BECOMING TRUTH ABOUT 'TRUE BECOMING':

PROVIDENCE, CAUSALITY, AND SCIENCE IN A SECULAR AGE

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To my fiancée Kristin Saylor, to whom I must believe that God, in her mercy, has led me. I am indeed delighted.

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DISCARD THIS PAGE

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1

Context

In his landmark tome *A Secular Age*, philosopher Charles Taylor begins by noting the difficulty of describing precisely the nature of the secular age we citizens of the "North Atlantic world" all agree we inhabit.[1] His attempt to do so leads him to identify three senses of the term "secularity": (1) "in terms of public spaces" that "have been allegedly emptied of God, or any reference to ultimate reality";[2] (2) in terms of "the falling off of religious belief and practice, in people turning away from God, and no longer going to Church";[3] and (3) in terms "of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace."[4] Of secularity in this last sense, he continues,

> I may find it inconceivable that I would abandon my faith, but there are others, including possibly some very close to me, whose way of living I cannot in all honesty just dismiss as depraved, or blind, or unworthy, who have no faith (at least not in God, or the transcendent). Belief in God is no longer axiomatic. There are alternatives. And this will also likely mean that at least in certain milieux, it may be hard to sustain one's faith. There will be people who feel bound to give it up, even though they mourn its loss. This has been a recognizable experience in our

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[1] Taylor (2007), 1.
[2] Taylor (2007), 2.
[3] Taylor (2007), 2.
[4] Taylor (2007), 3.

societies, at least since the mid-nineteenth century. There will be many others to whom faith never even seems an eligible possibility. There are certainly millions today of whom this is true.[5]

This essay is a theology for our secular age in Taylor's third sense.[6] As a work of philosophical theology, it is directed primarily to the faithful—in this case, the Christian faithful, both those for whom it would be "inconceivable" to "abandon [the] faith" *and* those for whom it "may be hard to sustain." Indeed, the peril but also the privilege of living a life of engagement in a secular age is the porosity of the boundary between these two populations.[7] But this essay is directed, in a secondary sense, to those no longer struggling to keep the faith and those to whom it "never even seem[ed] an eligible possibility." To that end, it also does the work of an *apologia*. It is an account or even defense of the faith that takes the objections of non-believers into account and attempts to address them in a serious way. We will leave open the question of whether or not this is an advisable practice rhetorically, epistemologically, and evangelically. Suffice it to say that, without considering this secondary audience—with whom the faithful share more than we are often attentive to—*I* believe we fail to adequately account for what Tillich called "the temporal situation in which the eternal truth must be received."[8]

This essay is also a theology for our *scientific* age, and Taylor is helpful here in insisting that science played a smaller part in the process of secularization than is generally believed. He tells us that his account will avoid "subtraction stories," recountings of the history of secularization that present it purely in terms of human cultures abandoning "certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge."[9] This is not the place to debate the strength of Taylor's position that something positive and constructive must also have driven secularization, that the process was not purely a *via remotionis*. But if we are inclined to trust that insight, we should take note here of how his position treats the role of science:

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[5]Taylor (2007), 3.

[6]Though, as such, it may happen to be suitable for addressing some of the challenges posed to the churches by the first and second senses as well.

[7]Perilous because faith is a gift worth keeping, privileged because that gift is strengthened by the experience of going there-and-back across the threshold and of staying in conversation with those who have not returned.

[8]Tillich (1973), 3.

[9]Taylor (2007), 22.

A common "subtraction" story attributes everything to disenchantment. First, science gave us "naturalistic" explanation of the world. And then people began to look for alternatives to God. But things didn't work that way. The new mechanistic science of the seventeenth century wasn't seen as necessarily threatening to God. It was to the enchanted universe and magic. *It also began to pose a problem for particular providences.*[10]

In other words, Taylor encourages us (1) to be skeptical of those more popular accounts, given by exclusive humanists and often also by the faithful, which portray the Western decline of religion as the steady retreat of belief with the advance of scientific explanation at its heels, and (2) to consider, as one *legitimate* arena of important reflection on this topic, modernity's evolving ideas about the providence of God.[11] A few comments on these directives will help continue to sketch the context in which the North Atlantic churches find themselves, the context to which we direct this theology of providence.

1.1 New Atheism and its opponents in the public sphere

Typical of the temptation toward subtraction stories and their underlying logic is Richard Dawkins's description of the progress science has made in explaining the mystery of life's existence. In *The Blind Watchmaker*, Dawkins insists that William Paley's 1802 argument for the existence of God by appeal to the complexity of God's organic creations (i.e., the watchmaker argument) carried significant weight in its day.[12] Before Darwin, he says, one couldn't be "an intellectually fulfilled atheist."[13] If we observe something that is "statistically-improbable-in-a-direction-specified-without-hindsight,"[14] we'd better try to find an explanation for it, a

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[10]Taylor (2007), 26, emphasis added.

[11]See in particular his Chapter 6, "Providential Deism" (221–269), part of the section under the larger rubric of "The Turning Point."

[12]See Paley (1860).

[13]Dawkins (1987), 6.

[14]Dawkins (1987), 15.

"mechanism" that can serve as an answer to the question "how does it work?"[15] Before Darwin, the best we could do was to say that the existence of living beings could be explained by no plausible mechanism except for design and creation by a Being we call God. Part of Dawkins' point in *The Blind Watchmaker* is that this is no longer the case: "our own existence once presented the greatest of all mysteries, but ... it is a mystery no longer because it is solved. Darwin and Wallace solved it, though we shall continue to add footnotes to their solution for a while yet."[16] In other words, Dawkins reduces the concept of God to what he would later call "the God Hypothesis": "there exists a superhuman, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us."[17] God is primarily an explanation.[18]

Dawkins is not alone in advancing this narrative and the arguments associated with it. He is joined by Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett, and others. The group has come to be called the New Atheists.[19] As my framing of the Dawkins critique above should suggest, the theological community sees no shortage of chinks in the New Atheists' armor. The concept of God is of course richer and more robust than the rather one-dimensional portrayal of God-as-physical-hypothesis. It's a fair assessment to say that the New Atheists are better public polemicists than philosophers, and writers such as David Bentley Hart, John Haught, Keith Ward, and Ian Markham have issued critical replies.[20]

My conviction in this essay is that replies to the New Atheists are apologetically necessary but rhetorically challenging. Haught rightly observes that New Atheism's "engagement with theology lies at about the same level of reflection on faith that one can find in contemporary

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[15]Dawkins (1987), 13.

[16]Dawkins (1987), ix.

[17]Dawkins (2008), 52.

[18]For an extended critique of this mistaken assumption, see Terry Eagleton's Terry Lectures. Early on he writes, "Dawkins falsely considers that Christianity offers a rival view of the universe to science . . . For Thomas Aquinas, by contrast, God the Creator is not a hypothesis about how the world originated. It does not compete, say, with the theory that the universe resulted from a random fluctuation in a quantum vacuum." Eagleton (2009), 6.

[19]Harris (2005, 2008); Hitchens (2009); Dennett (2007). I would want to add to this list of important books the final by Dawkins' disciple Douglas Adams, whose sudden death removed him too soon from a conversation he had become more and more committed to and had participated in more amiably than his colleagues. See Adams (2002).

[20]Hart (2009); Haught (2007); Ward (2009b,a); Markham (2010).

creationist and fundamentalist literature. This is not surprising since it is from creationists and intelligent design theists that the new atheists seem to have garnered much of their understanding of religious faith."[21] These are kinder words than come from Hart, who calls Harris's *End of Faith* "little more than a concatenation of shrill, petulant assertions"[22] and who singles out one chapter as "reminiscent of nothing so much as a recklessly ambitious undergraduate essay."[23] Both authors' observations are fair enough, but I wonder if the latter's do more harm that good. Hart may be too successful in his attempt to beat the New Atheists at their own game; he shouts back brilliantly, but he still shouts.

