, although human beings experience freedom and chance in the world, the end is no less determined from God’s perspective. As Jean-Yves Lacoste writes in an entry on hope:

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{15} Helm, \textit{Providence of God}, 158.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{16} Helm writes, “I have tried to articulate and to defend the view that God is timelessly eternal, existing in a state in which there is for him no before and after, who creates and sustains the universe by a timeless act of will. By implication, this view is inconsistent with the idea that God is purely sempiternal, existing for all times, backwardly and forwardly everlasting.” Helm, \textit{Eternal God}, 218.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{17} Helm, \textit{Providence of God}, 134.
\end{quote}
Thomas does of course acknowledge that a certain insecurity (\textit{anxietas, angustia}) affects the hoping conscience (\textit{ST} la Ilae, q.40, a.8). The absolute future to which theological hope is related is nevertheless promised with enough strength for hope to hope “certainly”: the reasons for hoping are rooted in the reasons for believing; thus, hope is as reasonable as it is virtuous.\textsuperscript{18}

Again, we see certainty only in the form of a promise, such that one may still experience anxiety over the unknown future. But, in the end it is not really unknown if one believes. As Aquinas writes, “Hope does not trust chiefly in grace already received, but on God's omnipotence and mercy, whereby even he that has not grace, can obtain it, so as to come to eternal life. Now whoever has faith is certain of God's omnipotence and mercy.”\textsuperscript{19}

One might expect Bracken’s process model of providence to be the deviation from the norm. Here God stands with one foot in time and one foot out of time.\textsuperscript{20} Consequently, while God knows the future, the future is constantly under revision as it is continually shaped by the past and the present. Despite the evolving future, the theological hope Bracken describes remains certain. In the end God’s persistence in providing new initial aims will win out.\textsuperscript{21}

In sum, divine providence in Helm’s, Dodds’, and Bracken’s models promises certain eschatological hope. However, hope should not be reduced to merely a pleasant inner disposition. Recalling the initial non-technical definition, to have hope means to believe something is possible and \textit{act accordingly}. To have hope in providence changes one


\textsuperscript{19} \textit{ST} II-II q18 a4.

\textsuperscript{20} Recall that in Bracken’s model, God’s field of activity is eternal (meaning past, present, and future are simultaneous), but God can also act within time. See Bracken, \textit{Christianity and Process Thought}, 79.

existentially and allows one to act in the world towards that end. Ian Barbour makes the same move from eschatology to hope to action. He writes, “The basic experience involved in eschatology is our orientation toward the future and our need for hope.”22 He later adds, “Our hope is based on the conviction that God is at work in the world and that we can cooperate in that work.”23 In other words, we have hope because of God’s providence but that hope also allows us to participate in God’s providence. If providence provides hope, the function of providence within a theological system must also include enabling human participation in bringing about the victory of good over evil.

However, if the function of providence includes enabling participation, a bit more explanation is needed. It is precisely the doctrine of providence which is sometimes accused of encouraging quietism! Helm deals with this quite directly, as he understands that Calvinist models of providence are easily accused of encouraging quietism, but all three of the models address this issue. In Helm’s Calvinist model, participation is enabled because both the means and ends are foreordained by God. One cannot partake of eternal life with God without living the sort of life that brings about that end.24 In Dodds’ Thomistic model, participation is likewise enabled through God’s will in both necessary and free acts.25 In addition, while Dodds does not directly comment on this passage, Aquinas explicitly connects hope and the motivation to act

21 Carr, Leadership in Action, 121-122.
23 Barbour, Religion in an Age of Science, 152.
in *ST* I-II q40 a8 which asks, “Whether hope is a help or a hindrance to action?” He suggests that nothing is more motivating than a good which is difficult but possible, and hope allows us to believe the good is possible. Finally, Bracken’s process model most clearly enables participation. In his model, overlapping fields of activity mutually influence each other horizontally, top-down, and bottom-up.

The word “participation” carries added baggage, though, which could still make one worry about quietism. In classic Thomistic theology, which all three models are influenced by to varying extents, participation has a very specific meaning. Human participation in God is the ground for analogical language. Since all being comes from God, who is Being Itself, “to be” is to participate in God. Positively, this kind of participation highlights how all creatures are related to the Creator. Unfortunately, to participate in this sense is not very active. As Rudi Te Velde writes of participation, “It has been treated often as a merely verbal construction which entails no more than the fact that finite beings depend for their existence on an extrinsic cause.” Here, humans, and all creatures, participate by receiving being; it is a receptive role. Participating is passive; creating is active. In contrast, Te Velde argues that even in the particular use of the word “participation” by Aquinas, a more active aspect should be

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26 *ST* I-II q40 a8.

27 Ibid.


30 Te Velde, *Aquinas on God*, 140.
reclaimed. He suggests that to receive being or participate in God’s being is to be “set free” as an individual who is “really distinct from God.”\textsuperscript{31} To be distinct from God is to take one’s being and make it one’s own by acting; it is to move beyond a merely receptive role. Therefore, to participate in God’s being is not just to be dragged along by God’s power but to operate one’s own independent power in the world.\textsuperscript{32} Likewise, to participate in providence is not just to receive the good end but to actively contribute to its arrival.

For human beings, eschatological hope and participation serve to augment each other. Human beings participate in the providential plan because of the hope they have that their actions are not futile. Without hope, there is no motivation to participate, as Aquinas notes. At the same time, the promise of providence is the reason to hope. Since providence includes our actions, our actions are, in part, the source of our hope.

This circular relationship between hope and participation reveals two remaining issues regarding how we describe eschatological hope. First, while Helm’s, Dodds’, and Bracken’s models describe eschatological hope as certain, certainty may not be necessary for providence to function as they describe. In other words, providence may be able to provide sufficient hope to motivate action without that hope being certain. Human beings, of course, act all the time without knowing for certain what the outcome will be. In fact, not knowing the outcome can itself be motivating so long as one does not perceive the situation as certainly futile. So we can return the definition of hope to its more everyday usage as a belief that something is possible before it is known. Whether or not eschatological hope will be certain in a given theological

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 141.

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 142.
system does not depend on the doctrine of providence. Rather, it depends on the doctrine of God. A God who is incapable of failing to keep a promise will provide certain hope. If, however, there were a Christian theological system in which God was not omnipotent, the system could still include providence, but God would only provide an uncertain hope.

Second, hope is a poor word to describe the motivation of non-human creatures to participate in providence. While human beings naturally hold hope for non-human creation (most obviously pets) in addition to human creation, non-human creation cannot properly be said to hope for itself or for us. Two options then remain: either providence is solely for human beings or providence is for all of creation but only humans require hope. While Helm, Dodds, and Bracken all affirm that God’s omnipotent guiding hand reaches all parts of creation, Dodds’ position comes the closest to the first option. As the most anthropocentric model, the rest of creation participates in providence only to secure a good end for humanity. Even in this model, though, all creation does participate to a degree. Furthermore, theologians, such as Elizabeth Johnson, Francisco Benzoni, and Ryan Patrick McLaughlin to name a few, have been critical of the anthropocentrism found in many Thomistic models of providence. While it is true that Aquinas’ own writings on providence are anthropocentric, Johnson suggests that


had Aquinas known what we now know about evolution and our connection to creation, he
would not have made the gap between humanity and the animal kingdom so large.\textsuperscript{37} She
argues that contemporary use of Aquinas needs to adjust for this new understanding—\textsuperscript{38}—a shift
which is lacking in Dodds’ work.\textsuperscript{39} In fact, she confidently writes, “A case can be made that for
God to love the whole means to love every part. Hence to save the whole means to save every
individual, every bear.”\textsuperscript{40} If the logic of God’s love depends on the salvation of every bear,
option two—providence is for all creation, but only humans require hope—appears more
promising. Without rationality to guide one’s free will, the motivation to act that human beings
require is not necessary for the rest of creation. Consequently, while all of creation participates
in God’s plan and our eschatological hope may include non-human creation, providence does
not provide eschatological hope to all of creation because non-human creation does not have
the capacity to experience hope. Bracken’s model is a slight exception. In his model, actual
occasions do respond to their experience in an amoral way.\textsuperscript{41} Hope, in this model, could be a
part of the luring divine initial aims which God provides in that moment of experience.

\textsuperscript{37} Johnson, \textit{Ask the Beasts}, 229-230.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 230.

\textsuperscript{39} Dodds is aware of the critique of anthropocentrism and cites several authors who make the critique in

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{41} Bracken, \textit{World in the Trinity}, 204. Bracken writes, “But wherever there is spontaneity, however
minimal, there is the option for good or evil in the self-constitution of constituent actual entities. At the
nonhuman level of existence and activity, it is most often natural evil; at the human level of existence and activity
it is much more often moral evil.”
In addition to eschatological hope (for human beings) and participation (for all of creation, we might note several other functions of providence in the three models. Focusing on the “What Providence Can Do” sections reveals that we have already covered the main functions for Helm: motivating action and increasing one’s hope. Helm also mentions freeing one from anxiety. However, as noted above, it is not clear that even a certain hope will free one from anxiety completely. Dodds also notes that providence is a source of hope and adds that a proper understanding of providence can help one to understand miracles. The potential conflict brought up by miracles is that they indicate God can impose something supernatural on the world without regard for natural processes, in other words, without the participation of creation. Dodds explains that miracles in fact do not conflict with creation’s participation. Consequently, for our purposes, understanding miracles is a part of understanding participation. Finally, Bracken discusses how providence can adapt and rework what freely or spontaneously happens in the world to move creation toward a good end. Understanding how God uses miracles, prayers, and other means to reshape the meaning of events and provide fresh initial aims helps one to understand why one should still hope when the future is uncertain.

The doctrine of providence ultimately affects many doctrines, as can be seen in the models. It is impossible to offer a complete description of the doctrine of providence without

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42 See chapter one.
43 See chapter two.
45 See chapter three.
also talking about free will, sin, Christ, redemption, and the nature of God. However, the heart of the function of providence can be found in providing eschatological hope and ensuring creation’s participation.

**From Elements to Criteria**

At the end of chapters one through three, a table summarized the main elements of each particular model. In order to facilitate comparison between chapters, the elements were divided into four main categories. Those categories are used again here in order to uncover the common ground between the three models. The common ground will be used to inductively develop criteria for recognizing the doctrine of providence in a system. Helm’s no-risk, compatibilist approach, Dodds’ no-risk approach with indeterministic freedom, and Bracken’s risky approach with indeterministic freedom offer an array of perspectives, which, while not comprehensive, are generally representative of the varieties of Christian doctrines of providence. Consequently, one can reasonably assume that elements of the doctrine of providence which are shared by all three models are likely to be found in any Christian model of providence. Nevertheless, the shared elements must also contribute to the function of providence. If an element is shared by all three models but is not related to eschatological hope or creaturely participation in bringing about the kingdom of God, it is extrinsic to the question of providence rather than a criteria for identifying it. The elements are discussed in the same order of presentation as the previous chapters.
1. Comparing the Source of Providence

Table 4. Source of the Doctrine

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Helm’s Calvinist Model</th>
<th>Dodds’ Thomistic Model</th>
<th>Bracken’s Process Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Providence is biblically based and requires revelation</td>
<td>1. Providence is based on revelation but cannot conflict with contemporary science</td>
<td>1. Providence requires acceptance of Christian revelation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The source of providence is an element where Helm, Dodds, and Bracken are in total agreement (see table 4). As theologians living and writing in the 21st century, all three are aware of current trends in science: quantum physics, indeterminacy, the human genome, etc. Furthermore, all three are committed to a theological method which takes science and reason seriously and in which theology as Truth cannot conflict with truth in other fields. Nevertheless, none attempts a purely natural theology in which the doctrine of providence could be read off the events of history or the workings of the physical world. All three find that while a robust doctrine of providence does not conflict with reason or science, and can even learn from models of causality in science, it cannot be proven on rational grounds.46 One must turn to revelation for faith that God is guiding creation. Revelation, here, means there has been or is a disclosure of God through Christ, Scripture, and/or present experience, although the experience of God cannot be proven. This insight, then, constitutes the first possible criterion for a Christian doctrine of providence: providence comes from revelation and cannot be proven empirically. While our inability to see providence due to the meandering nature of history does not provide hope or confirm our ability to participate in God’s plan, revelation is

46 Helm, Providence of God, 223; Dodds, Unlocking Divine Action, 7; and Bracken, World in the Trinity, 190.
still necessary as a sort of prerequisite for a Christian doctrine of providence precisely because providence is hidden. There is no reason to ask the question of providence without revelation, much less answer that question affirmatively. Furthermore, if one hopes to identify a *Christian* doctrine of providence, as opposed to some other variation on fate, one must accept Christian revelation. Therefore, holding a prerequisite status, providence relies on revelation is the first criterion.

2. Comparing God and the Meaning of Providence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Helm’s Calvinist Model</th>
<th>Dodds’ Thomistic Model</th>
<th>Bracken’s Process Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. God can be described with classical attributes: omnibenevolent, eternal, omniscient, immutable, and omnipotent</td>
<td>2. God can be described with classical attributes: omnibenevolent, eternal, omniscient, immutable, and omnipotent</td>
<td>2. God can be described as omnibenevolent and eternal Not required by model: God is not omniscient, immutable, or omnipotent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Providence is motivated by God’s goodness</td>
<td>3. Providence is motivated by God’s agapic love</td>
<td>3. Providence is motivated by God’s loving use of creativity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Everything is for the good and there can be no ultimate tragedy</td>
<td>4. God’s causality operates on a transcendent level, not in the gaps of scientific causality</td>
<td>4. God lures through divine initial aims, but does not directly cause Not required by model: Actions of actual occasions are not pre-ordained or willed by God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. God not only foreknows, but also foreordains</td>
<td>5. There is no risk</td>
<td>5. There is risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. There is no risk or chance</td>
<td>6. God’s providential plan will not change</td>
<td>6. God’s providential plan is only an end, the path is undetermined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. God’s providential plan will not change</td>
<td>6. God’s providential plan will not change</td>
<td>6. God’s providential plan is only an end, the path is undetermined</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This category, God and the Meaning of Providence, outlines providence from the perspective of God, including God’s view of the plan and divine action (see table 5). All three models highlighted the importance of God’s omnibenevolence for understanding providence.
Whether referred to as goodness, agapic love, or loving use of creativity, all three saw God’s omnibenevolence as the primary motivation for God’s guidance of creation. God’s goodness is necessary if we are to trust in our ability to participate and place our hope in the promise of the kingdom of God. Consequently, an all-loving God is the second necessary criterion for a doctrine of providence.

The only other classic divine attribute that all three models could endorse was that God is eternal. While ‘eternal’ meant different things for each theologian, the attribute’s relevance for the doctrine of providence was largely the same. God has a different perspective than we do and can see more of the plan than we can see in time. Whether God is only outside of time, experiences all time at once, or acts within time varies from model to model and is not part of the criteria for a doctrine of providence. Given these varying understandings of God, divine action operates differently in each model. Recall that in Helm’s model, God foreordains all actions while human beings still remain responsible and free in the sense that they do what they wish. In Dodds’ model, God, as a transcendent cause, operates through secondary causes without competing with them or compromising their freedom. Lastly, in Bracken’s model, God does not cause at all, but rather lures creation through divine initial aims which are

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47 Helm, Providence of God, 49.


49 Bracken, Does God Roll Dice?, 18, 55.

50 Helm, Providence of God, 67.

51 Dodds, Unchanging God of Love, 191.
adjusted and given through grace in real time. The consistent theme through all these models is that God’s divine action cannot conflict with scientific causality. God’s relation to time allows for God to operate as cause while the laws of science are still obeyed. While God’s eternal nature and divine action can take several forms, as we have seen, this is a necessary criterion for a doctrine of providence. If scientific laws of causality are not maintained, there is no way for a human being to predict the consequences of one’s actions and participation is stymied.

Both Helm and Dodds agree that God’s providential plan will not change, including the end as well as the path to get there. Bracken insists that the path is not predetermined, but, while somewhat ambivalent on this point, he trusts that God will successfully bring about a good end. So, while the path changes, and the shape of the end is not determined, providence is still incapable of failing. The end of providence encourages hope, which, as discussed above, does not need to be a certain hope in order to motivate participation. So, although all three insist on an inevitable good end, providence does not need to be risk-free while in progress or even in completion.

3. Comparing the Range of Providence

Table 6. Range of Providence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Helm’s Calvinist Model</th>
<th>Dodds’ Thomistic Model</th>
<th>Bracken’s Process Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8. Providence includes all things (down to atomic level)</td>
<td>7. Providence includes all things (down to atomic level)</td>
<td>7. Providence includes all things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8. But, all providence is for the sake of human beings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Providence includes the Fall</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

52 Bracken, *Christianity and Process Thought*, 81-83.
10. Providence includes predestination

9. Predestination includes general providence

8. All societies (not just humans) are brought into the kingdom of God

11. Providence includes the means as well as the end

10. Providence includes actions as well as their mode: necessary, contingent, free, by chance, etc.

9. Providence cannot reach its end without creaturely cooperation

12. Christ is the supreme example

11. Christ is the supreme example

10. Christ is the supreme example of following the divine initial aims

Not required by model: Not all acts must be equally providential

Regarding the range of providence, Helm, Dodds, and Bracken are again in total agreement, at least initially (see table 6). All three understand God’s guidance as extending to all of creation, living and non-living, and down to the smallest bits of creation—be that atoms, sub-atomic quarks, or actual occasions.\(^{53}\) In order for all of creation to participate in providence and given how connected human beings are to the rest of creation, all of creation must be included. The fourth criterion is clearly that providence extends to all things. However, the way in which “all things” are included opens up a debate between the three models, especially regarding the manner in which human beings are included. For Helm, all of creation is included in general providence, and human beings are included in a special way through predestination.\(^{54}\) Predestination is a sub-category of general providence. For Dodds, predestination, or the special providence guiding human beings, takes priority over general providence which assists human beings on the path toward their proper end.\(^{55}\) Consequently,


\(^{54}\) Paul Helm, *Calvin at the Centre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 143.

\(^{55}\) Dodds, *Unlocking Divine Action*, 241.
general providence is a sub-category of predestination. Finally, for Bracken, there is no predestination, only a flexible general providence which is oriented toward participation in the kingdom of God by all creatures.\textsuperscript{56}

Despite these conflicts over the priority of human beings in God’s providential plan, all three of the models recognize human beings’ unique ability to make decisions, act, self-reflect, and be responsible. Even in the Calvinist and Thomistic models, where God is properly understood as the Cause of all that happens, human beings are called to participate or cooperate with God’s providential plan in a special way.\textsuperscript{57} In Bracken’s model, while all types of societies can claim some responsibility, human decisions require special consideration because they carry moral weight.\textsuperscript{58} Human participation is the fifth criterion for a doctrine of providence. The element of participation, found in all three models, identifies the function of providence within a theological system and is a necessary criterion for identifying providence in any system.

All three models make a Christological turn in their descriptions of divine providence. Helm, who notes that not all acts are equally providential, describes Christ’s life, death, and resurrection as the most providential act.\textsuperscript{59} Christ is the supreme example of providence in two senses in these models. First, the coming of Christ is the ultimate example of God’s


\textsuperscript{57} Helm, \textit{Calvin at the Centre}, 143; and Dodds, \textit{Unlocking Divine Action}, 264.

\textsuperscript{58} Bracken, \textit{World in the Trinity}, 204.

\textsuperscript{59} Helm, \textit{Providence of God}, 110.
omnibenevolence and desire to guide creation to a good end because Christ frees humanity from sin. Second, Christ is the perfect example of human cooperation with God’s providential plan.\textsuperscript{60} Christ represents what all people could do if not bound by sin. Since the function of providence is to allow for human participation and eschatological hope, Jesus Christ, as a perfected human being, must be the perfect example of that participation. Furthermore, his participation in bringing about the kingdom of God is a source of hope for our own ability to contribute to the kingdom. Therefore, Christ as the supreme example of providence is the sixth criterion.

4. Comparing the Effect of Providence on Human Beings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Helm’s Calvinist Model</th>
<th>Dodds’ Thomistic Model</th>
<th>Bracken’s Process Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13. Humans are responsible for sin</td>
<td>12. Humans are responsible for sin</td>
<td>11. Humans and non-humans are responsible for sin/evil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Providence provides hope for the future</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not required: God does not need to “respond” to human beings</td>
<td>14. Prayer can help one follow the initial aim</td>
<td>15. Prayer can increase the good energy of a society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Providence leads to action</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not required: Providence does not need to be observable</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{60} Both of these senses are supported by Helm, Dodds, and Bracken. See Helm, \textit{Providence of God}, 214; Dodds, \textit{Unchanging God of Love}, 198, 201; and Bracken, \textit{Does God Roll Dice?}, 129.
The seventh and eighth criteria have to do with the effect of providence on human beings. This category deals with how providence is experienced by human beings (see table 7). The seventh criterion, which is shared by all three models, claims that despite the providential plan, human beings are responsible for sin. Even in Helm’s Calvinist model, in which God foreordains all actions, sin is the responsibility of human beings. Although Helm’s model uses a compatibilist version of human freedom, humans are still responsible. Nevertheless, it must be noted that indeterministic freedom is exceedingly important to both Dodds and Bracken, and this point alone would be enough for them to reject Helm’s model outright. Responsibility for sin is necessary for true participation because it implies ownership over our actions; it ensures that creaturely participation is not merely receptive but active.

The eighth and final criterion once again deals directly with the function of providence. Providence is a source of hope—eschatological hope in particular. It is the reason to believe that there is a good end coming, and, consequently, the reason to do what one can to help bring about that end.

5. Summary of Criteria

The elements that made up the Calvinist, Thomistic, and process models of providence in the previous three chapters have been whittled down to eight criteria for a doctrine of providence in table 8 below. The first criterion makes a Christian doctrine of providence possible, while criteria two through eight contribute to the mutually strengthening functions of providence which are to allow creaturely participation in bringing about the kingdom of God

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62 Dodds makes this especially clear. See Dodds, *Unlocking Divine Action*, 226n60.
and to provide eschatological hope. These criteria were developed to be a minimum criteria, meaning all Christian models of providence should satisfy the entire list. Of course, Helm’s, Dodds’, and Bracken’s models meet all of these criteria. In chapter six, these criteria will be used to identify and develop the place of providence within John Caputo’s theological system.

Table 8. Criteria for a Doctrine of Providence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Criteria for Doctrine</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Source of the Doctrine</td>
<td>1. Providence relies on revelation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God and the meaning of providence</td>
<td>2. God is omnibenevolent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. God has a different relation to time than creation which allows for divine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>action that does not conflict with scientific causality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range of providence</td>
<td>4. Providence includes all things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Providence requires human participation/cooperation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. Christ is the supreme example</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effect of providence on human</td>
<td>7. Humans are responsible for sin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>beings</td>
<td>8. Providence provides hope for the future</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the middle of the story of Job, Job begins to despair and wonder why his life is so senseless. Running out of hope he says:

For there is hope for a tree,
   if it is cut down, that it will sprout again,
   and that its shoots will not cease.
Though its root grows old in the earth,
   and its stump dies in the ground,
   yet at the scent of water it will bud
   and put forth branches like a young plant.
But mortals die, and are laid low;
   humans expire, and where are they?\textsuperscript{63}

\textsuperscript{63} Job 14:7-10.
The doctrine of providence seeks to convey that despite apparent evidence to the contrary, life is more like the tree. The possibility of a young sprout is the eschatological hope for a resurgence of life. That hope ignites a cooperative attempt to bring about the new plant as a joint effort between God (the rain) and creation itself (the stump). Providence provides the hope and motivates the participation to bring about the good end.
CHAPTER FIVE

CAPUTO AND THE CRITIQUE OF ONTO THEOLOGY

We have now arrived at the main question. What happens to the doctrine of providence in John Caputo’s work? Can a weak God or weak theology be providential? Before diving in, now is a good time review the development so far and point to where the argument is going.

The three models of providence described in chapters one, two, and three have much in common. All three come from contemporary theologians working within the Christian tradition who also self-identify as Christian. While variations can be seen between the Calvinist, Thomistic, and process conceptions of God, all three are confident that whatever God’s nature, God is capable of guiding creation to a good end and will use human cooperation to do so. In chapter four, a comparison of their models resulted in eight shared elements across all three models which together ensure Christian hope and motivate human participation.

In this chapter, the central question of the dissertation is framed through the introduction of Caputo’s work and the critique of ontotheology. The chapter has three main sections. First, Caputo’s work will be briefly introduced. Next the critique of ontotheology will be explained, especially Caputo’s specific concerns regarding ontotheology. Finally, the third section of this chapter will describe how the critique of ontotheology in Caputo’s work raises challenges, but also gestures toward an opening, for a doctrine of providence like those described in chapters one, two, and three.
In the final chapter, chapter six, the shared elements of the Calvinist, Thomistic, and process models of providence will be used as criteria to identify and reimagine what the doctrine of providence could be in Caputo’s work. By preserving a doctrine of providence, the Christian hope and human participation that providence ensures will also be preserved.

Introducing John D. Caputo

John D. Caputo began his academic career as a philosopher. As a scholar of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Martin Heidegger, and especially Jacques Derrida, his critique of ontotheology began as a philosophical endeavor. It could have also ended as a philosophical endeavor. However, by 2011, having achieved emeritus status at both Syracuse University and Villanova, Caputo had rebranded himself as a “radical” theologian.1 His take on theology is chronicled in what he refers to as a “postmodern treatise on the divine names”2 consisting of *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (2006), *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* (2013), and *The Folly of God: A Theology of the Unconditional* (2016). The three books do not so much function as three separate parts, but rather three articulations of the whole, expressed in slightly different language each time. *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event*, Caputo’s first attempt, is the most poetic of the three. *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* is the most technical with ample references to well-known philosophers and theologians. *The Folly of God: A Theology of the Unconditional* is the shortest, offering a concise summary of Caputo’s theology. Postmodern theology, sometimes referred to as radical

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Christianity, insists on a move from theo-logic (theology) to theopoetics. It therefore resists a certain amount of systemization. Nevertheless, just as one can more deeply appreciate a beautiful poem after thoughtful analysis, a strong theopoetics is not destroyed by analysis. To understand Caputo, as a philosopher and a theologian, we must understand the critique of ontotheology and how it applies to the figures we have been discussing.

**Caputo’s Rejection of Ontotheology**

The term “onto-theo-logy,” as it was written by Martin Heidegger, was popularized by Heidegger’s critique of the history of metaphysics. His critique was then picked up by Derrida and others and applied especially to classical and scholastic theologians. These theologians conceptualize being in terms of essence and existence, in other words, ontologically and theologically. Ontologically, a being’s essence is who or what the being is. Theologically, a being’s existence places the being in relation to the totality, or in relation to God. God is also conceptualized in terms of essence and existence, although God’s essence already implies God’s existence. To speak of God in terms of being, whether one intends God to be “a being” or “being itself,” is to close off the possibility of God as completely Other. God becomes comparable to other beings, even if God is always greater than them. This is, in fact, the simplest definition of ontotheology: “God is the highest being” and causes the world.

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5 Ben Vedder, “Religion and Theology” in Raffoul and Nelson, _Bloomsbury Companion to Heidegger_, 332.

When this ontotheological move occurs, there are several related negative results. While these categories overlap significantly and one could divide them differently, three of those negative results and their appearance in Caputo’s work will be highlighted. First, God becomes an explanation. God is not a place-holder to explain existence nor a super-being in the sky that makes things happen. This is a conceptual critique. Second, history is ignored. When all particular beings in the world are intended to fit into a larger narrative in relation to the totality of God, the tragedies and losers of history have no voice in the narrative. Furthermore, the ontotheological model cannot account for the unnecessary and the contingent. This is a historical critique. Third, if God is thought of as a super-being in the sky and if the all-encompassing nature of God cannot leave room for contingencies or tragedies, ontotheology can actually do moral violence. If there is no room for the Other, and I believe I speak for God (as a political/religious leader or merely a follower), then I can ignore or dispose of the Other. This is an ethical critique. All three of these concerns can be found in Caputo’s work.