It is certainly true that Christians must enter the conversation, if for no other reason than to achieve comparable reach. But it is worth noting that our path needn't be as stark as Hart's. An attractive alternative is available. I believe it to be a characteristically Anglican path, the one modeled by the likes of Richard Hooker, F. D. Maurice, William Temple, and Rowan Williams, to name but a few representatives. It is a path of generosity. Those walking it declare, with Maurice, that the "acknowledgment of a God who beareth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things,—who has been long suffering with all His creatures and long-suffering with us,—will make us tremble to deal harshly with the struggles and doubts—how much more with the convictions—of our fellow human-beings."[24] This approach grounds the task of apologetics—and, when necessary, polemics—in thanksgiving for one's opponent, in a desire to make common cause wherever possible and to refuse to dismiss that opponent as, to return to Charles Taylor's language, "depraved, or blind, or unworthy." This choice represents its own rhetorical strategy, of course. But the strategy is grounded in a trust that the most powerful arguments we can make will also witness to the love of Christ in the world, a Love that doodles in the sand while the self-righteous crowds disperse, a Love that refuses to pronounce easy judgment.[25]

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[21] Haught (2007), xi.
[22] Hart (2009), 8.
[23] Hart (2009), 9.
[24] Maurice (1998), 210–211.
[25] See John 8:1–11.

Notice that this approach sometimes makes the apologist appear to be weak, or even mistaken. Williams himself provides an example in an interview conducted by Dawkins for a program on Darwin for BBC Channel 4.[26] Because both Williams' approach and the interview's subject matter are so germane to this essay, it is worth quoting an account of it at some length:

> Dawkins asks the archbishop of Canterbury if he really believes in miracles such as the virgin birth and the resurrection, happenings in which the laws of physics and biology are suspended. Well, not literally, says Williams. [Note: He says no such thing.] But, says Dawkins, pouncing, surely Williams believes that these are not just metaphors? No, says the archbishop, they are not just metaphors, they are openings in history, "spaces" when history opens up to its own depths, and something like what we call a "miracle" might occur. Dawkins rightly says that this sounds very nice but is surely nothing more than poetic language. Williams rather shamefacedly agrees. [Note: Williams agrees that this is poetic language but certainly *not* that it is "nothing more than" that.] The scene is amusing because both men are so obviously arguing past each other, and are so obviously arguing about language and the role of metaphor. Dawkins comes off as the victor, because he has the easier task, and holds the literalist high ground: either the resurrection happened or it didn't; either these words mean something or they do not. Williams seems awkwardly trapped between a need to turn his words into metaphor and a desire to retain some element of literal content.[27]

Of course, we should watch the video for ourselves before accepting Wood's conclusions. When I first saw it several years ago, my admittedly biased interpretation was that Dawkins was the one who had been outmaneuvered, despite the considerable advantages of his editorial control and conspicuous voice-over. Williams seeks first and foremost to affirm the important insight in Dawkins' perspective, that God's constant intervention in cosmic and biological

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[26]Dawkins (2009). See sdanaher (2008) for the clip discussed below.
[27]Wood (2011), bracketed commentary added.

evolutionary processes would, in Williams's words, "rather suggest[] that God couldn't have made a very good job making the laws of physics in the first place, if he constantly needs to be adjusting the system" from outside.[28] He starts not by saying "you're wrong about *X*" but, rather, "you're right about *Y*." If, in going on to affirm the virgin birth and other miracles, Williams "seems awkwardly trapped between a need to turn his words into metaphor and a desire to retain some element of literal content," it is because he believes he inhabits this tight space with the truth itself. As we shall see, the "mismatch" Dawkins identifies does not seem so irreconcilable if both the reliability of natural law and the breaking through of the Eternal Word in history are both communicative of God's faithfulness. But this is not an available alternative to someone who understands God with respect to the laws of physics and not the other way around. It is Dawkins's prerogative to understand the incarnation as a "cheap conjuring trick," and it is evidence that he is indeed talking past Williams. But I cannot agree with Wood that Williams does the same to Dawkins; indeed, Williams goes to great pains to avoid such a misstep, and it is to Williams's credit that he is willing to have this generosity interpreted as shamefacedness. What Williams courageously models is a way to join the conversation that avoids Hart's tendency toward histrionics and attempts to steer the conversation in a productive direction. Not *all* of the New Atheists critiques are easily dismissed, so we will have need of the insight such generous reading is capable of producing.

In summary, part of our context for this theology of providence is the way that some prominent scientific materialists have chosen to discuss their interpretation of the findings of science and what these must mean about metaphysics and causality. Another part is the way some prominent Christians have responded. Notice that the doctrine of providence, of God's governing action in the world, is at the heart of the conversation. For Dawkins, especially in his early writings, the existence of God is unproblematic until its invocation is no longer necessary

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[28]sdanaher (2008).

as biological explanation. But even then, all things being equal,[29] it would simply be an inelegant and wish-fulfilling explanation if it weren't for the law-suspending intervention Christians claim that God partook, and perhaps partakes, in. There is here a legitimate and serious critique about the coherence of divine action, a critique Christians must address. Thus, our discussion will treat the New Atheists, and Dawkins in particular, not as an enemy to be refuted but as a valuable partner in our efforts at speculative theology.[30] They remind us of the important questions we need to keep asking ourselves.

1.2 Biblical interpretation and its effects in the churches

Thankfully, the animosity of the science-and-theology conversation is sometimes tempered when it takes place within the circle of faith. Nevertheless, tensions are evident, and the doctrine of providence once again looms large. One problem facing the churches as they struggle to articulate a biblical faith in providence for a secular and scientific age was described with great clarity by Langdon Gilkey in a 1961 article called "Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language." Gilkey noted that "contemporary theology ... is half liberal and modern, on the one hand, and half biblical and orthodox, on the other, i.e., it's world view or cosmology is modern, while its theological language is biblical and orthodox."[31] He summarizes that liberal theology's critique of providence hinged on incredulity about the apparent lack of reliable laws of nature in biblical times. As a result, he says, "divine activity became the continual, creative, immanent activity of God." Special religious insights about that activity could only be subjective. The understandable neo-orthodox response was to assert that "God was not an inference from religious experience but he who acts in special events."[32] The crux

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[29]Of course, Dawkins's later point is that all things are not equal: "To the vast majority of believers around the world, religion all too closely resembles what you hear from the likes of [Pat] Robertson, [Jerry] Falwell or [Ted] Haggard, Osama bin Laden or the Ayatollah Khomeini." Dawkins (2008), 15. Believers need to be opposed not simply because they hold incorrect beliefs, but because they are, in some real sense, dangerous. Notice Wood's claim that September 11, 2001, was "the obvious spur" for the "unlikely success" of the New Atheists' recent offerings. Wood (2011).

[30]More than perhaps any of the Anglicans I've mentioned, Thomas Aquinas is our most obvious role model for how to treat non-Christian sources. Of course, he was one of Hooker's role models as well.

[31]In Thomas (1983), 29.

[32]In Thomas (1983), 30.

of the problem for Gilkey is that the neo-orthodox "have *not* repudiated the liberal insistence on the causal continuum of space-time experience." They participate in a culture that assumes this causal continuum and so can "scarcely do anything else."[33] Indeed, this is part of Charles Taylor's whole point.

Gilkey goes on to examine what happens to our language of faith in this environment. He notes that, as a result of our cosmological paradigm shift, we no longer regard biblical language about the mighty acts of God as univocal—plain, direct, unambiguous. (E.g., God stopped the sun, and Israel "took vengeance on their enemies."[34]) He further believes that we have not given sufficient thought to how to read this language analogically, in order that we might still glean from it a meaningful theological confession about God's action in the world. (E.g., God caused the sun to be made and could well do anything at all with it, were it not for God's self-limiting decision that the universe be governed by reliable laws. But God's providential power was nevertheless with the Israelites during the time of the settlement, and both they and the nations around them seemed to know it.) Too often the result is that we speak equivocally, so our confession becomes "empty, abstract, and self-contradictory."[35] (E.g., God didn't stop the sun and probably played no objective part in the history of Israel. And yet our celebration of the Eucharist makes note of "the calling of Israel to be [God's] people,"[36] what Gilkey would call special revelation.)

Gilkey's account of the problem helpfully describes the tension that, in the fifty years since he wrote this article, has continued to cause so much division within and between the churches over the interpretation of scripture as it regards both the science-and-theology conversation

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[33]In Thomas (1983), 32.

[34]Joshua 10:12–13.

[35]We should be hearing echoes of the Williams-Dawkins conversation and Wood's assessment of it. Dawkins is rightly reacting to those people of faith who continue to use univocal biblical language regardless of the problems it poses in light of our modern cosmology. And he is accusing Williams of either doing the same thing or of, on the other hand, speaking equivocally ("nothing more than poetic language"). Wood seems, wrongly, to agree with the latter assessment. But Williams is clear that he does not believe it to be "nothing more than" poetic language. There are real truth claims at stake; they just fail to map unambiguously onto (or, rather, from) the text. A claim made by analogy still carries objective content; it's just more challenging to tease out that content.

[36]The Episcopal Church (1979), 368.

and many other subject matters where ambiguity[37] causes disagreement. Many of the other disagreements are matters more of discipline than doctrine, of ethics and ecclesiology than creedal commitments. But some confessional clashes have received a great deal of attention as well. Perhaps the most prominent example comes from evangelical circles and concerns the question of the historicity of Adam and Eve. The central figure in this debate has been geneticist-turned-apologist Francis Collins, whose bestseller *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* created anxiety for its openness to allegorical interpretation of Genesis 1–2.[38] Even if this and similar conversations seem to mainline theologians a bit late in coming, they are still opportunities for us to refine our arguments and, hopefully, to re-engage with Christian brothers and sisters who are in the middle of an honest struggle with their faith. It might also be a valuable methodological exercise to inform our reflections on the doctrine of providence, about which there is a much broader range of opinions within the mainline.

As regards providence, Gilkey's framework for tackling the challenge he described remains useful to us today. He distinguishes between three tasks: biblical theology (examination of "what the biblical writers meant to say" in their context), systematic theology (examination of "what *we* believe the truth about God and about what he has done to be"), and philosophical theology (examination "of the relation of God to general experience" in order to "give content to the biblical analogy of a mighty act, and so to our theological concepts of special revelation and salvation").[39] As we will see in the next chapter, this third task is the main activity of this essay, since it is the intelligibility of our creedal claims and the biblical witness on which they are founded that are so pointedly challenged by the context this chapter has been describing. That context, in sum, is one from which the internal deliberations of the church have not been immune or isolated.

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[37]We might replace "ambiguity" with "incoherence" or something similar in the case of those who choose to read the bible univocally and, therefore, to discount ambiguity.

[38]Collins (2007). For an overview of the follow-up from an evangelical perspective, see Osling (2011).

[39]In Thomas (1983), 43, emphasis original.

1.3   The challenges and opportunities for providence

This chapter has been narrative rather than systematic because a context is best appreciated first in light of particulars rather than generalities. Still, it is worthwhile, in closing, to generalize a bit—and to add to our list of challenges some of the opportunities we face. What should our philosophical theology of providence address? What are the sticking points, and why might it be worth all the bother?

The manner of divine action. As should by now be clear, it seems to me that the most pressing question facing the doctrine of providence in our context is the accusation of interventionism. In a world where "God is no longer axiomatic" and where many people believe that scientific laws provide an adequate explanation of why things happen the way they happen, the proposition that God acts in objective ways is a tough sell. Of course, this critique is at least as old as David Hume, who wrote in "Of Miracles" that "[a] miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imaged."[40]

A tough sell or not, objective divine action may be a necessary one, particularly if we plan (as I do here) to remain grounded in the Church's creedal profession of faith. Clearly, those New Testament events that Dawkins ridicules and Williams affirms force us either to concede that God occasionally changes[41] the rules or to articulate a better understanding of what those rules are and what they mean. Thankfully, twentieth-century science itself has helped us in this regard; as we will see, the physicist's picture of the universe is no longer one "wholly determined by inflexible and universal laws that exclude any other causal influence and that completely explain everything that will ever happen."[42] Hume's "unalterable experience" was perhaps not as reliable as he thought, and the new scientific picture seems not to rule out the

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[40]Reprinted in Taliaferro and Griffiths (2003), 567.

[41]The only-two-miracles option of incarnation plus resurrection (suggested, for example, in "Two Indispensable Miracles" in Nash (1994)—though Nash would obviously like us to go beyond it) is not particularly compelling, since decreasing the number of these interventions does not free us from the accusation unless we decrease it to zero. Otherwise we are merely changing the scale of the problem, not its nature.

[42]Ward (2008), 97.

possibility of God's continued physical involvement in the causal unfolding of the universe (we're speaking here of the so-called "causal-joint problem"). In short, the emerging research about non-interventionist objective divine action[43] will be of interest to our conversation.

The arc of divine action. If the heading above deals with the *means* of God's interaction with the world, this one deals with the *purposes* of that interaction. Here again, scientific materialism and other children of the secular age pose legitimate objections. Dawkins' strongest critique of "the God Hypothesis" is actually one of his oldest, the one he laid out in *The Blind Watchmaker*. Blindness, for Dawkins, is a much-misunderstood word, and it has led some commentators to be overly dismissive of his critique.

Briefly, blindness is a property of the evolutionary process that describes the connection between random and nonrandom events. Natural selection is about *nonrandom* survival of organisms that have been subject to *random* mutations. In my opinion, it is the paradoxical idea of blindness that makes evolution so difficult to understand:

> Natural selection is the blind watchmaker, blind because it does not see ahead, does not plan consequences, has no purpose in view. Yet the living results of natural selection overwhelmingly impress us with the appearance of design as if by a master watchmaker ... The purpose of this book is to resolve this paradox to the satisfaction of the reader.[44]

Dawkins's point here is not just that the evolutionary data shows no positive evidence for divine purposefulness but rather that it is full of positive evidence against divine purposefulness. We may disagree with his interpretation of the data, or we may attack the premise that we would know divine purposefulness when we saw it. What we mustn't do is attack the *mistaken* notion that evolution is random or arbitrary, which neither Darwin nor Dawkins holds.

In other words, our theological and philosophical reflection on *telos* must in some way handle the subtle critique that historical, physical, and biological processes do indeed seem to

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[43]See Russell (2007), 202–203.

[44]Dawkins (1987), 21.

be wandering freely, though not aimlessly.[45] John Polkinghorne and others have argued that this openness is indicative of the way God has chosen to govern creation.[46] That the properties of the governed are important for understanding the Governor is of course an old idea. Aquinas put it this way: "Errors about creatures sometimes lead one astray from the truth of faith."[47] If we are inclined to accept this principle in an appropriately qualified way, then here, again, the annals of scientific discovery in the twentieth century provide the theologian with interesting and helpful material for reflection.

The righteousness of divine action. Moving now to wider implications of the doctrine, we first note that no account of providence, particularly one interested in the possibility of affirming God's objective action in the world, can gloss over the issue of theodicy. Indeed, Markham's assessment that "all of Christian doctrine is a response to evil and suffering"[48] should serve as a caution against careless formulations of God's freedom (always from self-imposed limitations) to act. On the other hand, we do not have to share, say, Barth's understanding of the utter brokenness of our knowledge of creation due to the "nothingness" that is evil[49] to nevertheless enter this difficult conversation with the most modest expectations. Our goal will be merely to discuss how particular theologies of providence might speak to the problem of evil and our deliverance from it.

The consolation of divine action. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, reflection on the doctrine of providence presents us with the opportunity to unite in further wholeness our devotional and intellectual lives. Gilkey is right that our creeds become empty if we speak them equivocally. How much more will our prayers seem hollow—to us and to others—if we are not open to the possibility that they will be answered![50] Put another way, if a central tenet of the

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[45]A legitimate question we will need to ask is whether, in assuming that God's providence has anything to do with physical and biological processes, we are not ourselves falling into the scientific materialist's reductionist trap.

[46]See, for example, Polkinghorne (1996a), 25–26.

[47]*Summa Contra Gentiles*, II 3.1.

[48]Markham (2007), 89.

[49]See Barth (2004), 289–368.

[50]Notice the role of the doctrine of providence in Michael Goulder's journey to atheism as described in Goulder and Hick (1983).

life of faith is trust, how can we grow in faith without a doctrine of providence that warrants such trust?