Caputo begins his rejection of ontotheology in *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* with the 2004 earthquake/tsunami which resulted in hundreds of thousands of fatalities in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, and Thailand. Caputo describes two “blasphemous images of

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9 Ibid., 20.

God” that resulted in the immediate aftermath. Some used the occasion to suggest that God is unhappy with human sinfulness and that the natural disaster was a deserved punishment for those sins. Others preached that God knew the earthquake/tsunami was coming and would kill innocent people but did not prevent it for reasons that can only remain a mystery to us. Caputo promises a third alternative by rejecting the ontotheology which understands God as a “strong force with the power to intervene.” When God is not thought of as a strong force, worldviews which ignore history and believers who do violence to the Other will no longer be a part of theism, at least that is Caputo’s hope. We will begin with the conceptual critique of ontotheology which claims that God is not a super-being.

1. Conceptual Critique

The conceptual critique of ontotheology brings to light the problems of a doctrine of God which associates God with being and power. Aquinas is often identified as the prime example of this conceptual problem, although there have been many attempts to rehabilitate or exempt Aquinas from this critique. Caputo sums up the claims against Aquinas by

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13 Ibid.

14 As Caputo puts it, “The very core of the mistake made by onto-theology derives from conceiving God on the horizon of being, power, and causality, as if God were a cosmic power supply.” See Caputo, *Weakness of God*, 40.

explaining that although Aquinas makes it very clear that God is not a being, since that would make God finite, to call God “being itself” fails to fully resolve the problem.\textsuperscript{16} God still exists and would continue to exist if all else disappeared.\textsuperscript{17} He continues, “For Aquinas treats God as an agent who does things or makes things, a person who makes decisions, a mover who chooses to move things (the first ‘prime mover,’ of course), the ‘first cause’ of all things.”\textsuperscript{18} All these activities of God imply God has both being and power. And, while Aquinas intends these phrases to apply to God in only an analogical way, for Caputo and others, the relationship between God and human conceptions of being/power is still too strong.\textsuperscript{19}

How, then, can one properly conceive of God? Caputo begins with an apophatic approach. He writes, “The proper concept of God is the concept of that which exceeds any concept.”\textsuperscript{20} However, Caputo does not stop there. Negative theology makes the claim that since God transcends all of our concepts, one always is more accurate in saying God is not this or that than God is. While an apophatic approach maintains the otherness of God, the God above all our concepts still sounds supremely strong to Caputo. He suggests that instead of transcending us above, God calls from below.\textsuperscript{21} His critique of mystical theology follows the

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unsatisfactory but suggests in his final chapter that the mystical union described by Aquinas may overcome the critique of ontotheology.
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\textsuperscript{16} Caputo, \textit{Folly of God}, 16.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 17.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 21.

\textsuperscript{21} Caputo, \textit{Weakness of God}, 36.
same logic. While mystical theology rejects using metaphysical language to talk about God, it makes the mistake of placing God beyond metaphysics rather than prior to metaphysics. God does not transcend being; God does not yet exist.\textsuperscript{22} That being said, Caputo is very fond of the mystics, and if anyone is consistently described as “on the right track,” it is them.

So, Caputo rejects the God of being and power. But why? Quite simply because that conception of God is hard for him to swallow. As he writes, “The record of the Supreme Being of stopping the evil ones in their tracks, of making our enemies our footstool, of shrinking cancerous tumors, and the like, is so bad, you have to wonder why the theologians keep bringing it up.”\textsuperscript{23}

In order to combat the conception of God as powerful, Caputo suggests thinking of God as “weak.”\textsuperscript{24} The weak force of God is the force of patience, forgiveness, hospitality, gift-giving, and the kingdom of God.\textsuperscript{25} Forgiveness, for example, does not coerce and comes without reason. It rejects retaliation.\textsuperscript{26} To say God is the weak force of forgiveness means that God comes to be through forgiveness and is the call to forgive. It is not say God is the power of forgiveness as if forgiveness could be used as weapon or tool to manipulate people.\textsuperscript{27}

\begin{flushleft}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} Caputo, \textit{Folly of God}, 70.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 76.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Caputo, \textit{Folly of God}, 53.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Caputo, \textit{Hoping Against Hope}, 116; and Caputo, \textit{Weakness of God}, 210-211.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Caputo, \textit{Hoping Against Hope}, 116.
\end{itemize}
\end{flushleft}
Caputo’s reimagining of God as weak is not without precedent. He names his primary sources regarding this the term “weakness” as Gianni Vattimo, Derrida, Walter Benjamin, and St. Paul. Vattimo is a postmodern Catholic known for “weak thought.” Weak thought replaces strong religion by recognizing the view of the world is limited to interpretations of reality rather than objective reality. Vattimo hopes his hermeneutical perspective will combat the violence done in the name of absolutes and turn people instead towards greater charity. Caputo hopes the same for his weak theology, as seen below in the ethical critique.

Derrida uses the word “weak” in describing the “weak force” of the unconditional. The unconditional, something like justice, for example, does not have any real power or sovereignty. Justice itself does not make anything happen. Rather, justice is a call. Caputo, likewise, describes the unconditional named “God” as a call or that which insists.

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28 Caputo, Weakness of God, 7.


33 Caputo, Folly of God, 57. See also Derrida, “Force of Law,” 244. For more on justice as an impossible call see Caputo, Weakness of God, 28-29; and Caputo, Insistence of God, 85-86.
Benjamin’s use of weakness comes in his description of “weak messianic power.” If God is not an all-powerful being in the sky, God cannot save us. Benjamin suggests that we are meant to be the messiah, although we only have “weak messianic power.” By remembering the dead, we do not bring them back to life or undo the injustices done, but we do offer a kind of hope and a kind of redemption. When Caputo refers to the weakness of God, he means “that what is done in the name of God is done by human beings in the name ‘God’,” in this case, redemption.

Finally, Caputo identifies St. Paul as a source for the word “weak.” In his letters, Paul explains how the power of God is not what even the believers expected it to be. Rather than the power of a king, God’s power lies in the cross and *kenosis*. For Paul and Caputo the image of Jesus on the cross is the prime example of the way God works in the world. Both agree that God does not employ traditional feats of power in order to bring about justice. However, although Paul speaks of the weakness of God, Paul’s description of God’s weakness is significantly different than Caputo’s, and Caputo is well aware of this fact. When Paul writes, “For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a

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stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,” he is describing God as weak. But, descriptions like these are always followed by explaining that God’s power only appears weak. In reality, it is humans who are foolish because they fail to recognize the nature of God’s power and sovereignty. In this passage Paul continues, “For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.” Caputo, on the other hand, is not suggesting that God’s power is misunderstood or delayed. The crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth could not be prevented by God nor did Jesus want to be crucified. For the witnesses to this event, past and present, Jesus’ death is a call to overthrow injustice and violence, but the crucifixion itself does not accomplish this task. Acknowledging this difference, Caputo cites Dale Martin’s work on Corinthians, noting that the New Testament scholar reads Paul as contrasting human power with divine power, not power with weakness. Paul Helm interprets Corinthians similarly. Despite Caputo’s attempt at transparency, his use of Paul is not without critique. Carl Raschke argues that the postmodern move to a weak God has no grounding in Paul and that the name of God has always been a name for power. He writes:

A “weak God” is not really god, or even the simulacrum of a God, even for Nietzsche. Gods are always about power—unexpected, unexpurgated, explosive, and exponential

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38 1 Cor. 1:22-23.

39 1 Cor. 1:25.

40 Caputo, *Weakness of God*, 44.


power. Krishna revealing himself to Arjuna as the lights of a million suns! Time, Destroyer of Worlds! The voice from the burning bush! The stranger on the road to Emmaus!\textsuperscript{43}

Nevertheless, when speaking of the God of Christianity, most theologians would go at least as far as Michael Dodds who claims that although God is not weak, God at least knows and understands weakness through the human nature of Christ.\textsuperscript{44}

To recap, the first critique of ontotheology by Caputo is that associating God with being and especially power is conceptually problematic. Furthermore, God should be rethought as weak, so long as weakness is not taken to simply mean a hidden power.

2. Historical Critique

The historical critique of ontotheology is a rejection of grand narratives which erase the losers and anomalies of history and remove the possibility of novelty and the unexpected. In *Hoping Against Hope: Confessions of a Postmodern Pilgrim*, Caputo writes that any postmodern theology, whether it moves towards weakness or not, has to deal with the disappearance of grand narratives if it wants to be grounded in reality. He writes that all “stories that show the ultimate point of things,” are met with “incredulity” and with good reason.\textsuperscript{45} Everything we know of the world scientifically tells us that one day our sun will


explode and the universe will either expand or contract into nothingness. How could the grand narrative survive that?

Caputo’s worries about a grand narrative are not merely scientific though. If they were, we could find a workaround. Perhaps we will somehow live on virtually or perhaps there is another universe.\(^{46}\) His real concern is what grand narratives do to the unconditional, namely, they condition it. The most in-depth discussion of grand narratives in relation to Caputo’s theology takes place in *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps*. Here, Caputo takes a surprising turn towards Hegel in chapters five and six, although he cautions, “Hegel's God on earth is still too powerful and ‘providential’ a divine force for my new species of theologians and for my weak and spectral ‘perhaps.’”\(^{47}\)

In chapter five, Caputo uses Hegel as a foil to Kant, whom Caputo feels has removed the poetry of theology in favor of a strictly ethical religion.\(^{48}\) Hegel, on the other hand, describes theology as presentation. Something true happens in the stories of Christianity, such as the Incarnation and Resurrection, which is why we find them so compelling.\(^{49}\) What Hegel calls a presentation, Caputo calls poetry or theopoetics. A presentation or poem is an imaginative, non-literal and yet still true depiction which does *not* rely merely on reason.

\(^{46}\) See Caputo, *Hoping Against Hope*, 10, 11-12 for mention of these workarounds.


\(^{48}\) Ibid., 88. When Caputo claims he is “against ethics” he does not mean he is against concepts, such as justice, which are typically categorized as ethical concepts. Rather, he is claiming that justice always goes beyond duty or obligation and is consequently *more than* ethical.

\(^{49}\) Ibid., 90.
Caputo appreciates the possibility of something happening within these presentations, and he calls these happenings ‘events’ (or the impossible, or the unconditional). An event, the impossible, is the sort of thing that one can hardly believe.50 Something new can come to be that was completely unforeseen by us in the prior state.51 An event means “the existence of God is liable to break out at any time, in great and world-historical events, like Paul on the road to Damascus, and in the smallest things, like the rose that blossoms unseen.”52 Still, Hegel’s conception of Spirit is too strong for Caputo. For Caputo to accept Hegel, the event must maintain its event-ness even after the fact.53 If the Spirit can see how one thing led to another, before, during, or even after the fact, it is not an event. In other words, if God is unable to predict the future due to its genuine openness but can still understand how we got from there to here looking at the past, that God is too strong for Caputo. In fact, that God has much in common with the God Joseph Bracken describes, which will be discussed below. For Caputo, the event is destroyed if precursors can be traced to the final conclusion.

Caputo obviously has Benjamin’s “On the Concept of History” in mind here. Benjamin critiques what he calls historicism, where the present understands itself as progress on the past in order to tell the story of the victors. As Benjamin explains, “All rulers are the heirs of prior conquerors. Hence, empathizing with the victor invariably benefits the current rulers.”54

50 Caputo, Folly of God, 38. Caputo contrasts this understanding of “impossible” with a simple logical contradiction.

51 Caputo, Insistence of God, 92, 124.

52 Ibid., 49.

53 Ibid., 125.

But, in doing so, the nature of the event, not to mention the losers of history, is erased.\textsuperscript{55}

Furthermore, for Caputo to fully accept Hegel, the Spirit itself would have to be up for grabs and at risk (for Hegel, the Spirit is always a victor).\textsuperscript{56} In order for there to be an event, and for the unconditional to really be unconditional, the Spirit cannot be immune to the possibility of an event which destroys the Spirit or destroys God. Since the name of God is an event, the existence of God is not a given, like Hegel’s Spirit is, but rather the responsibility of human beings.\textsuperscript{57}

3. Ethical Critique

As mentioned above, Caputo is critical of theological systems (such as Kant’s or Levinas’) that reduce religion to ethics. The theopoetics for which Caputo advocates includes the call to justice and moral action, but also includes non-ethical calls: an aesthetic call, a call to hope, a call to joy, a call to “love of life itself.”\textsuperscript{58} Still, ethical problems resulting from ontotheology are an important motivator for his weak God theology. If God is an all-powerful super-being organizing the world, Caputo argues that our own ability to participate in bringing about the unconditional is hindered. When acts such as hospitality, forgiveness, and gift-giving (the stuff of the event named God), are rewarded by God, they lose their ability to be


\textsuperscript{56} Caputo writes, “In Hegel, the Spirit is always open to the future, but it is not open to no more future, to absolute death, to telic frustration or catastrophe.” Caputo, \textit{Insistence of God}, 130.

\textsuperscript{57} Caputo, \textit{Insistence of God}, 37.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 108. As an example, Caputo often references the band which continued playing as the Titanic sunk. A strictly ethical call might have obligated them to help load boats instead of playing. Yet their music can be seen as an in-breaking of the impossible. See Caputo, \textit{Folly of God}, 42.
unconditional.\textsuperscript{59} Furthermore, the super-being God is always revealed to someone and on the side of someone. Despite the work done in theologies of religion, historically, when revelation has been claimed by particular groups, it has resulted in religious violence.\textsuperscript{60} There are those who know God and are known by God and those who do not and are not. As Mary-Jane Rubenstein puts it, “The moment I know who the Messiah is and when he is coming, I know who is in the kingdom and who is out—and will behave accordingly.”\textsuperscript{61} There is always (if not theoretically, then practically) an Other who is excluded by the people of the super-being God. Finally, there is the age-old criticism against the ontotheological God that believers will be led to quietism. Readers of the models of providence presented in the first three chapters will know this is denied by proponents of a classical God. For Caputo, this final criticism is not proof that a Supreme Being does not exist, but it is a very good reason to stop waiting around for God to take care of the evil in the world.\textsuperscript{62} As Caputo points out, Christianity has always been about becoming the body of Christ and making God present in the world.\textsuperscript{63} It is time to stop worrying about what God is doing and start doing ‘godly’ things.