1.4   A final note on focus and scope

This overview of our context and purpose gets us thinking in the right direction, but if left to itself it will bite off more than an essay of this length could possibly chew. I have therefore chosen to focus primarily on the issues bound up in Gilkey's observation about "the causal continuum of space-time experience." If we take as our working definition of providence "the doctrine by which we discuss the way God orders and governs the world," then God must have some causal role in this ordering and governing. I will write primarily about the philosophical issues involved in positing and defending such a role in the intellectual climate of our secular age. Partly because these issues are so often presented by scientists and philosophers interested in science,[51] examples from science are an important part of the conversation and will be important here. As I said, Dawkins and thinkers like him will always be in the back of our heads, asking us pointed questions. But as we will see in Chapter 3, what I call "scientific resonance" will be only one of several criteria by which we will evaluate different approaches to the problem of God's causal role in providence. This essay is not an attempt to systematically address the scientific theories and disciplines that have bearing on the doctrine of providence; rather, it is an attempt to evaluate different ways of understanding God's action in the world and to consider how we should talk about such action in the context of a scientific society. Critiques and illustrations from science should be a part of any such discussion, but in this thesis they will not dominate it.

We move now to some methodological preliminaries. The goal of this essay is to survey modern philosophical theologies of the doctrine of providence and eventually to sketch one of my own; the goal of Chapter 2 is to explain what I will assume in the process.

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[51]This has of course been true for a long time: think Laplace.

Chapter 2

Method

The philosophical theologian, perhaps especially the one concerned with the science-and-theology conversation, bears a considerable responsibility to be clear about what, methodologically, he or she is doing. As we saw in Chapter 1, Gilkey suggests that our task is to examine "the relation of God to general experience" in order to "give content to the biblical analogy of a mighty act." In other words, we are bringing the deliberations of philosophy and the findings of science to bear on the content of our dogmatic theology of providence. Is what we claim about God's ordering and governance of the world coherent both internally and with other truths that we (1) have discovered about the world or (2) have had revealed to us by God? And does it *resonate*, so far as its fidelity to the truth will allow it to, with the culture to whom it is directed? A negative response to the former question will suggest to us errors in our thinking; a "no" to the latter will send us back to the explanatory drawing board, since our purpose must always be partly apologetical and evangelical.

But even these claims rest on a set of underlying assumptions about God, the Bible, truth, and reality. A thorough defense of this starting point is beyond the scope of this essay, so we can merely examine it, as best we can, for what it is. Thus, this chapter will describe the assumptions that this essay will bring to bear on our problem of the theology of providence: a creedal faith perspective, a Hookerian biblical hermeneutic, a critical-realist epistemology, and a "sacramental" metaphysic that assumes the interrelationship of matter and spirit.

2.1 Perspective: A creedal Anglican faith shaped by worship

As we began to discuss in the last section, I write from what I hope is a characteristically, though not uniquely, Anglican perspective. But we will need to say more than that, given the diversity of opinion that so comprehensive a tradition nurtures. To begin with, what exactly is our Anglican dogmatic theology—that is, the confession of the Church as Anglicans articulate it—under the perspective represented here? What theological corpus are we reflecting on and defending?

There are two answers. The less ambiguous one is that of the historic creeds. Part of both the ecclesial and theological genius of Anglicanism is a trust that worship is the primary mechanism by which the Holy Spirit leads us "into all truth."[1] If it is true that *lex orandi, lex credendi*, that praying shapes believing, then it is fitting that we *pray* the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds at the very center of our liturgies of the daily office and Holy Eucharist, respectively. Under this perspective, it should be no surprise that we will take the creeds for granted in our theological discussion. We do this not only because the contents of the creeds are largely matters where we must trust revelation (see below[2]) but also because the habitual experience of worship plants these convictions deep within our souls and waters them by means that are neither purely emotional nor purely rational. Of course, this does not mean we will avoid critical engagement with the creeds' propositional content; that is part of the very purpose of this essay. But it does mean that we are merely defending the faith, not attempting to prove it—nor, on the other hand, to contradict it.[3]

As for more detailed and contextual sources of our dogmatic theology, we must be comfortable with a great deal more ambiguity. My reading of the Anglican tradition is that we are

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[1]John 16:13. The verse that follows is telling under this perspective: "He will *glorify* me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you." Our response is to glorify God by taking what is God's and declaring it to each other. For a discussion of worship as a central purpose and shaper of life, see especially Temple (1995) and Sedgwick (2008).

[2]A preview to avoid alienating the skeptical at this point: We say "must" not as a blind appeal to the authority of tradition but because of the rational conviction that certain truths simply cannot be uncovered by the independent operation of reason. In other words, if God is who we think God is, then we have no epistemological warrant for assuming we will be able to know God with much specificity without an act of revelation on God's part.

[3]For a discussion of this approach to theology, see Thomas Aquinas's "discourse on method" in Chapters 1–8 of the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book 1.

"not a confessional but a confessing church"[4] and therefore that the Nicene Creed is, in the words of the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral, "the sufficient statement of the Christian Faith."[5] This means that the confessionals and catechisms of other traditions and indeed the whole of the theological writings of the Church Militant, Expectant, and Triumphant are fair game for us—but that none but the creeds have the last word.

This approach, which I and many Anglicans believe to be the only one able to tolerate the diversity of belief necessary for the full restoration of the unity of the Church, poses a particular problem for any discussion of providence: the creeds don't explicitly say anything about this doctrine. Of course, as we suggested in Chapter 1, they impose some *requirements* on our theology of providence. It must accommodate the virgin birth, the Incarnation, the resurrection, and the Spirit's speech by the prophets. It must ponder what God's role as Creator might imply about God's role as Governor and what might be the ground of our hope for the "life of the world to come" in the kingdom that will "have no end." But as with the doctrine of atonement, it seemed good to the early church not to formulate a statement of how exactly to express its doctrine of providence.

We can view this ambiguity as a challenge to our task, as it surely is, for we will need to decide just what picture of providence to defend in addition to offering our actual defense of it. In a sense, then, we are forced to expand the scope of this paper from pure philosophical theology to dogmatic theology as such. But we should also view this situation as an opportunity. The relative degree of freedom afforded to the theologian writing on providence allows for a hermeneutical circle to develop between the philosophical and the dogmatic material. Of course, we will need to be responsible to the witness of scripture, which is the most significant source for both the creeds and for all the dogmatic theology that preceded and followed them. The Bible will certainly have something to teach us about providence. But so too can we be responsible, from the start, to the demands of the truth we have learned by other means—the truth about the age of the Earth, to choose an arbitrary but relevant example. This building-in

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[4]I owe the phrase though not the spirit to Michael Nazir-Ali. See Virtue (2010).
[5]My reading is by no means uncontested. See, for example, Davie (2007).

of some of the fruits of human inquiry and experience will be a boon to our apologetical and evangelical efforts in a secular context. And this approach, too, is distinctively though not uniquely Anglican.[6]

But since we are writing from a committed faith perspective, do we have theological warrant for going about our reflection on providence from within this hermeneutical circle? That is, are we remaining faithful by looking not just to the Bible but also to philosophy and to science for help in articulating a theology of providence? Or, alternatively, is all of this hand-wringing about the sufficiency of the creeds just an attempt to clear the way for an un- or anti-biblical approach to this problem? These questions are particularly important given the ongoing disputes about authority, discipline, and interpretation of scripture in the Anglican Communion. I will suggest next that the most influential Anglican thinker to write on the authority of scripture is of some help in answering these questions.

2.2 Hermeneutic: A reciprocal understanding of revelation and reason

Although the discipline of biblical hermeneutics has come a long way since *Of the Lawes of Ecclesiastical Politie*, Richard Hooker's understanding of how to let scripture speak authoritatively is nevertheless a helpful guide for today's reader. First things first: the so-called "three-legged stool" of scripture, reason, and tradition is indeed a misleading illustration of Hooker's thinking, as a cursory survey of the Anglican blogosphere will remind us. But corrections to this misunderstanding that simply tell us, in effect, that for Hooker the legs of the stool are not of equal length[7] display, in my opinion, an over-reliance on the famous passage from Book V[8] and ignore the larger arch of Hooker's understanding of revelation. Put briefly, that understanding posits an irreducible reciprocity between revelation and reason.