\textsuperscript{59} Caputo, \textit{Folly of God}, 75.

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 76.

\textsuperscript{63} Caputo, \textit{Insistence of God}, 151. Caputo argues here that both Judaism and Christianity attempt bring about the messianic age by bringing God to the world. They only differ in whether it is the first or second coming of the messiah.
4. Ontotheology in Helm, Dodds, and Bracken

In order to see where Caputo’s theology stands in relation to the previous systems, it will be helpful to briefly note where Helm, Dodds, and Bracken run into ontotheology in their work. To begin, Helm immediately falls prey to the conceptual critique by understanding God as Cause. This instrumentalizes God. God becomes a way to explain the world, even if the explanation is only that we cannot in this life see the full picture. Helm also must face the historical critique, as the “Happy Fall” and secret providence of God do not keep a record of the losers of history. A theological system in which everything is for the greater good only tells the stories of the saved. Finally, regarding ethics, Helm’s acceptance of manipulation, reward, and punishment in the God-human relationship would prevent one from acting unconditionally as Caputo describes.

Dodds holds a similar classical view of God and therefore faces similar critiques. Dodds understands God as Cause (conceptual critique), as one who smooths out tragedies for the greater good (historical critique), and as one who rewards and punishes (ethical critique). However, Dodds’ understanding of free will does give him an ethical edge over Helm.

Bracken’s theological system is the most interesting case, as process theism is meant to address many of the problems of ontotheology. Nevertheless, Caputo has his reasons for not becoming a process theologian. Conceptually, process theism moves away from understanding God as an omni-everything super-being, but it does not totally distance itself from being. Robert Masson makes an interesting argument that the way Bracken uses analogy to speak of God suggests there must be something in common between creatures and God in order to
create the comparison.\textsuperscript{64} Masson’s point can be seen in Bracken’s positive appraisal of Jean-
Luc Marion. In \textit{God Without Being}, Marion’s insight is that God loves before God is.\textsuperscript{65} Bracken
adds that what is true for God is also true for everything else: being follows activity.\textsuperscript{66} Thus, we
can speak analogically about God. Masson’s critique of Bracken’s conclusion is that if actual
occasions analogically participate in the activity of God, the societies of actual occasions (or
beings) are also analogically related to God as a being or entity.\textsuperscript{67} Due to this comparability
between human beings and God, Masson concludes that Bracken is more vulnerable to the
critique of ontotheology than most Thomists, even though process theism is meant to critique
classical theology.\textsuperscript{68}

While Bracken is on better grounds than Helm and Dodds regarding the ethical critique
since the future is open, his system fits what Caputo rejects in Hegel in the historical critique.
Caputo explains that the Spirit is not subject to the event in Hegel. “In my view, what all this
real contingency really amounts to is that the Spirit can achieve its destination (\textit{telos}) in many
different ways. Whatever arbitrary chance befalls it, the Spirit will always and necessarily

February 17, 2017, ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials. Masson contrasts this view of analogy with the way
he sees analogy used by theologian such as Elizabeth Johnson and Karl Rahner. Their method, according to
Masson, makes use of metaphor within analogy, which does not require a comparable element between God and

\textsuperscript{65} Jean-Luc Marion, \textit{God Without Being}, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago
Press, 1991), 47.

\textsuperscript{66} Joseph A. Bracken, S.J., \textit{The One in the Many: A contemporary Reconstruction of the God-World
Relationship} (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001), 24-25. Here Bracken has swiftly reinserted a
metaphysics which Marion was specifically trying to avoid.

\textsuperscript{67} Masson, “Analogy and Metaphoric Process,” 595.

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., 573, 595.
achieve its destination. There is no chance that it will not."69 While process theism allows the
future to remain open, even for God, Bracken is still confident that everything will work out
well in the end. Certainly Bracken does not entertain the possibility that God could be
altogether destroyed one day in the future!

**Caputo’s Rejection of Providence**

Caputo is my central conversation partner in this chapter, but flipping through the
indexes of his “trilogy”70 on the weakness of God, you won’t find the word providence at all.
This is indicative of a larger truth about Caputo’s work—it calls into question the doctrine’s
very existence. Much of Caputo’s work, in an indirect way, is treatise on why providence is a
bad idea. Nevertheless, the concept does come up in the texts directly and repeatedly, if
briefly, for example in *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* where he writes, “To pray
is to say ‘come’ to what we cannot see coming, none of us, including God. Divine 'providence'
arises from the assumption that somebody must know what is going on, and if not God, then
who? Who, indeed! Suppose no one knows what is going on? That is the event.”71 And, in *The
Folly of God: A Theology of the Unconditional*, Caputo adds, “Nothing says that the worst will
not happen. No invisible hand ensures a good outcome. No Providence guides is like a ship to a
safe harbor. Nothing says that the good will triumph and the evil will repent their ways or be
punished. The event means the coming of what we cannot see coming and nothing says that it

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will all end well.” Caputo describes the name of God as an event to emphasize the radical unpredictability and open-endedness of the future. If God is an event, then providence is a fantasy. Still, I want to investigate Caputo’s rejection of providence a bit more fully. While Caputo’s rejection of providence is related to his rejection of ontotheology, a few additional points can be highlighted here.

Caputo’s project begins with a rejection of God’s sovereignty. Christianity’s depictions of God as king, lord, or ruler have often been critiqued for the way they have justified (male) human powers on earth. But, Caputo states quite bluntly that the problem with traditional ontotheology is “the paradigm of sovereignty itself” not just the misapplications or misappropriations of God’s power. Consequently, rather than a sovereign God above, the call of God comes from a weak God below: a God of patience and forgiveness which Caputo calls the “power of powerlessness.” The result is a world open to risk. Unlike the strength of a First Cause, the weak force of forgiveness does not guarantee a good outcome. A weak God does not sound very providential.

A sovereign-less God means a kingdom of God with no king. So, we might ask what exactly it is that God is doing, if not ruling. Here we see a possible opening for providence. God is the call which lures us toward the kingless kingdom. Consequently, God is not a neutral

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74 Ibid., 36.

75 Ibid., 29.
call—the name of God is a call to justice and goodness. In *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event*, Caputo writes, “God is taken to be, not the reason things are *there* or the cause that makes them *happen* or the power supply that can intervene when things go wrong, but the reason that they are or can be *good.*” We might respond in positive, negative, or insane ways to God’s call—and God has no control, no sovereignty over that. Yet, the call itself has a direction even while the kingdom of God remains hidden, unpredictable, even impossible.

Nevertheless, we must be careful in our imagining of the kingdom because Caputo also rejects totalizing narratives that too easily erase the particular events along the way. Caputo rejects a full Hegelianism because some form of providence takes the place of the event. In the end, everything, though unpredictable initially, fits a comprehensible chain of causes and effects when viewed from the end. Instead, in Caputo’s “headless Hegelianism,” as he calls it, God does not direct the future providentially by acting as a transcendent cause nor is God able to weave events together in a providential pattern after the fact. In *The Folly of God: A Theology of the Unconditional*, this is the point where Caputo notes straightforwardly that the weak God, the unconditional, “is not Divine Providence transcribed into space and time but a more radical roll of the dice.”

No guarantee of a good ending to tie together our story means no guarantee of heaven or the kingdom, which is typically the providential end Christians have in mind for human

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76 Ibid., 53.
78 Caputo, *Folly of God*, 79.
All three models of providence we examined included such an end. In *Hoping against Hope: Confessions of a Postmodern Pilgrim*, Caputo plays with the idea that perhaps technology could be our savior and we could enjoy afterlives of uploaded consciousness. But, as Caputo notes, it seems that not even our universe will last forever, much less our computers.\(^{79}\) With his realist approach to the inevitable destruction of the universe, I do not think Caputo is at all worried that there will not be an end. But, the hoped for kingdom of God, can only be that—hoped for.\(^{80}\) That kingdom may also look a bit a different than our previous models suggest. While Dodds calls for a “dynamic stillness of abiding love,”\(^{81}\) Caputo calls for a Mad Hatter tea party.\(^{82}\) Both of these visions of the kingdom of God provide a direction and view of completion—an end, even if we never reach it in full (and Caputo does not expect that we will). For the paradoxical “dynamic stillness” to find a place in Caputo’s Wonderland, and for it to resist becoming a totalizing narrative, its existence must remain at risk. Still, perhaps Caputo’s notion of the kingdom has something to do with providence.

When we turn in particular to chapter four’s conclusions about what providence does, we begin to see further openings for providence. Providence, we saw, offers a way for human beings to participate. It is our opportunity to interact with God and to make something good, beautiful, or loving. This is similar to how Caputo describes responding to the call. The call calls

\(^{79}\) Caputo, *Hoping Against Hope*, 153.

\(^{80}\) Caputo, *Folly of God*, 119.


us to what is good and is our opportunity to bring God into existence in the world. When we answer the call in the right way, “God” can happen.

In the three models of providence examined in chapters one, two, and three, providence also provides a reason to have hope. When things look like they are going badly, one can justifiably remain hopeful if one trusts that God is in control and good will be victorious over evil. Caputo is concerned with hope as well, but he imagines a “groundless ground” for hope.\textsuperscript{83} For Caputo, to hope is to be in a precarious situation.\textsuperscript{84} One cannot hope when a beautiful and good end is already guaranteed. To lack providence does not negate the possibility of hope, according to Caputo, but rather it requires that God hope along with us.\textsuperscript{85} Hope means that although there is no guarantee that anyone will answer the call and bring God into existence, we are not pre-ordained to fail either.\textsuperscript{86} Nevertheless, if we recall Langdon Gilkey’s plea for new work on the doctrine of providence, it is clear he would be scandalized by the trust Caputo places in human beings to bring about change in the world, and he would be equally upset by Caputo’s lack of faith in God’s ability to do anything in the world.\textsuperscript{87}

\textsuperscript{83} John D. Caputo, “Hoping Against Hope: The Possibility of the Impossible” (lecture, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, June 2016). In this lecture Caputo states, “If we have a good reason, it is not hope but a reasonable expectation. If it is utterly groundless then it is not hope be an idle and arbitrary will-o’-the-wisp. Is there nothing between good reasons and arbitrary fancy? That is what I mean by a groundless ground. The groundless ground of hope means that it does not rest on a ground but that it is nonetheless motivated.”

\textsuperscript{84} Caputo, \textit{Insistence of God}, 16.

\textsuperscript{85} Caputo, \textit{Hoping Against Hope}, 198.

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid.

Concluding Thoughts

This chapter has brought us to the crux of the matter. Caputo’s weak God theology avoids the problems of ontotheology but greatly diminishes the possibility of providence in the process. Nevertheless, we have seen some places where traces of providence may enter back in and still provide a reason to participate and hope. In the next chapter, the criteria for identifying providence will be used to reimagine providence in Caputo’s weak God theology in the openings identified here.

At this point a brief story must be told. In April 2016, I spoke with Caputo about this project and his rejection of providence. He seemed slightly taken aback by my allegations and suggested at the time that he does not so much reject providence as he fails to acknowledge it at all. In later communication, he clarified that he does reject providence since it requires a divine agent but that he is open to the idea of providence as merely the call for us to make a plan. 88 So, we move forward with Caputo’s blessing.

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CHAPTER SIX

REIMAGINING PROVIDENCE

In this chapter, an understanding of providence will be constructed from within John Caputo’s weak God theology. In order to construct providence in this somewhat hostile environment, we must be free to reimagine what providence might mean. The reason for doing this is two-fold. First, as we saw in the previous chapter, Caputo has good reasons for rejecting the ontotheological God that Paul Helm’s, Michael Dodds’, and Joseph Braken’s models require. Second, the Calvinist, Thomistic, and process models fail to convince many Christian theologians, not to mention non-Christians. As Langdon Gilkey pointed out decades ago, we are in a time when many theologians feel more comfortable ignoring the question of providence altogether than attempting to address it. Caputo falls into that category. However, the doctrine of providence is a doctrine central to Christianity and not easily disposed of. In fact, Christian non-theologians almost always carry a latent understanding of providence as a part of their faith, even when their understandings flounder when applied to real world situations.

Among Christians, there is strong sense of God's providence but a lack of intellectual coherence regarding how providence functions in one's life. Often, one or more problematic stances are taken. In some cases God's action in the world is relegated to the place of chance. If God’s actions are unpredictable and detached from human intention and participation, the
result is a theology of anti-planning (quietism). Alternatively, all worldly events are sometimes interpreted as a message from God which leads to both prosperity gospels and the condemnation of victims of natural or personal disaster. These Christians need new ways to articulate how God is present in their lives. They need a sense of providence which is not only comforting but also empowering, sensitive, and nuanced. At the same time, Christians are at risk of losing their sense of God’s guidance in the world completely. The wars of the last century and the ecological crisis of this century have led many, including Christians, to believe that the world will not likely come to a good end. At best, the future remains unknown. A reconstruction of providence needs to speak to the contemporary situation and acknowledge our own uncertainty about God’s ability to bring all to a good end while still affirming that authentic hope is possible. This is the type of providence we hope to imagine here.

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1 As an example of providence leading to quietism, consider my aunt who was diagnosed with skin cancer a few years ago. While she did get the cancerous area removed, she acknowledged little connection between her own actions and her health/life. When asked whether the condition was serious and what type of treatment she would undergo, she said she did not really care whether she lived or died. Besides, whatever God wanted to happen to her would happen regardless of her actions.