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[6]I recently heard Ralph Godsall of Westminster Abbey call it the "earthy" Anglican way of doing theology—letting our human experience of the world be with us from the very start.

[7]E.g., "Hooker places three elements in a *hierarchical* ranking" or "*ordered* sequence." Brown (2006), emphasis added.

[8]"[W]hat scripture doth plainelie deliver, to that the first place both of creditt and obedience is due; the next whereunto is whatsoever anie man can necessarelie conclude by force of reason; after these the voice of the Church succeedeth." Hooker (1977a), V.8.3 (p. 39).

To be sure, Hooker discounts the possibility that a standalone natural philosophy could ever realize full human flourishing or the purposes of God. Nature and natural reason are, for Hooker, insufficient in two ways. First, he appeals to a "triple perfection" that comprises the ultimate *telos* of creation: "nature even in this life doth plainly claime and call for a more *divine* perfection" than the sensual and intellectual.[9] Even when our material and mental needs are met, we will still be wanting. Second, as regards our obedience to the law that Hooker believes unites God's order, "[t]he light of nature is never able to finde out any way of obtayning the reward of blisse, but by performing exactly the duties and workes of righteousnes."[10] The ultimate anti-antinomian, he is all too aware of our failure in this second regard. So for Hooker there is both an incompleteness and an outright brokenness in nature which God must address for us. God does so in "a way which could never have entered into the heart of man as much as once to conceive or imagine, if God him selfe had not revealed it extraordinarilie."[11] This "supernaturall way had God in himselfe prepared before all worldes"; it is both Christ himself and the "supernaturall dutie which to us he hath prescribed."[12] Notice, then, that Hooker first introduces the topic of scripture-as-supernatural-revelation by setting it up as a required complement and ground of reason, which is humanity's natural reflection on (and of) God's goodness and perfection. We can conclude that, for Hooker, reason is a kind of "natural revelation" which is necessary but by itself insufficient and must be complemented and directed by "supernatural revelation."

Hooker later claims that this supernatural revelation would, by itself, also be insufficient. It grounds but does not subsume natural reason. There are two senses in which this is the case. The second sense is perhaps the one with which we are more familiar. It involves reason, but reason as pure ratio-intellectual activity, not reason as the *fruit* of turning that activity upon the natural order and gleaning what we can from it (the sense used in the final sentences of the previous paragraph). This is the reason of the so-called three-legged stool, the reason that helps

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[9]Hooker (1977b), I.11.4 (114), emphasis added.
[10]Hooker (1977b), I.11.5 (118).
[11]Hooker (1977b), I.11.5 (116).
[12]Hooker (1977b), 11.5 (118).

us in "comprehending" the scriptures.[13] Hooker's clearest illustration is "our beliefe in the Trinitie," which all agree to be necessary but which is "notwithstanding in scripture no where to be found by expresse literall mention, only deduced . . . out of scripture by collection."[14] What Hooker directly acknowledges here is the unfortunate but serious reality that what we call the "plain sense of scripture," even if it exists, does not contain all things we hold to be necessary for salvation. Thus, the scriptures are by themselves insufficient without the reasoned reflection on their supernatural revelation that will allow us to grasp what they reveal.

More intriguing is the first example of the insufficiency of supernatural revelation. Hooker clarifies that the scriptures contain "all things that are necessarye, and eyther could not at all, or could not easily be knowne by the light of naturall discourse; all things which are necessarye to be knowne that we may be saved, but knowne with *presupposall of knowledge concerning certaine principles whereof it receaveth us already perswaded, and then instructeth us in all the residue that are necessarie*."[15] That's a mouthful, but it's easily clarified by Hooker's clever and contemporary[16] example about scripture's inability to teach us the simple truth of "what bookes wee are bound to esteeme holie."[17] There is, he points out, an essential circularity to our claims about scripture's sufficiency. We have to come to the scriptures "already persuaded" that they will contain something important for us, something we wouldn't be able to figure out any other way. This observation points to the weakness of so much evangelical apologetic, especially in a secular age. The authority of scripture has to be *warranted* by some appeal from outside it; it cannot fully justify itself.[18] The "viciousness" of the circularity goes away if we say that scripture and reason, taken together in reciprocal wholeness, are both necessary and sufficient (that is, they together contain all things necessary for salvation). More generally,

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[13]Hooker (1977b), I.14.2 (126).

[14]Hooker (1977b), 14.2 (126), emphasis added (to highlight the functioning of reason in this example).

[15]Hooker (1977b), I.14.1 (126), emphasis added.

[16]For him, not for us.

[17]Hooker (1977b), I.14.1 (125), emphasis added.

[18]"Being therefore perswaded by other meanes that these scriptures are the oracles of God, them selves do then teach us the rest, and laye before us all the duties which God requireth at our hands as necessary unto salvation." Hooker (1977b), I.14.1 (126).

though, what Hooker is making way for is that some of the knowledge we come to without supernatural revelation is nevertheless necessary for us.

Admittedly, there are limitations to the applicability of Hooker's discussion to our question about sources of authority for a theology of providence and how the Bible can continue to be an authority for cultures that no longer share its cosmology. Hooker is concerned here with Reformation questions involving what is "necessary for salvation." Let us trust and assert that none of our theorizing about providence has such an elevated importance. But his more general point nevertheless stands: there is no such thing as an uninterpreted text, nor of effective divine revelation without an integrated faith in its purpose, necessity, and scope.

The Bible cannot be an all-encompassing theological authority, most especially on questions its authors, divinely inspired though they were, did not intend to answer or did not think to ask. Hooker says as much when he explicitly links the content of the biblical writings to their various occasions and purposes.[19] The question "How, in light of what we know about efficient causation and natural laws, does God govern the world?" was never itself such an occasion, at least not directly. So the Bible will be an important source among many for our speculative efforts at a theology of providence, and our interpretation of it will require us to remember the limits of its applicability and the role that reasoned reflection must always play.

2.3 Epistemology: A critical-realist theory of knowledge

It is no coincidence that the two theologians we've discussed most prominently so far are Thomas Aquinas and Richard Hooker. Indeed, I share with them a commitment to a realist philosophy that is perhaps unsurprising for a modern person with training in the sciences.[20] John Polkinghorne puts it this way: "Like most scientists, I believe that the advance of science is concerned not just with our ability to manipulate the physical world, but with our capacity

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[19]"The several books of scripture having each some severall occasion and particular purpose which caused them to be written, the contents thereof are according to the exigence of that special ende whereunto they are intended." Hooker (1977b), I.14.3 (127).

[20]Indeed, it is perhaps unsurprising for any Christian: "Realist assumptions have . . . always been an essential part of Christian belief." Van Huyssteen (1989), 159. Note that this is not to imply that all important Christian thinkers have been realists.

to gain knowledge of its actual nature. In a word, I am a realist." Of course, the years since Aquinas and Hooker have given us reasons to temper our expectations about our ability to know the exact nature of reality (more on that in a moment). Thus, Polkinghorne continues, "such knowledge is to a degree partial and corrigible. Our attainment is verisimilitude, not absolute truth. Our method is the creative interpretation of experience, not rigorous deduction from it. Thus, I am a critical realist." So we see through a glass darkly, but we believe what we see is really there.[21]

Polkinghorne is not alone in this perspective or in his vocation. He and other "scientist-theologians" have adopted a critical-realist approach in their defense of the idea that "[i]f it is the one world of existing reality that both [scientists and theologians] are investigating, then the stories they tell of it must be reconcilable with each other."[22] Wentzel van Huyssteen has provided a critical account of and philosophical grounding for this development in modern theology in his chapter "Criteria for a Critical-Realist Model of Rationality."[23] Here, especially, a rigorous defense or even simple description of the position is beyond both the scope of this essay and the limits of my philosophical expertise. Thus, I will simply draw a few remarks from van Huyssteen's material that I hope will outline his position in enough detail to show its epistemological attractiveness and its utility to our project.