2 Many Christians fall into the prosperity gospel trap. Take, for example, Youtube vloggers Derek and Sabrina. When pregnant Sabrina’s water broke at 23 weeks, they prayed for an increase in amniotic fluid to carry them through to at least 34 weeks before delivering. Despite good fluid levels at 30 weeks, doctors told them they were very unlikely to make it that long before needing to deliver the baby. Nevertheless, Derek and Sabrina interpreted the fluid levels at 30 weeks as a sign that God was overcoming the boundaries of western medicine because of their prayers. Furthermore, their good fortune was meant as witness to others that with sufficient faith God will liberate one from suffering. Their baby, as the doctors predicted, was delivered 4 days later. See Derek and Sabrina, “My Water Broke at 23 Weeks: PPROM: Things Don’t Always Go as You Plan” (vlog), posted March 27, 2017, accessed May 27, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=30hUBtcwg4I; Derek and Sabrina, “Week 30 Pregnancy Update: Baffling Doctors: Reality is Setting In” (vlog), posted May 8, 2017, accessed May 27, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gs_P-Pzit6U; Derek and Sabrina, “The Birth of Truman John: What a Ride: Birth at 30 Weeks” (vlog), posted May 9, 2017, accessed May 27, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Bq3YnwVk88.

Examples of blaming tragedy or natural disaster on human sinfulness unfortunately abound. Almost every natural disaster is followed by attempts to scapegoat or justify God’s involvement by blaming the disaster on acts deemed immoral that have no direct relation to the disaster itself.
“Reimagining providence” means offering a way of living in the world—a way of moving from despair, apathy, or smugness to action.

Nevertheless, in order to call it providence in a meaningful way, some account of the criteria for a doctrine of providence, from chapter four, must be given. The first section of this chapter moves through each criterion and reimagines how it might relate to providence in a weak God theology. The brief second section discusses the possibility of rejecting providence rather than reimagining providence. It then summarizes the main features of what a reimagined providence in Caputo’s weak God theology would look like, if that option is chosen over a reading of Caputo in which providence is no longer needed for Christianity.

**Criteria for Identifying Providence**

Since Caputo does not develop a doctrine of providence in his own work, a supporting player is necessary to inform the construction of providence here. Throughout this chapter, Michael Welker’s work on the Holy Spirit will be used as a jumping off point for a reimagined providence. In fact, a turn to the Holy Spirit is already anticipated by Caputo when he writes, “If you stick to the facts, you soon see that God is spirit, and the spirit is a specter of an event.” Welker’s main concern is not the doctrine of providence either, but his work on the Holy Spirit offers a way to think about God’s action in the world which is non-totalizing and is dependent on human participation. Welker, while not considering himself a process theologian, is influenced by process theism, providing a bridge to the more traditional models.

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of providence described in chapters one, two, and three.  

Likewise, while uncomfortable with the term “postmodern,” Welker is also influenced by postmodern theology which provides common ground with Caputo. Welker’s primary work on the Holy Spirit is *God the Spirit* (1994) which takes a biblical, realistic approach to the Holy Spirit. By “realistic,” Welker means that there is a sensitivity to the variety of human experiences of God both within Scripture and various cultures today. A realistic theology does not try to homogenize differences in experience as a way of controlling future claims of God’s presence. No group can claim exclusive rights to the experience of God, even when experiences seem contradictory. In the following subsections, we can construct from Caputo, sometimes with an assist from Welker, responses to the criteria for providence.

1. Providence Relies on Revelation

Before the seven criteria for a doctrine of providence can be met, a theological system must be shown to rely on revelation. For simplicity, I am calling this prerequisite the first criterion out of eight. Without meeting this prerequisite, the discussion of providence is not possible. Caputo’s postmodern, pluralistic approach to theology does still incorporate an understanding of revelation, which includes a reliance on Christian Scripture, although he does

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5 Welker dislikes the term “postmodern” because it has been swallowed by popular media. Caputo shares this concern and often refers to his work as “radical” theology rather than postmodern. See Michael Welker, *God the Spirit*, trans. John F. Hoffmeyer (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1994), xii; and Caputo, *Folly of God*, 1.

6 Welker, *God the Spirit*, 46-47.
not understand Scripture to be the Word of God to the extent of our previous theologians (Helm, Dodds, and Bracken).7

Caputo distinguishes his approach to Scripture from both a humanistic, religious studies approach and a theological approach which claims direct divine revelation. This means that for Caputo Scripture does not merely tell us about history, but it does not reveal the concrete doctrines of fundamentalism either.8 Instead, Scripture is itself the call for the event known as the kingdom of God.9 Its truth, or what it reveals that one might call God, is a poetic truth which need not be literally true.10 Therefore, while Scripture is revelatory, it is not revelatory to the exclusion of other sources of revelation. Caputo writes, “The idea of one true religion or religious discourse or body of religious narratives makes no more sense than the idea of one true poem or one true language or one true culture.”11 Caputo’s ultimate goal for this poetic

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7 Interpretation of Caputo is mixed on this point. For example, B. Keith Putt writes, “Undoubtedly, the grand inquisitors of orthodoxy find it incredulous that Caputo should be taken seriously when he writes about God, or Christ, or the Spirit, or the Church; however, anyone who would exercise a willful suspension of disbelief and actually read The Weakness of God must affirm that Caputo is not skipping playfully around vandalizing the Bible, ripping its texts to shreds; on the contrary, he writes on his knees, praying for wisdom, listening for the comforting and convicting call of what he loves most, that Other who may well be named God, or Christ, or Love, while simultaneously remaining unnamable.” In contrast, Thomas Park offers an entire essay on Caputo’s rejection of revelation. As will be seen, I agree more closely with Putt. Caputo does reject certain understandings of revelation, but not revelation as such. See B. Keith Putts, “Reconciling Pure Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Bringing John Caputo Into the Kingdom of God,” CrossCurrents 59, no. 4 (December 2009): 501, accessed April 2, 2017. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost; and Thomas Park, “Faith in God Without Any Revelation?” International Journal for Philosophy of Religion 78, no. 3 (December 2015): 315-328, accessed April 2, 2017. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11153-014-9491-0.


9 Caputo, Weakness of God, 118.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid. See also John D. Caputo, “The Weakness of God and the Iconic Logic of the Cross,” in Cross and Khôra: Deconstruction and Christianity in the Work of John D. Caputo, ed. Marko Zlomislic and Neal DeRoo (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2010), 17. There, Caputo writes, “I would like to have as many truths as possible,
approach is actually shared by plenty of Christians who would align themselves more closely with Helm, Dodds, or Bracken, as can be seen when he writes, “By taking the Scriptures as the site of an event, we find a way to read the remarkable texts of the Scriptures, to take seriously texts that describe the most impossible things, while avoiding the Scylla of the fiery faithful, who literalize them into facts, and Charybdis of cold-hearted unbelievers, who dismiss them out of hand as fiction.” The result is scriptural interpretation which is understood neither as mundane nor magic.

In addition to Scripture, Caputo turns to the Christian tradition as a source of revelation. By “tradition” Caputo means “the workings of the Spirit in the people of God” which allow the people of God, and not just the hierarchy, to read the Christian Scriptures rightly in a given time. Properly understood, revelation does not consist of Scripture and tradition on equal footing, but rather tradition first and foremost, which happens to include the compilation of writings which are now called Scripture. When the Spirit works through the experiences of Christians today, their new interpretations of Scripture, history, and tradition are added to tradition as the ongoing revelation of the name of God.

so long as all of them are true.” He gives a similar defense of multiple revelations in John D. Caputo, “Only as Hauntology is Religion without Religion Possible: A Response to Hart,” in Cross and Khôra, ed. Zlomislić and DeRoo, 115.

12 Caputo, Weakness of God, 119.


14 Ibid.
Nevertheless, Caputo could have chosen sources of revelation other than Christian ones. While not denying the possibility of the name of God being revealed in all sorts of ways, his references are actually thoroughly monotheistic and Christian. As he attempts to explain, “Were I born elsewhere, at another time, all this might be different, something else might be going on. The name of God is a paradigmatic name for me and there is nothing I can do about it. . . . It is a paradigmatic name for me, for a lot of ‘us,’ meaning for those of ‘us’ who find themselves situated in one of the cultures of the great monotheisms.”\(^\text{15}\) The Christian paradigm, including its vocabulary and thought patterns, shapes the way Caputo names the event and offers the name “God” as the inevitable name of choice. Caputo’s logic here can be extended to his reliance on Christian revelation. Given his Catholic upbringing and immersion in cultures where Christianity is the majority religion, he naturally grounds his theopoetics in Christian Scripture, Christian tradition, and experiences interpreted through the lens of a Christian worldview. In regards to providence, though, a challenge is still posed. If Christian revelation is only one way to experience revelation, one paradigm among several, then a providential understanding of the world is only one way to understand the world. That does not make providence untrue, but it leaves open the possibility of non-providential truths.

2. God is Omnibenevolent

The second criterion for a doctrine of providence is that if there is divine providence, God must be omnibenevolent. While omnipotence, omniscience, and even omnipresence cause problems in many theological systems, omnibenevolence tends to be the least

controversial of the omni-descriptions. However, a common sense understanding of omnibenevolence still seems to imply that God exists. God must exist in order to exist in an all-loving way. Consequently, this is one of the criterion that needs to be reimagined within Caputo’s system.

According to Caputo, while God does not (yet) exist, the name of God still points to something good. The kind of events the name of God calls for are events of democracy, “justice, love, friendship, mercy, life,” etc. Caputo writes, “The name of God is powerful because it is the name of our hope in the contract Elohim makes with things when he calls them ‘good,’ when he calls them to the good, when he breathes the life of the good over them.” Of course, sometimes no one responds to the call or someone responds in the wrong way. Sometimes the impossible occurs, and it is tragic. When the call of God is misheard, rather than justice flowing like a river, “perhaps what will flow will be the blood of injustice, the worst violence, which happens time and again with names like ‘God’.” Still, while events which happen under the name of God are not always good, the call itself is always good. Interestingly, this is precisely the point where Richard Kearney notes a departure between the

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16 Caputo, Folly of God, 85.

17 Caputo, Weakness of God, 88. See also Caputo, “Weakness of God and the Iconic Logic of the Cross,” 27. There, Caputo writes, “I think of the world as a gift, not an effect, and of God as beneficence, not cause.”


19 Amos 5:24.

20 Caputo, Insistence of God, 15-16. See also Caputo, Weakness of God, 5. There, Caputo explains that an event can be evil rather than good.
deconstruction of Jacques Derrida and the kingdom of Caputo. According to Kearney, the impossible for Derrida could be any event—good or evil—whereas the kingdom of God in Caputo’s writings always promises love and justice, although it might not come to fruition.21

The insistence of God, as Caputo puts it, is that God be made real in the world by us, which means choosing the power of powerlessness—choosing to give a gift, to forgive, to do something beautiful or loving.22 Consequently, to the extent one can say something meaningful about God at all, God is omnibenevolent. God is not omnibenevolent in the sense of an irresistible, all-consuming goodness, though. The omnibenevolent call can be both ignored and misinterpreted.

What is the nature of this insistence? Without intending a turn to metaphysics, the characteristics of the insistent call are those traditionally assigned to the Holy Spirit.23 Welker’s work on the Spirit is helpful here, as he does not intend a turn to metaphysics either. Like Caputo, Welker is skeptical of omni-words, especially the suggestion that God might be omni-causing.24 The Spirit, according to Welker, is a liberating force which works through human

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21 Richard Kearney, “The Kingdom: Possible and Impossible,” in Cross and Khôra, ed. Zlomislić and DeRoo, 133. Caputo disagrees with Kearney’s portrayal of Derrida but not with the importance of the promise of goodness in his work. He writes, “Derrida was not calling for the monster, or calling for something to happen no matter what, anything whatsoever, even if it includes the monster, which is how Kearney tends to portray him.” John D. Caputo, “The Possibility of the Impossible: A Response to Kearney,” in Cross and Khôra, ed. Zlomislić and DeRoo, 149.

22 Caputo emphasizes that it is “us” who are called repeatedly. See for example, Caputo, Insistence of God, 107; and Caputo, Folly of God, 87, 92.

23 While not necessarily referencing the Holy Spirit, Caputo does use the image of a spirit to talk about what happens under the name of God. For example, he writes, “This name whispers in our ears that we live in response to the promptings of a distant promise, to the solicitude of a spirit or specter little known, to a real beyond the real.” See Caputo, Folly of God, 81.

24 Polkinghorne and Welker, Faith in the Living God, 80-81.
beings in a public fashion.\textsuperscript{25} As a liberating force, it is always good. However, since human participation is required, we are at risk of misidentifying the work of the Spirit in the world.\textsuperscript{26} We may even attribute an event to the Spirit for generations which upon later examination was not as liberative at it appeared and not the work the Spirit at all.\textsuperscript{27} These non-liberative acts were not caused by God, yet God is still omnibenevolent. All that God does is good, but everything is not caused by God. Through an analysis of the Holy Spirit’s work throughout Scripture, Welker can find no reason to suggest that God is omni-causing or even omnipresent if that is taken to mean equally present in all places and times.\textsuperscript{28} Rather, the Spirit always works through particular people in particular times and places, albeit in a public fashion.\textsuperscript{29} Welker writes, “Where the Spirit acts on human beings, the experiences are firsthand ones. But these experiences are at the same time experiences for others, experiences that bear witness.”\textsuperscript{30} In fact, the work the Spirit is meant primarily for the community rather than for the transformation of an individual.\textsuperscript{31}

\textsuperscript{25}Welker, \textit{God the Spirit}, 75, 336.

\textsuperscript{26}Ibid., 336.

\textsuperscript{27}Welker writes, “Forces that are spiritless, disintegrative, and are detrimental to life, indeed even forces that are demonic powers, can also generate the illusion of freedom and can elicit misleading experiences, experiences of supposed freedom. By no means need these experiences be merely subjective and short-lived. They can be supported by a broad consensus and can outlast a series of generations.” Welker, \textit{God the Spirit}, 336.

\textsuperscript{28}Welker, \textit{God the Spirit}, 215. See also Polkinghorne and Welker, \textit{Faith in the Living God}, 80, 123.

\textsuperscript{29}Welker, \textit{God the Spirit}, 75, 176.

\textsuperscript{30}Ibid., 176.

\textsuperscript{31}While the public nature of the Holy Spirit is central to Welker’s work, the public nature of the call is emphasized less in Caputo’s work. One might ask if the call or insistence of God might be to forgive oneself or seek justice for oneself. Still, if the event is to be unconditional, it is difficult to see how it could be self-serving. I always have something to gain by forgiving myself or seeking justice for myself. Here, then, we see a point of
For Caputo, God’s goodness is made present in the impossible event. Welker shows that this is in fact the way God has always worked. God is not a vague presence everywhere, but a particular happening at particular historical moments in response to specific needs. When it is really God the Spirit calling or working though human beings, the call is always loving and good.

3. God Has a Different Relation to Time than Creation

Which Allows for Divine Action that Does Not Conflict with Scientific Causality

Essential to the doctrine of providence is that human participation as well as natural causal processes are not superseded by God’s action in the world. A zero-sum understanding of causality only allows for competition between God and creation, whereas providence requires unified or collaborative action towards one plan. In the Calvinist, Thomistic, and process models we examined this was achieved largely by specifying the difference between a creaturely relation to time and God’s relation to time. By showing how God and creatures operate on different planes, the models achieve a non-competitive view of scientific causality and divine action.

Caputo solves the operating on different planes problem swiftly and completely. Human beings, and all the rest of creation, exist and act in time. God does not exist, and therefore, has no relation to time. Human and divine acts are never competing causes because God does not cause things to happen. Likewise, God does not compete with physics.

Unfortunately, for a doctrine of providence this raises a question as quickly as it answers one. The criterion for a doctrine of providence “allows for divine action which does not compete with scientific causality.” This implies that there is divine action of some kind. The other models of providence coordinated natural causality with divine causality through foreordination (Helm), through secondary causes (Dodds), or through overlapping fields of activity (Bracken). How can this occur within Caputo’s system where the only action towards the kingdom of God is human action? Again, we turn to Welker’s work on the Holy Spirit for a possible way out.

If we understand Caputo’s “call” as the work of the Holy Spirit, we can use Welker’s explanation of the pouring out of the spirit to understand human action in relation to God’s (in-)action. The action of the Holy Spirit, which is the way God accomplishes God’s will, “comes to expression through the ‘pouring out’ of the Spirit.”

Beginning with the first references to the Spirit in the Old Testament, the Spirit is said to “come upon” a specific person. When the Spirit comes upon or is poured out on a person (or group), that person enters a new a field of activity. Here Welker’s interest in process theism is apparent. The field of activity of the Spirit is a non-homogenous field of renewal in which the person acts on behalf of others for liberation. For the person overcome with the Spirit, a sense of calmness, trust, and

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32 Welker, God the Spirit, 228.

33 Welker specifically cites Othniel, son of Kenaz (Judg. 3:9-10), Gideon (Judg. 6:34), Jephthah (Judg. 11:29), and Saul (1 Sam. 11:6) as examples of the Spirit “coming upon” a specific person. See Welker, God the Spirit, 53-55.

34 Welker, God the Spirit, 228. Welker uses the term “force field” rather than “field of activity,” but I have chosen to stick with Bracken’s phrase, introduced in chapter three, for consistency.

35 Ibid., 229.
persistence is indicative of the new state. However, since the action of the Spirit is a public action, the individual will not always even be fully aware of his/her participation. All those on whom the Spirit is poured participate in the Spirit’s field of activity which is a “world-encompassing, multilingual, polyindividual testimony to Godself.” The Spirit acts neither directly nor once and for all. Rather, “a multitude of diverse concrete experiences of liberation are indicative of the Spirit.”

What then, does this human action have to do with God’s action? Do we need reference to God or the Spirit at all? And, if not, can this be called providence? Recall that for Caputo the name of God is another name for the unconditional. The appearance of the unconditional is why we must speak of God at all and why we can speak of providence. Sometimes, human response to the call results in an event. Welker would attribute these moments to the pouring out of the Spirit. An event goes beyond what could have been predicted. Even after it occurs, it is described as impossible, unbelievable, or preposterous. Both Caputo and Welker describe the presence of the divine as impossible. Welker points out that the action of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament occurs in times of extreme distress or danger. The Holy Spirit provides a way out when there is no way out.

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36 Ibid.
37 Ibid., 75, 78. Welker gives the example of Gideon who is skeptical of the Spirit’s presence and asks for a sign.
38 Ibid., 235.
39 Ibid., 215.
40 Caputo, Folly of God, 19.
41 Welker, God the Spirit, 52.
speaks of these unexpected moments (which can be positive or negative experiences). He writes, “That is what Derrida calls the impossible, not logically impossible, like \( p \land \neg p \), but phenomenologically, like something we just cannot believe.” Welker does not mean a logical impossibility either, but rather something impossible in another way. He explains that “although God’s Spirit unleashes unexpected forces and produces improbable results, this Spirit acts under the conditions of what is creaturely and finite.” Furthermore, the consequences of the Spirit remain within the realm of the natural. When the Spirit is poured out, one does not become a magician, and when one is healed or liberated, one does not become infinite or impervious to future harm. Human beings remain human beings.

A better way to think of the impossible is the story of Pentecost. When the apostles received the Spirit, an event occurred and the impossible happened. But, the event was not impossible in the sense of being confusing, illogical, or contradictory. Rather, the event of Pentecost which resulted in everyone hearing in their native tongue was impossible for exactly the opposite reasons! It is was unbelievable because it was moment of shared capacity to understand. Pentecost was “spectacular and shocking.” “Without dissolving the variety and complexity of their backgrounds, without setting aside their forms of expression and understanding as these forms are marked off in relation to other forms, an unbelievable

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42 Caputo, Folly of God, 38. Recall the examples Caputo gives in The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps which are quoted in chapter five: Paul on the road to Damascus and the rose that blossoms unseen. See Caputo, Insistence of God, 49.

43 Welker, God the Spirit, 55.

44 Ibid., 230-231.

commonality of experience and of understanding occurs.\textsuperscript{46} Here we can see this second criterion for a doctrine of providence really at work in weak God theology. The criterion states that God cannot compete with scientific causality. Caputo and Welker’s notion of the impossible accomplishes exactly this. The impossible is actually not that which contradicts physics. It is not impossible in that sense. But, it is also more than one can expect from human action and, therefore, points in some way to the divine or unconditional. Even after we have seen it, we cannot believe it.

4. Providence Includes All Things

Caputo’s first theological book, \textit{The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event}, raised questions for readers about anthropocentrism. If God is a call brought into being by humans, it seems God does not have anything to do with the rest of creation. Creation, apart from humanity, can neither hear nor respond to the call. Caputo attempts to answer these questions in his next book, \textit{The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps}.\textsuperscript{47} His answer is important because all three models of providence are clear that God’s plan extends to all of creation. This is one of the least debated or variable aspects of providence. Furthermore, as determined in chapter four, while hope need not apply to all of creation, participation in providence is not limited to human beings in the three originally examined models.

The first step of Caputo’s turn away from anthropocentrism is to note that human beings are already connected to the rest of the created world and, in fact, are made of the

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 232-233.

\textsuperscript{47} Caputo, \textit{Insistence of God}, 21.
same stuff. Jesus, by virtue of his humanity, is a member of the animal kingdom and is not exempt from animalistic and material needs. Consequently, although Caputo's work focuses on human beings and their response to the call, he is already talking about the world. One cannot speak of human bodies without speaking of the world. In the end, people, trees, and planets are all made of the same cosmic dust. As Caputo puts it, we are all “heavenly bodies.”

The second step is to remind readers that the call, which Christians name “God,” cannot ultimately be known. Consequently, we might name the call something else; we might hear the call as something other than “God.” Caputo suggests that the same call could be said to occur under the name of “life.” “Life” is the insistence of the world. And, although we know that life must come to end for individuals, we celebrate when life persists, as do other creatures. Caputo gives the following example: The call a human being hears when observing the aesthetics of a painting by Picasso is the same call a chimpanzee hears when observing the power of a waterfall. In the end, though, Caputo concludes that we should not get too caught up in the caller. He writes, “Is it God who calls? Is it the world? Is it life? The point is that this is not a query requiring an answer but a call calling for a response.” Caputo designates this

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48 This approach is similar to what Elizabeth Johnson calls for in Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love as a correction to the anthropocentrism found in Thomistic theology. See Elizabeth A. Johnson, Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 229-230.

49 Caputo, Insistence of God, 167.

50 Ibid., 176.

51 Ibid., 175.

52 Ibid., 177.

53 Ibid., 262.
broadened understanding of his own theology a “cosmo-theopoetics.” It is “a willingness to say ‘come’ to a cosmic ‘perhaps,’ where it is the world itself that insists, that comes knocking at our door.”

These two steps, noting that human beings are already part of the world and noting that the caller can go by many names, open the door for a model of providence that extends to all of creation, on earth and across the universe. While only human beings give the call a name, all of creation can respond to the call when it is understood as the call of the world, cosmos, or life.

Furthermore, we can again augment what Caputo explicitly writes with Welker’s work on the Holy Spirit. Welker faces a similar problem as Caputo. How does the rest of creation receive the Spirit? Certainly we cannot be satisfied with a completely anthropocentric Holy Spirit! Welker extends the influence of the Spirit through the public nature of the Spirit’s actions. As noted above, while the Spirit comes upon particular people, and in that sense is anthropocentric, the Spirit’s goal and influence always extends beyond the individual. In fact, conversion of the individual is quite often only a secondary effect at best.

When the Spirit is poured out on a person, the response to the Spirit is not only seen in the community but also in nature itself, as is indicated by Isaiah 11. In this passage, the Spirit brings about a transformation of the natural world which allows the wolf to live with the lamb,

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54 Ibid., 169.
55 Ibid.
56 Welker, God the Spirit, 170.
the leopard to lie down with the child, and so on. Welker claims that “flourishing vegetation” is a sign of the Spirit which indicates right relations between humanity, cultivated land, and wild land. He writes, “The enduring preservation of flourishing vegetation is threatened just as much by unrighteousness between human beings and by the consequences of that unrighteousness, as by ‘conflictual relations’ lying within nature itself: for example, wild animals, locust plagues, sicknesses, and natural catastrophes.” Therefore, providence does not extend to the rest of creation simply because we are ourselves animals but also because the fate of creation lies largely in the hands of human beings. Never has this been more true than today, and we can expect that the responsibility of human beings in the determination of the fate of the rest of creation will only grow.

The Spirit appears in moments of hopelessness and danger, which, Welker notes, change over time. In the twentieth century, nuclear destruction was the greatest threat. While that threat still exists, the twenty-first century is perhaps better characterized by the threat of environmental destruction. Environmental degradation is the demon our world is possessed with today. Unfortunately, attempts to save the environment are often not driven by the Holy Spirit even when they appear to be. Rather, we have tried to drive out demons with demons just as Jesus was (wrongly) accused of driving out demons by the ruler of the demons,

57 Isa. 11:6.
58 Welker, God the Spirit, 170.
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid., 303.
Beelzebul.⁶¹ The Holy Spirit acts in these instances “beyond all human attempts to bring help”⁶² but not as a hero or institutionalized power.⁶³ If the Spirit reaches creation (and if providence reaches creation), it will be through concrete acts by individuals who claim no power for themselves.

Despite our increasing responsibility for creation, at this point in time we hold very little responsibility for creation beyond our own planet. Even acting under the Spirit, one’s actions are unlikely to have any impact on distant galaxies. Therefore, while Welker aids our understanding of how providence extends to animals, eco-systems, natural formations, and weather patterns on our own planet, Caputo’s own cosmo-theopoetics better extends providence to creation beyond earth.

5. Providence Requires Human Participation/Cooperation

The fifth criterion, that providence must allow human beings to participate in the plan, is the foundation of Caputo’s theological system. It is also more easily addressed than the previous criteria because its focus is on the unique role of human beings. It is ultimately human beings who are capable of turning the insistence of God into the existence of God in Caputo’s system. Providence not only includes the participation of human beings but requires it every step of the way. Caputo’s repeated refrain is that God insists, but we are responsible for God’s

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⁶¹ Ibid., 211-215. See also Mark 3:22; Matt. 9:34, 12:24; and Luke 11:15.

⁶² Welker, God the Spirit, 217.

⁶³ Ibid., 215.
Welker attributes this to the self-giving nature of the Spirit. For the Spirit to be the Spirit, it cannot speak for itself. In other words, it is part of the nature of God to remain hidden and to only liberate through the actions of human beings who also act on behalf of others.

Importantly, though, the necessity of human participation is balanced by the impossibility of what human beings are called to do. When the call is answered, it still has the character of an event. As Welker writes, “The Spirit’s action is a process that human beings cannot ‘make happen’, cannot manage, cannot bring under their control” despite the fact that the Spirit only acts through actual human beings. When one responds to the call or acts in the name of the Spirit, the event exceeds what is possible by human standards. There is a flash of God’s existence. Since the event is impossible and unwarranted by the human actions themselves, the event of God is grace. Consequently, Caputo’s heavy reliance on human participation does not result in Pelagianism. As B. Keith Putt writes, “Caputo’s theology of salvation reprises—admittedly with some questionable inconsistencies—a classical Protestant perspective, predicated upon the Apostle Paul, that—salvation comes by grace through faith, not by works or according to some celestial economy, but ultimately from the

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64 Caputo writes, “The name of God is the name of an insistent call or solicitation that is visited upon the world, and whether God comes to exist depends upon whether we resist or assist this insistence.” Caputo, *Insistence of God*, 14.

65 Welker, *God the Spirit*, 225.

66 Those who receive the Spirit change themselves and others through “free self-withdrawal for the benefit of their fellow creatures.” Welker, *God the Spirit*, 282.

incomprehensible extravagance of a Godly gift.”  