Very briefly, van Huyssteen's goal is to apply to theology the insight that emerged in philosophy of science from the reaction to Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. With his paradigm-based model of scientific progress, Kuhn discredited a naive realism that would posit an untroubled correspondence between physical reality and what we would, since his work, be careful to call the *constructs* of scientific theorizing.[24] Although the problem of

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[21]Though they really exist, "the objects of science and the objects of religious belief lie beyond the range of literal description." Van Huyssteen (1989), 156.

[22]Polkinghorne (1996b), 4.

[23]In Van Huyssteen (1989), 143–197.

[24]Of course, one might be tempted to say that this ship had already sailed thanks to the findings of quantum mechanics, depending on which interpretive school one subscribes to. To side with Bohr over Bohm is already to admit a certain "quantum fuzziness" that at the very least "exten[ds] ... the limits of what is conceivable" to the naive realist. See Polkinghorne (1996a), 23–25; and Polkinghorne (1991), 86–87, respectively. An interesting result to keep an eye on in this department is a forthcoming article that revisits the possibility of the real physical existence of the quantum wavefunction. See Reich (2011).

the correspondence of our God-talk to the reality of God has long been known,[25] van Huyssteen shows that the renewed interest in this problem as it relates to our descriptions of *created reality* has been inspirational for those who share his conviction that "[n]o systematic theologian, given the universal claims of theology's central thematics, can ever be reconciled to an esoteric conceptual model that provides, in ghetto fashion, its own intratheological criteria for truth."[26] Faithful to this conviction, van Huyssteen proposes criteria for "a valid systematic-theological model of rationality" that will, he believes, allow theological reflection to proceed with a more carefully qualified but still analogous epistemological confidence to that of its empirical cousin. If theological statements, like scientific statements, can (1) depict reality, (2) critically solve problems, and (3) make constructive progress, then theology develops in much the same way that realist philosophers now believe science does.

We must refer the curious reader to van Huyssteen's text for a detailed discussion of how theological discourse can be said to meet these criteria and thereby claim a small part, at least as regards the pursuit of truth, in the exalted status of science. But even this small summary is useful to us, for two reasons. First, it shows that the scientist-theologians' project has a certain symmetry to its method. Not only can we claim that scientists and theologians are pursuing a truth and a reality that is ultimately unified; we can also say, at least in some contexts, that they are pursuing them in markedly similar ways. This latter similarity provides an important warrant for the theological genre that Polkinghorne, et al., have created—philosophical theology that draws often and deeply from the scientist's well of experience and insight.

Second, van Huyssteen's work provides us with criteria to be mindful of as we begin the task proper of this thesis. In the two chapters that follow, we first examine (from the perspective we have outlined) the theologies of providence of several important writers and then draw on their insights to articulate a position. As we do so, we should be especially concerned (1) that our theological claims depict a common reality as it is understood by scientists and theologians in conversation, (2) that these statements do an adequate job of addressing our

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[25] See, for example, Aquinas on the analogous sense of the divine names, *Summa Theologeiae*, Book 1, Question 13, Article 5.

[26] Van Huyssteen (1989), 144.

central problem ("How does God order and govern the world?"), and (3) that our answers are responsive and responsible, as our scope allows, to other major doctrines of the Christian faith. Without meeting this final criterion, we undermine the possibility for "constructive progress" that both grounds and springs from our "realist trust"[27] in a partially knowable Creator and creation.

2.4   Metaphysic: A hierarchical understanding of matter, mind, and spirit

Obviously, the forgoing remarks about our theory of knowledge have said something of our beliefs about the universe, inasmuch as we believe we can formulate scientific and theological statements that correspond in some approximate way to the nature of reality. But any theology that seeks to be in conversation with scientific materialists like the New Atheists must go on to say something more about the nature of reality and of being. To articulate a metaphysic that is not purely materialist, as this final section will do, draws attention to the New Atheists' choice to demand that all our philosophizing be grounded in the empirical realm.[28] In short, that what can be *observed* is not all there *is* cuts against the grain of materialist dogma[29]—and in so doing helps us see it as dogma, to differentiate between science and scientism, to reconnect with the epistemological modesty that helped science become so successful in the first place.[30]

The metaphysic we will treat here is the "Sacramental Universe"[31] of William Temple's *Nature, Man and God*. It is attractive for our purposes in part because Temple begins with the facts of our scientific observation of the universe, especially its unfolding as process in

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[27]Polkinghorne (1998), 124.

[28]As Keith Ward writes in his recent ontological defense of humanism, we Western intellectuals are in the midst of "a metaphysical battle, a battle about what sorts of things exist and about whether persons are distinctive sorts of things that are different from purely material things." Ward (2010), 11–12.

[29]Again, Ward: "Nevertheless, scientifically minded philosophers often assert that all genuine causes are physical, whereas the personal or mental is a sort of by-product that plays no effective role in governing what happens in the world. This seems to be just a basic dogma—all causes must be physical, because I say so. (I should add that I am not against having basic dogmas. We all have them, but at least we should acknowledge that they are dogmas, and are by no means obvious to everbody.)" Ward (2010), 35.

[30]Karl Jaspers puts it well: "A crucial feature of modern science is that it does not provide a total world-view, because it recognizes that this is impossible. It was science that liberated us from total views of the world, and for the first time in history . . . [S]cience is always aware of its limitations [and] understands the particularity of its insights." Bartsch (1972), 135.

[31]Temple (1934), 473–495.

history. From these facts he argues that there is more to the universe than the material and indeed that, "in so far as the universe is a single system, its 'highest principle of unity' must be sought in spirit."[32] In this explication of the universe as system and history as process, he lays the framework for a philosophical theology of providence that does not accede to the materialist claim that efficient causality is the only force responsible for the world's becoming. The universe for Temple is sacramental, and "in the sacrament God acts, fulfilling His own promise."[33] In explaining Temple's views, we run the risk of getting ahead of ourselves and diving in to a treatment of a particular authors' thoughts on providence. Thus, we will endeavor here to limit our comments to Temple's general framework and will return later to providence and causality.

Fundamental to Temple's account of the created order is a hierarchy of being not unlike what we encounter in the classically informed models of Thomas Aquinas and Richard Hooker. The levels of the hierarchy he calls "strata," and they are "mechanical . . . matter," "living matter," "mind," and "spirit."[34] In distinction to the classical worldview, however, these are not static modes of being that have always existed. Indeed, the strata (and their component substrata) actually unfolded through historical process in a way that could not have been anticipated:

> It is surely quite clear that if anyone studied the world before there was life on it he could never have predicted life; if he had studied vegetation he would never have predicted animal life; if he had studied the animal world he would never have predicted human civilisation and the arts; and if he had studied the selfishness of mankind he could never have predicted a life of perfect and selfless love.[35]

When Temple says that each successive development "could never have [been] predicted," I believe he is saying that the higher (and later) strata are not somehow the inevitable and fully determined offspring of the system as it was comprised by the lower (and earlier) strata. That

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[32]Temple (1934), 479.
[33]Temple (1934), 492.
[34]Temple (1934), 475.
[35]Temple (1995), 29–39.

the earlier stages are, by themselves, necessary[36] but not sufficient conditions for the later stages—that something genuinely new emerges with the genesis of each new stratum—is evidenced by the irreducibility of the hierarchy: "We must be careful not to say that, because the actions and reactions studied in physics and chemistry are certainly real, therefore those studied in biology, in aesthetics, in ethics, in theology are either unreal or else are only complicated forms of the other group."[37] So chemistry is somehow more than just applied physics, biology more than applied chemistry, etc. Of course, we weren't in a position to prove this claim when Temple made it, and Dawkins and others are unlikely to accept it.[38] But I am convinced this claim makes reasonable sense of the data we have about the interrelation of the strata as we can observe and understand them and thus grounds Temple's vision in "the modern scientific view."[39]

As we will see later on, Temple discusses these interrelations with a view toward reviving the idea of final cause, of *telos*. And thus he describe the universe as sacramental because "[i]n the sacrament . . . the order of thought is spirit first and spirit last, with matter as the effectual expression or symbolic instrument of spirit. That is the formula which we suggest as an articulation of the essential relations of spirit and matter in the universe."[40] At this point, we merely comment that such a metaphysic is appealing in striking a balance between the overly materialist perspective of our scientific age (which assumes *a priori* that spirit does not exist and, often, that the mind can ultimately be explained by the material) and the disembodied idealism of past centuries (which, in their extreme forms, regarded the material as almost wholly insignificant). The metaphor for describing the spirit-matter interrelation as sacramental restores a perspective that grants spirit not only existence but an essential place in the order of things. This will be necessary for any view in which God can interact meaningfully (or, more

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[36]"[T]he lower is necessary to the actuality of the higher but only finds its own fullness of being when thus used by the higher as its means of self-actualization." Temple (1934), 474. Of course, the implications of the latter clause go beyond the point about necessity and anticipate what Temple is going to say about purpose and its role in the unfolding. Of course, we can assent to this general trajectory without being so problematically instrumentalist in our language, as if the kingdom of plants only finds it fulfillment in being utilized by animals.