I agree with Putt and only demur to suggest that for Caputo the theological virtue of hope takes priority over faith, so it is by grace through hope that one is saved.

6. Christ is the Supreme Example

Since God does not exist in Caputo’s theological system, the role and meaning of Jesus Christ must be reimagined alongside providence. Caputo refers to Jesus Christ as “Jesus” rather than “Christ” to emphasize his humanness (or even animal-ness). While it would be incorrect to call Jesus “God” in Caputo’s system, Jesus does represent responding to the insistence of God. The event we call “God” happens through Jesus’ response, and in that sense God exists through Jesus, but that does not make Jesus divine. Therefore, we cannot answer the question of whether Christ is the supreme example of cooperating with God in providence. Nevertheless, as we will see, Jesus, particularly on the cross, is still the supreme example of responding to the call and bringing the event of God into the world. 69

According to Caputo, Jesus reveals what resurrection means as he is dying on the cross. Central to the meaning of resurrection is the value of life for the sake of life. Therefore, living for a reward in heaven or to avoid a punishment is contrary to the idea of resurrection. 70

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69 In chapter four, Christ was described as the supreme example of providence in two ways: (1) the incarnation is the ultimate sign of God’s omnibenevolence and (2) Christ is the perfect example of human participation in God’s plan. While the way Jesus responds to the call does reveal the goodness of the call, in Caputo’s system the second way is more relevant.

70 Not all Christian theologians agree with Caputo that belief in an afterlife cheapens or devalues our lives on earth. One notable objector is James Cone who argues that although heaven has been used to manipulate compliance, the concept of heaven can also motivate justice in the here and now. He writes, “To believe in heaven is to refuse to accept hell on earth.” James H. Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 40th anniversary ed. (New York: Orbis Books, 2010), 149.
Caputo writes, “We live in order to live; we live life for life, not for something else.”\(^{71}\) To receive more life, new life, is grace.\(^{72}\)

Caputo is not very concerned with a literal resurrection of Jesus. For Caputo, the resurrection occurs in the event of forgiveness on the cross when Jesus forgives those who have crucified him in a moment where he clearly has nothing to gain.\(^{73}\) It is forgiveness absolutely freely given and therefore a perfect response to the insistence of God. The Spirit of God was brought into existence in that moment and, as an act of the Spirit, it was one of the most public acts there has ever been because it is still being recalled and witnessed two millennia later. If we are to talk of the post-resurrection Jesus, Welker is helpful. According to Welker, Jesus is alive, not as a natural human body, but in the Spirit.\(^{74}\) This transformation from body to Spirit means the resurrection is nothing without the witness of followers because the Spirit does not speak for itself.\(^{75}\)

The witness of the event begins immediately with the robber to Jesus’ side who is liberated through Jesus’ impossible forgiveness.\(^{76}\) Of course, we know the other robber is still able to resist the insistence of God. While the event changes the world in an impossible way, the resurrection that occurs is not life-everlasting in the typical Christian sense. The call of the

\(^{71}\) Caputo, *Insistence of God*, 232.

\(^{72}\) Ibid., 237.

\(^{73}\) Ibid., 236.

\(^{74}\) Polkinghorne and Welker, *Faith in the Living God*, 60.

\(^{75}\) Ibid., 62.

\(^{76}\) Caputo, *Insistence of God*, 236.
name of God/life does not lead to life going on and on. “We love life not despite but under the very condition of its mortality, of being a transient gift, a lily that lasts but a day, a lily of the field that cares not for itself, that neither sows nor reaps but is adorned with the very glory of God.”77 Just as the work of the Spirit does not remove our finitude according to Welker,78 the event does not remove our mortality according to Caputo.

Jesus’s resurrection is a reminder to look for resurrection, in the form of forgiveness, justice, beauty, etc., in our daily lives rather than at the end of life. Caputo writes, “The space of the world is bent and inflected by a religious genius like Jesus, by his words and deeds, by the event that takes place in and through his life and death, which ripples across the world in the memory and the promise of his name.”79 The resurrection of Jesus is a rebirth for this world rather than a promise for the next. Caputo refers to this as a quotidian grace, a concept fleshed-out by Ivone Gebara, although Caputo does not cite her.80 Caputo explains that quotidian grace can attune us to the insistence of God and enable us to see the fragments of the kingdom which are happening now.81 Gebara, similarly, passes over the notion of an eschatological resurrection in favor of everyday resurrections.82 She writes, “Salvation will not

77 Ibid., 237.
78 Welker, God the Spirit, 203.
79 Caputo, Insistence of God, 239.
80 Ibid.
81 Caputo, Weakness of God, 167.
82 Ivone Gebara, Out of the Depths: Women’s Experience of Evil and Salvation, trans. Ann Patrick Ware (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 129-131. Gebara argues that eschatological understandings of resurrection which depend on an omnipotent God are often used to maintain the status quo of power relations in the world.
be something outside the fabric of life but will take place within the heart of it."\(^83\) This is a salvation that only occurs in fragments; it is not eternal or universal.\(^84\) Her examples include “beautiful music that calms our spirit, a novel that keeps us company, a glass of beer or a cup of coffee shared with another . . . a baby long awaited or a love letter that brings us back to life.”\(^85\) Within Scripture as well, salvation comes through the ordinary: sharing food, welcoming children, respecting women and strangers, and socializing over a meal.\(^86\) Caputo’s own list of moments in Jesus’ life which revealed the kingdom of God highlights many of the same actions as Gebara’s:

The kingdom takes form in the theopoetics of Yeshua, in the memory and the promise of what he said and did, in his words of unconditional forgiveness, of mercy for the least among us, of freedom for the oppressed, of good news for the poor and the coming year of the jubilee. The kingdom comes by reaching out to the outcasts, sitting down to table with the outsiders, healing the lame and making the blind to see, driving out the demons that possess us all.\(^87\)

These are all moments where someone responded to the insistence of God and the event of the name of God broke through. And, these are precisely kinds of acts Jesus called for and lived.

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\(^83\) Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 121.

\(^84\) Ibid., 123-124.

\(^85\) Ibid., 124.

\(^86\) Ibid., 128.

\(^87\) Caputo, *Folly of God*, 115.
7. Humans are Responsible for Sin

This criterion is straightforward in Caputo’s system. As Caputo states quite clearly, “When I deny that God is an agent-being who does things, I am saying that the only thing we know about agency is human beings doing things under certain names, in response to certain claims made upon them.”\cite{Caputo, Insistence of God, 107} He continues, “The weakness of God means that what is done in the name of God is done by human beings in the name of ‘God’.”\cite{Caputo, Weakness of God, 181} Since God cannot intervene in the world and can only insist, God cannot be held responsible for the evil that human beings bring into the world. Sin, at least some sins, bring about irreparable damage. God can neither prevent these acts nor correct them after the fact. Caputo adds, “And if sometimes some good somewhere comes out of it, it would be an obscenity to suggest that that is either an explanation or a justification.”\cite{Caputo, Weakness of God, 181} The permanence of human sinfulness is precisely what makes forgiveness an event.

Likewise, Welker speaks of the hiddenness of the Holy Spirit.\cite{Welker, God the Spirit, 4} The Spirit is quiet, and consequently many people have stopped even looking for the Spirit.\cite{Welker, God the Spirit, 4} Since the Spirit does not impose itself, “the silent, powerless servant of God [the Holy Spirit] does not bring a specific political or moral program to bear.”\footnote{Welker, God the Spirit, 4.} The work of the Spirit ends up looking different

\footnote{Caputo, Insistence of God, 107.}
\footnote{Ibid.}
\footnote{Caputo, Weakness of God, 181.}
\footnote{Recall that Welker does not understand God to be omni-causing or equally present in all places and times. See Polkinghorne and Welker, Faith in the Living God, 80, 123.}
\footnote{Ibid., 132.}
everywhere it emerges because rather than having a specific agenda, the Spirit allows itself to be mediated through particular individuals, times, and cultures.\footnote{Ibid., 133.} The upside of this approach is diversity. The downside is that the Spirit cannot solve our problems once and for all and we are still able to sin. Welker explains that sin counters the work of the Spirit. “According to the understanding of the biblical traditions, ‘sin’ is that action, that behavior, or that posture and exercise of influence by which—over and above every concrete delinquency and misdeed—the foundations of life-promoting behavior and the possibilities of repentance are destroyed.”\footnote{Ibid., 316.} In other words, to sin is to resist the event and therefore to fail to respond to the call for beauty, justice, hospitality, etc. Welker specifically names the destruction of the environment as an example where sin has closed off even the hope for a healthy planet.\footnote{Ibid., 317.} He comes to the same conclusion as Caputo—that forgiveness is the only way forward.\footnote{Ibid.}

8. Providence Provides Hope for the Future

The final criterion for a doctrine of providence is a sticky one for Caputo, but not because he ignores or rejects the subject. Hope is of the utmost importance in his work. It is a central theme and a concept he is constantly defending. Our three original models revealed that a doctrine of providence must provide hope for the future. This was accomplished in most cases by ensuring a good end despite human sinfulness and the tragedies of finite life. Caputo,
though, offers no guarantee of a good end and no after-life to escape from finitude. And, yet, he claims that his theological system is about nothing if it is not about hope.

Caputo ends his spiritual autobiography, *Hoping Against Hope: Confessions of a Postmodern Pilgrim*, with a chapter entitled “Dreaming, Praying, Hoping, Smiling.” In the section on hoping, Caputo proclaims that it is not just we who hope, but God also. Reflecting on that hope, he writes, “Hope means that things are neither steered mightily unto good by an invisible wisdom nor hollowed out at their center by some primordial catastrophe and doomed to fail. Hope means that things are just unstable, risky, nascent, natal, betokening neither an absolute plenum nor an absolute void.”98 In Caputo’s system the doctrine of providence cannot provide hope founded on a guaranteed good end, but it can provide hope, for us and for God, by refusing to accept a closed future. Choosing to hope means choosing to listen for the calls and respond rather than accept that only what is possible is possible. Perhaps the impossible is also possible. Perhaps something unbelievable will happen.

Caputo sees this as a more authentic hope, a stronger hope, a “hoping against hope,”99 or maybe even the hope of hopes. Hope itself is an impossible event that rearranges the world and of which one cannot make sense.100 In the end, we hope because we hope. We have hope in life because life is worth hoping for. “The life of hope is hope in life itself.”101

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99 Rom. 4:18.
100 Caputo, *Weakness of God*, 249.
Reimagined Providence

Providence typically refers to a guaranteed plan that God has for creation that will ensure that all things come to a good end. Since there is no guarantee of a good end in Caputo’s theological system, providence must be reimagined or rejected. On the one hand, by using the eight criteria for a doctrine of providence, we can see that a doctrine of providence is still possible within Caputo’s weak God theology. Providence can be reimagined within this system, although providence will look different than it does the models previously explored. On the other hand, Caputo’s work could also be used to propose a Christianity free from providence.

Rejecting the God of ontotheology naturally seems to lend itself to rejecting providence as well. Caputo’s weak God theology does not offer the foresight, guidance, or guarantees that providence typically implies. Nevertheless, there are two reasons why reimagining providence may be more appropriate than rejecting providence. First, although the details of providence are altered, as we have seen all throughout this chapter, something within Caputo’s system is still serving the function that providence serves in more traditional articulations of theology. In this chapter that “something” has been identified as the call or the Spirit, which enables human participation in the kingdom of God and allows for hope. Approaching the question of rejecting or reimagining providence from the perspective of systematic theology, it is reasonable to call that which functions as providence by the name “providence,” and thus reimagine providence. Second, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter, many Christians are firm in their desire to hold on to a notion of providence, even when their understanding of providence cannot hold up to scrutiny or does not sufficiently enable participation and ensure
hope. Consequently, approaching the question of rejecting or reimagining providence from the perspective of pastoral theology, one is again led to reimagine providence for those Christians who already hold the doctrine dear. While either option, rejecting providence or reimagining providence, is a valid interpretation of Caputo’s work, the rest of this section and the conclusion will focus on reimagining providence.

In reimagined providence, God has no plan. In fact, there is no God. God does not exist. And yet, although we cannot say much about the caller, there is a call. Responding to the call brings about an event which opens up the impossible. The call calls us to justice, hospitality, forgiveness, to the stranger, and to life. But, of course, a call on its own is powerless and unable to act directly in the world. In this reimagined providence, all agency must come through creation—there is no direct intervention by God. Human beings must fully participate in bringing about the kingdom of God, if there is to be one.

The call functions like the Holy Spirit. It is where God is happening in the world. Without forcing anything, the Holy Spirit allows us to hear how we might bring God into the world. When human beings respond to the call, the impossible can occur. The impossible is an event that, even after the fact, is unbelievable. Jesus offering forgiveness while dying on the cross is the sort of unbelievable event worthy of the name of God. Consequently, the hope that providence normally provides through certainty and stability becomes hope in the impossible when providence is reimagined. Therefore, it is a hope against hope or a hope without a foundation or reason. We might call reimagined providence a preposterous

102 Of course, not being able to say much about the caller has not stopped theologians from saying plenty about the caller and even naming the caller, “God.”
providence. Nevertheless, the hope which reimagined providence provides motivates further action, further responding to the call, and further participation. The experience of life makes us want more life, simply for the sake of life.

If we choose to reimagine providence rather than reject it, we find that in Caputo’s system providence focuses less on the eschaton than the original three models we examined in chapters one, two, and three. While it does dream of the kingdom of God, the work of providence is not in dreams, but in the quotidian. Reimagined providence acts only in the present. It is the call and response to aesthetics, ethics, beauty, and life in the day-to-day. Reimagined providence is an invitation to life in the Spirit—to life lived in response to the call.
CONCLUSION
PREPOSTEROUS PROVIDENCE

The previous chapter laid out a reimagined doctrine of providence, which while meeting all of the criteria gleaned from the original three models of Paul Helm, Michael Dodds, and Joseph Bracken, nevertheless looked substantially different. In John Caputo’s theological system, God does not have a plan. Human beings participate by responding to or resisting the call to justice, hospitality, and other dimensions of the kingdom of God. Hope is not grounded in the certainty of a good end, but rather in the grace of the event.

Caputo believes that this approach better allows for the celebration of life for life’s sake while also accepting death. We may want some evidence, however, that this approach is actually good for something—that it actually helps people live in the world. In other words, where is the evidence that the reimagined providence described in chapter six actually functions as providence is meant to? Does reimagined providence provide hope and motivate participation in bringing about the kingdom of God? Does this model of providence disclose possibilities other models of providence obscure? Caputo writes, “We will only be able to tell afterward if God has come. So theology will always be after the fact, and God’s providential foresight will all be reconstructed retroactively, after we see what has come, even while the
So, we will have to look backwards in order to see any evidence of providence. Consequently, this conclusion will utilize a case study to look backwards for the kind of providence we might find in Caputo’s theological system. Through the case study, I will also show that the model of providence developed in chapter six offers an interpretation of the world which is superior to the Calvinist, Thomistic, and process models explored earlier.

I have chosen Hurricane Katrina for this case study. Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans almost twelve years ago and seems to provide just the right amount of temporal distance to begin to see the workings of providence. In reimagined providence, providence will come in the form of impossible events. Events which are still unbelievable even twelve years after their occurrence. We are looking for the preposterous. Nevertheless, we must keep in mind that none of the original three models of providence claim one can expect to see an overarching pattern to one’s life or human history (even if they claim there ultimately is an overarching pattern). Being able to recognize providence is not a criterion for the presence of providence. Furthermore, Michael Welker observes that sometimes the work of the Holy Spirit (and work of providence) is misidentified for generations. Consequently, an analysis of providence during and in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina can only be provisional.

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Case Study: Hurricane Katrina

Hurricane Katrina hit the coast of Louisiana on August 29, 2005 with winds reaching 140mph.\(^4\) Widespread flooding and displacement resulted, especially in New Orleans.\(^5\) Twelve years after this natural disaster, most are aware that the damage was magnified by a failure to prepare and properly secure the levee system. As Ivor Van Heerden explains only a year after the hurricane, there was a “systemic failure on the part of our society.”\(^6\) To make matters worse, President George W. Bush and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) failed to provide adequate aid in a timely manner while racial divisions in New Orleans prevented just distribution of that aid.\(^7\) Even the natural elements of the disaster were


\(^7\) Van Heerdan and Bryan write, “Assorted government agencies had ignored years of excellent science, failed to heed warning after warning, failed to plan for the disaster, failed to act when it did happen, and, if the past is indeed prologue, would probably now fail to rebuild New Orleans properly and assure its safety from another catastrophe.” Van Heerden and Byran, Storm, 8-9. Christopher Cooper and Robert Block chronicled the government’s failures in Disaster: Hurricane Katrina and the Failure of Homeland Security. They claim the federal government has little excuse because “Hurricane Katrina traveled toward its destination at roughly walking speed, giving federal officials days to plot a counterstrategy. If intelligence drives Homeland Security’s disaster-response planning and execution, few calamities provide better advance intelligence than a hurricane.” Christopher Cooper and Robert Block, Disaster: Hurricane Katrina and the Failure of Homeland Security (New York: Times Books, 2006), xiii, xv. In Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color Disaster, the failure of the government to activate military emergency services that were already in place off the coast of New Orleans is particularly highlighted. See Michael Eric Dyson, Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2006), 109-127. Dyson’s book also examines issues of race.
exacerbated by global warming. Theologically, then, Hurricane Katrina cannot be considered merely a natural evil, as it is also the result of sin.

With these basic facts on the table, we can consider the Calvinist, Thomistic, and process models of providence described in chapters one, two, and three by Helm, Dodds, and Bracken. The shortcomings of these models are largely due to their reliance on an ontotheological conception of God. Consequently, considering the ways in which Caputo critiques ontotheology also reveals the shortcomings of these models of providence. First, Caputo critiques ontotheology on conceptual grounds. Caputo’s reflections on the 2004 earthquake/tsunami offer us a starting point. There, Caputo suggests that if there is providence, it will not be found in a God who could have prevented the tragedy nor in a God who believes the tragedy is a just punishment for human sinfulness. These are problematic conceptions of God because they call God’s omnibenevolence into question. From a Calvinist perspective, God could have foreordained from the beginning of time that Hurricane Katrina

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8 The number of severe storms has increased along with global warming. In fact, 2005, the year Hurricane Katrina hit, was the first year the National Weather Service named storms all the way from A to W...and they still had five storms to go. While the relationship between global warming and meteorology is complex, research has indicated that we can expect both stronger and more frequent storms as the atmosphere and oceans warm. The rising sea level, caused by the melting ice caps, also increases the destructive power of coastal storms. John McQuaid and Mark Schleifstein, Path of Destruction: The Devastation of New Orleans and the Coming Age of Superstorms (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2006), 345-362.

9 It is impossible to ever definitively label a particular act by a particular individual as sinful, since one’s motivations, intentions, worldview, and possibilities are never fully known. However, the circumstances which elevated the destructive impact of Hurricane Katrina did develop within a context of social sin where the actual and potential needs of the residents of New Orleans and the surrounding areas were disregarded.

not happen at all. From a Thomistic perspective, God could have intervened through secondary causes to mitigate the damage. From a process perspective, God could have lured actual occasions to use their creativity in unselfish ways, thus creating a ripple effect throughout overlapping societies and ultimately overcoming the social sin present in those societies.

While all three models raise questions about God’s involvement, Helm’s Calvinist model of providence is the most problematic because it is the only model which suggests tragedy might be used as form of punishment. This interpretation was widespread after Hurricane Katrina. The most well-known example comes from The 700 Club host, Pat Robertson, who suggested that Hurricane Katrina was due to America’s support of abortion and the difficulty of getting nominated to the Supreme Court as a pro-life candidate. While this line of thinking is meant to motivate action and reform, it is difficult to square with God’s omnibenevolence, which is central to the doctrine of providence. It seems an omnibenevolent God would try to

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12 Dodds, *Unchanging God of Love*, 196.


15 Dyson refers to this line of thinking as punitive theodicy and provides a number of examples of its occurrence after Hurricane Katrina. Dyson, *Come Hell or High Water*, 179-181.

stop tragedies from occurring. Even if good comes out of the tragedy (Helm, Dodds, and Bracken all insist that it will), it cannot undo the tragedy of the lives lost and destroyed.

The potential for greater good to come out of tragedy leads us directly to Caputo’s historical critique of ontotheology. This critique asks us to reflect on how the victims of Hurricane Katrina will be remembered. Caputo is concerned that totalizing metanarratives can erase the pain and suffering of the past. The lives lost become “worth it” because of a greater good that is gained. Somehow all events, those which appear good and those which appear bad or sinful, are contributing to a narrative in which good triumphs. While acts of heroism and beauty abound in the midst of any tragedy, including Hurricane Katrina (some examples are given below), it is difficult to see how any of them can undo the damage of 2,000 lives lost.¹⁷

Finally, Caputo offers an ethical critique of ontotheology. If all of our good actions are ultimately rewarded by eternal life, we are unable to act unconditionally. This means that one can never engage in an act of freely given hospitality, forgiveness, or justice. This is a problem if Caputo is correct that it is precisely these unconditional acts which bring God into the world and trigger events that open the impossible. Again, Helm’s Calvinist model runs into the greatest obstacles of the three because it relies on a compatibilist understanding of human freedom. While one does not necessarily act in order to receive a reward (Helm would be very cautious around that kind of Pelagian language), if one is coerced by God, one cannot act unconditionally either. Preserving the possibility of acting unconditionally allows for openings

of grace in the midst of an irredeemable tragedy such as Hurricane Katrina. We are given the opportunity to act as Jesus did on the cross when he forgave unconditionally.

The problem goes deeper than simply human freedom, though. Caputo worries that when one views one’s actions as judged by God, particular groups naturally begin to claim authority over the revelation of God’s will. This in turn leads to violence against other groups. It was not just Pat Robertson who claimed authority over God’s revelation in aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.18 Of course, Helm, Dodds, and Bracken would absolutely condemn religious violence and the extreme us-versus-them mentality that some religious leaders promoted after the hurricane. However, Bracken escapes this critique more successfully than the others by rejecting special providence and the idea that human beings, or a particular subset of human beings, are saved in a special way.

Caputo offers an alternative way of thinking about providence in relation to disasters such as Hurricane Katrina.19 While one could read his work as an attempt to dissolve the question of theodicy and, by extension, providence, his work can also be read as a reimagined providence. What might that look like? We know the occurrence of the disaster was partly natural and partly due to human sinfulness. If God can only insist but does not exist, God can

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19 Caputo, Weakness of God, xi.
do nothing about the natural evil component. Human beings, on the other hand, are responsible for sin and actually can affect the natural as well. As research on the effects of global warming continue, human beings have an increasing level of control and responsibility for what appears to be natural—including the strength and frequency of storms.\footnote{Again see McQuaid and Schleifstein, Path of Destruction, 345-362.} Human sinfulness, which for Caputo means resisting the call, is easy to see in Hurricane Katrina. The call of the name of God was resisted in the insufficient levee system, the systemic racism, the inadequate reaction of FEMA, and the unwillingness of society to address global warming.\footnote{Again, while it is difficult to assign individual blame for any of these destructive or negligent acts, these acts occurred within a culture of social sin where care for the poor/vulnerable, dignity of the human person, and care for creation were not given sufficient priority.} Some of these failures to respond to the call might also qualify as events of a negative sort. It is preposterous that New Orleans was not better prepared for Hurricane Katrina, especially since the storm was not even as bad as the “perfect storm” scientists had modeled and predicted.\footnote{The original computer-generated “perfect storm” used by FEMA was a category 5 hurricane named Pam. Disaster planning in New Orleans, however, focused on the possibility of a category 3 hurricane. Hurricane Katrina was category 4. Cooper and Block, Disaster, 15.} It is also preposterous that the USS \textit{Bataan}, a military ship equipped to offer fresh water, food, and medical services and which followed the storm in order to assist in an emergency, was left hamstrung due to never receiving an order to act from the federal government.\footnote{Dyson, \textit{Come Hell or High Water}, 119-120.}

Despite those evil events, the world-shattering nature of something like a hurricane opens many opportunities for responding to the call to go on living.\footnote{Caputo refers the tragedy of the sinking of the Titanic as a site of responding to the call, noting especially the band which kept playing until the end. See John D. Caputo, \textit{The Folly of God: A Theology of the Unconditional} (Salem: Polebridge Press, 2016), 41-43.} The preposterous events...
which occurred also include stories of preposterous perseverance in the face of death and destruction. For example, Byron LaFrance and his brother returned to their abandoned street and rebuilt their homes without any electricity or city services.\textsuperscript{25} Another survivor, Rowena Duplessis, faced not only Hurricane Katrina, but also the death of her husband and suicide of her son within one year. She lost her home in the hurricane and the trailer she moved into was robbed. Yet, she continues to find hope and the resolve to continue living.\textsuperscript{26} Psychologist Lisa Miller attributes Duplessis’ response to forgiveness and gratitude,\textsuperscript{27} which could both be responses to the call Caputo describes. Perhaps recognizing the preposterous nature of moving forward after so much loss, Duplessis attributes her strength to the grace of God.\textsuperscript{28}

Many more examples of people responding to calls could be given, but the aspect of reimagined providence that is most helpful when thinking about Hurricane Katrina is that reimagined providence remains unfinished. The call of God is still coming, and the responses which may open up new preposterous events may still be to come as well. We do not know if a wonderful turn of events might breathe new life into New Orleans or anyplace else. Since we are talking about things that are preposterous anyhow, it is never too late for everything to suddenly look different. When looking back at a tragedy like Hurricane Katrina where so many things went wrong and so many people and groups resisted the call, the open future is

\textsuperscript{25} McQuaid and Schleifstein, \textit{Path of Destruction}, 336.


\textsuperscript{27} Szabdo, “A Katrina Survivor.” Lisa Miller is the director of the Spirituality Mind Body Institute at Columbia University, Teachers College.

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
certainly a source of hope. There is still time to build the kingdom of God; we can still participate in providence. Furthermore, unlike in more traditional models of providence where tragedies must somehow be redeemed for a greater good, in reimagined providence the tragedy can be remembered as simply a tragedy.\textsuperscript{29} It is not incorporated into the kingdom of God, but rather it stands as a reminder that the fullness of the kingdom of God was not and is not here yet.

\textbf{The Spirit of a Weak God}

The global warming crisis which has increased the possibility of super-storms is far from over. Human beings will face the cascading effects of environmental degradation for the foreseeable future. Of course, just as the nuclear threat gave way to the climate change threat, new threats are also likely to define future generations. As new threats emerge, even if God is understood as weak, human beings will likely continue searching for signs of providence and models of providence that meet the challenges of the day. Fortunately, a weak God still has a Spirit that calls. The Spirit cannot guide hurricanes or stop them from coming, but human beings can respond to the call. God will depend on creation’s response, but we can still hope that creation will respond. When it does, Caputo tells us an event we might call “God” will open up in ways beyond our imagining. It will be an experience of grace—an experience of providence.

The Spirit of a weak God combats the problems of ontotheology including an omnipotent super-being God who allows evil in the world, a totalizing view of human history, and an unethical use of religious truth which excludes the Other. Divine providence, though, need not be a casualty of the critique of ontotheology. The resulting theological interpretation opens the door for a reimagined model of providence which is preferable to Calvinist, Thomistic, and process models of providence. The Spirit of a weak God empowers human participation through the call to the impossible, unlike ontotheological models which stifle one’s ability to act unconditionally and raise serious questions about theodicy. The Spirit of a weak God also secures hope through the grace of the event. Unlike ontotheological models of providence, the building of the kingdom will not result in a totalizing, metanarrative. Tragedy will not always result in a greater good. Nevertheless, although victory is not guaranteed and is certainly not possible without our response, hope remains. Caputo might say along with Julian of Norwich, “All shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well...perhaps.” If Christians still hope and participate in the building of the kingdom, perhaps that is providence enough.
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