[37]Temple (1934), 475.

[38]See Dawkins (1987), chapter 1.

[39]Temple (1934), 474.

[40]Temple (1934), 492.

precisely, objectively) with the world. On the other hand, the sacramental view also reminds us that the material not only exists but *matters*, matters in a most essential and intimate way. We can't have a sacrament without the material, nor would we want to; a sacrament is, in part, a celebration of our solid earthiness and the distinctive union that is possible between it and the Spirit of God. Although feminist theologians will likely still object to a metaphysic that explicates the matter-mind-spirit interrelation in terms of "top-down" utilization and control, there is still in Temple the notion that created matter and especially living matter is valuable in and of itself and that God relies on it in order to have the relationship with us that God desires.

A final excerpt from Temple does an ample job of summarizing not only his understanding of reality but the priorities of this chapter as a whole:

> [T]he view of the universe which I have called sacramental asserts the supremacy and absolute freedom of God; the reality of the physical world and its process as His creation; the vital significance of the material and temporal world to the eternal Spirit; and the spiritual issue of the process in a fellowship of the finite and time-enduring spirits in the infinite and eternal Spirit.

His final concern, with its emphasis on reciprocal fellowship, also provides a preview of the direction in which my own position is heading.

Chapter 3

Approaches

We come at last to that point in the essay where we may begin to work on our problem in earnest. This chapter will present and critique four promising approaches to the question of how God orders and governs the universe:

1. **Compatibilist approaches**, which argue for the compatibility between the world's apparent (and indeed actual) freedom and God's determining will;

2. **"General providence" approaches**, which note God's creating, sustaining, and relational roles but downplay or discount the role of special active governance;

3. **Process-theology approaches**, which stress creatures' co-creatorial role in bringing about the unfolding of process in response to God's non-coercive "luring" of the future into being; and

4. **"Open theism" approaches**, which attempt to balance God's freedom and reliability and posit openness to genuine mutual response between creature and Creator.

It's important to realize from the outset that these categories are not exhaustive[1] and perhaps not even mutually exclusive; indeed, I draw insights from several of them in my final position. Similarly, the scope of this essay precludes a properly thorough treatment of each school, or even each author. In most cases, I have simply chosen an accessible and reasonably representative work or works to discuss in necessarily limited detail. The goal in each case is the

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[1] For instance, Molinism does not appear in this listing; I will treat it briefly in the section on compatibilism, since Helm discusses it at some length.

sketch the author's or authors' view of providence, especially as it relates to the concerns of our context and to the direction this essay is ultimately heading.

However, before proceeding with these discussions, we need to give final specificity to the criteria we have been developing in the first two chapters. What follows is a discussion of the categories whereby we will evaluate these theologies of providence with respect to the concerns of our context and perspective.

3.1 Criteria for evaluating positions

In obedience to our firm grounding in a creedal Anglican perspective, our most weighty criterion is what I will call *theological coherence*. To use a metaphor from the sciences, we're looking for a good "fit" between the theological data and the theory we advance in response to it. Here the data are the convictions and perspectives of the creeds, the biblical witness, and the related reflections of the tradition, and the theory under consideration is the particular author's doctrine of providence.

As in science, not all the data in our theological exercise are of equal importance; we know that some observations are clearly paradigmatic "game-changers," while we suspect that others are merely puzzles to be worked out in time but that are unlikely to pose an ultimate challenge to our prevailing theoretical understanding.[2] As we have said, we will give predominance to the "data" of the creeds, and we will keep in mind that the Bible is neither a science textbook *nor* a systematic theology textbook, and so the witness of scripture is of central importance, and yet we must be critical about our appeals to it. Regarding this latter source, we will always ask, with Hooker as our model, "What *kind* of revelation is this particular biblical passage speaking to us?"

Another similarity between scientific data and our theological data in this essay is that not all of them seem to speak in a unified way. In science, there are often multiple physical "regimes" for a system, some in which a particular force dominates the observed behavior of the system and some in which multiple forces seem to contribute significantly to what the

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[2]See Chapter IV, "Normal Science as Puzzle-solving," in Kuhn (1996).

experimenters see. The behavior of a watermelon dropped from a New York skyscraper is attributable mostly to gravity, whereas the dropping of a feather involves a more equal balance between the downward gravitational pull and an upward push from the feather's wind resistance. So although scientists have a confidence in the underlying unity and consistency of physical law, it can be surprisingly difficult[3] for them to answer the questions "Which law?" and, as it were, "Which subjects?" in a particular experiment. Similarly, our conviction here is that the God of Israel is the source and ground of the varied theological perspectives of Hebrew and Christian scripture and subsequent theological reflection; but some perspectives are more germane than others to particular questions, and we also cannot rule out the obfuscating effects of the way imperfect and culturally conditioned human instruments set forth the word of God.

A second criterion will be the doctrines' *scientific resonance*. Here, too, we are concerned with a certain fittingness between the theologies and the data we can observe. But here the data come from what scientists have learned about the physical world. To choose the most obvious example, biologists teach us that the multiplicity of earthly species is the result not of the special creation (and thereafter static persistence) of each species at the beginning of time but of a gradual and dynamic process of evolution by natural selection. We need a doctrine of providence that does not fly in the face of that reality. Notice, though, that the fit we should expect here is of a different kind from our first criterion, which is why I use the word *resonance* instead of *coherence*. What we're asking is a more intuitive question than before: Does the doctrine of providence under consideration serve as a stumbling block or a generous invitation to faith in the twenty-first-century Western milieu, which is so shaped by the scientific worldview? In other words, does the fit between the doctrine of providence and our experience of the physical universe witness to the underlying unity in our knowledge of God and of creation, or does it undermine that very notion? Readers who are less convinced of this underlying unity may wish to re-weight our emphasis on this criterion accordingly.

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[3]Though it is not in the watermelon and feather cases.

Notice that this second criterion is also second*ary*.[4] The theology of providence offered by out-and-out deism serves as a helpful example of why this should be so. Since we believe Markham is right that "Christianity is committed to a God that acts"[5] (as opposed to a God who merely "acted"), deist providences score miserably with respect to our primary criterion. The fact that deism scores highly in the category of scientific resonance[6] does not redeem its understanding of providence for the purposes of this essay.

The third criterion is related to what we earlier called the "consolation" of providence. If the first question for our theology was "Is it faithful?" and the second was "Is it thoughtful?", the third question is "Is it inspirational?" In other words, does it preach? Is this theology of providence also a theology of hope? Though Freudians and others will see this criterion as evidence of religion's infatuation with wish-fulfillment, both the biblical witness and the historical experience of Christianity make clear that an essential part of our faith is the Christian's trust that—in the fullness of time and in ways we do not always understand—God has provided, is providing, and will provide. We acknowledge here that theology is not purely or even primarily propositional. This essay is concerned with a livable theology.

The fourth criterion speaks to the theologian's need to attend to the systematizing impulse that pulls us beyond an isolated treatment of any one particular doctrine. In our context, the most important "partner doctrine" is the doctrine of evil. As Paul Helm writes, "in the context of a treatment of divine providence this problem [the problem of evil] is faced in a more acute form . . . [T]he problem is not merely 'How can God permit or allow evil?' but 'How can there be evil in a universe which God controls?'"[7] These questions are simply too important not to ask of our authors from the very beginning, rather than as an afterthought when considering additional implications of their positions. So the adequacy of the *theodicy* of a particular providence will be an explicit concern for us here.

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[4]Mostly because we do not want to commit the category error of treating scientific data as if it were unproblematically theological.

[5]Markham (1997), 1.

[6]Indeed, this score was largely responsible for the development of deist theology.

[7]Helm (1994), 25.

Finally, a fifth criterion is relegated to a lower position than it probably warrants. The *internal coherence* of any theology of providence is certainly of high importance, second only, perhaps, to its theological coherence, its value as theology *per se*. If what we claim about God's governance of the world is nonsense, then we will have built our theological house on sand. However, this essay will give only passing treatments to this important criterion, for two reasons: First, these are more purely philosophical matters, somewhat beyond the scope of a master's-level theology thesis. Second, and perhaps more importantly, they are often beyond my philosophical expertise and training. When I do make reference to this final criteria, it will mostly be to other writers' analyses.

Before we proceed to summarize and assess our four promising approaches, a word on the relation of these criteria to the perspective of critical realism. If we believe that the results of our philosophizing and theologizing refer to an actual, knowable reality, then the criteria we choose for assessing theologies of providence ought to increase our confidence that the world-view we're describing is accurate (or not). This confidence generally comes from a theory's coherence and its explanatory power. My latter two criteria address the matter of the theologies' coherence (the theodicy problem is at its core a coherence-based challenge to Judeo-Christian theism, concerned with the difficulty of reconciling the various attributes we assign to the God of Israel). The first two speak to the explanatory power of the theology—the power to make sense of the biblical witness and the power to describe how the theology jibes with what we have come to know of the universe by other means. Our third criterion, the matter of how a theology "plays" in our historical period and cultural context, is of course irrelevant to the strict matter of a theology's presumed truthfulness. However, as we have said, if the claims of that theology are expressed in such a way that they cannot gain any wider cultural purchase, the theology will not succeed in its wider evangelical purpose and probably needs to be expressed in a different way. Obviously, there may be limits to what kind of rehabilitation is possible in such circumstances.

3.2 Overviews and assessments

3.2.1 Compatibilist approaches

In his *The Providence of God*, Calvinist theologian Paul Helm presents an inspiringly clear exposition of various "no-risk" understandings of providence[8] and gives a biblically grounded defense of the one he finds coherent and compelling. His view posits the compatibility between God's risk-free sovereign governance and deterministic human freedom. Helm's concept of God is a decidedly classical one, affirming in an unqualified way the infallibility of God's knowledge, the efficacy of God's decreeing will,[9] and the ultimate if mysterious character of God's goodness.[10]

The way he arrives at such a view in light of the biblical data will be important to our later discussion of his position and is central enough in conversations about providence to merit quoting it at some length:

> We are faced with apparently incompatible data ... One alternative would be to say that the language about God's ignorance, about his changes of mind and resistance to his grace, is more basic to our understanding of God than the more general statements ... about the extent of God's knowledge or the efficacy of his grace ... As a consequence of accepting [the first alternative], the scriptural language which ascribes omniscience or gracious power to God would be understood as hyperbolic; to ascribe omniscience to God is exactly like ascribing it to a human expert, to someone who knows everything about his subject. To say that God is gracious is rather like saying that a generous friend, whose gifts may be spurned, is gracious. There is therefore a straight choice. The alternative hermeneutical

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[8]We will discuss them each in turn to jump-start our survey of the options available and establish some vocabulary that will help us throughout.

[9]As opposed to God's commanding will. Following Calvin, Helm draws a distinction between the way God's *commands* are obviously and routinely disobeyed and the apparent truth (apparent to Helm, that is) that everything God *decrees* comes to pass: "To put the point paradoxically, the breaking of his will became part of the fulfilling of his will." Helm (1994), 48.

[10]As we noted in this chapter's introduction, Helm is aware that theodicy is the most significant challenge to providence in general and to his no-risk view in particular.

position would be to say that general scriptural statements of the omniscience, will and effective goodness of God take precedence. The other language of Scripture, the language of ignorance, of indecision and of change, is then to be interpreted in light of these statements. Put in such a stark way it seems obvious (at least to me) what that choice ought to be. The statements about the extent and intensity of God's knowledge, power and goodness must control the anthropomorphic and weaker statements, and not vice versa.[11]

Notice that Helm has set up a "straight choice" and implied for us a criterion for making it. We are to break the tie, so to speak, between the competing datasets[12] based on who we otherwise know God to be—the transcendent Creator of all things, for instance. We must resist the urge to allow God to be "distilled to human proportions."[13] Indeed, Helm then recites Calvin's compelling argument that the anthropomorphic language of scripture is a matter of God's accommodation of human beings: "it is a logically necessary condition of dialogue between people that those people should act and react in time."[14] In other words, it merely seemed to Abraham, to Moses, and to Jonah that God's will was subject to change in time; that was how they experienced it, because God accommodated their needs as time-bound creatures in the interactions God had with them. To pick up on a thread Helm opens and does not return to, we can similarly assume that it only *seemed* that people resisted grace and rejected salvation in the Acts of the Apostles.[15] In reality, it was God's will that these events should be so; there was never any risk that God's grace would be refused. Presumably God's withholding of irresistible grace only *appears* to observers[16] as grace genuinely offered and genuinely resisted.

Having established a biblical-theological warrant for committing to the no-risk view, Helm continues by outlining three options that support it. He mentions most briefly James Packer's

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[11]Helm (1994), 51–52, square brackets added, parentheses original.

[12]I'm not trying here to extend my earlier analogy between the theologian's task and the scientist's; I'm simply following Helm's lead in how he discusses the collective insights of the biblical text.

[13]Helm (1994), 52.

[14]Helm (1994), 53.

[15]Acts 7:51 and 13:46. See Helm (1994), 50.

[16]To Stephen, Paul, and Barnabus, perhaps? Presumably not to the author of Luke-Acts?

idea that divine sovereignty and human responsibility form an antimony: "an *apparent* incompatibility between two apparent truths."[17] In reality, Packer says, God is genuinely sovereign and humans genuinely responsible for their actions. If it appears as if these biblically warranted claims are false,[18] that is only because our limited human perspective currently prevents us from grasping the means of their actual conciliation.[19]

Helm, too, is concerned with upholding God's sovereignty and humans' accountability, but unlike Packer he does not wish to simply throw up his hands.[20] More attractive to him, in this respect, is the position proposed by Molina and later Plantinga, which he discusses under the category of "middle knowledge." At stake in the project of defending the middle-knowledge position is its ability to preserve indeterministic human freedom,[21] which is probably closest to what most modern Westerners mean when they use the term "free will." If we seek to uphold both this kind of freedom as well as God's risk-free providence, then we must assume God has middle knowledge of the otherwise undetermined free choices human beings will make. Otherwise, God cannot plan accordingly, so to speak, and make decisions that will allow the divine plan to be realized regardless of the free choices made by human agents. But Helm does not believe the middle-knowledge position is coherent:

> The strength of the middle-knowledge view is that it presents the universe, and innumerable other possible universes, as already having run their courses, albeit in conditional form. From the sum total of all these conditions, God selects (he actualizes) some of them in order to actualize one universe. But this is a false picture. The universe cannot, given the strong view of freedom endorsed by the Molinists, have a shadow form; a form of a purely conditional kind which is the mirror-image of how the universe will be when it is actual. For how it will be when

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[17]Packer in Helm (1994), 62

[18]Of course, it *does* appear that way to many, which is why Calvinism is often rejected on coherence grounds.

[19]Helm (1994), 63–64.

[20]Primarily because it is unclear how to distinguish between antimony and genuine incoherence: "The problem with such a reply is that it is too permissive. During the history of Christianity there is scarcely a limit to the nonsense that has been believed because it is allegedly biblical in character." Helm (1994), 66. To this point we of course join our resounding *Amen*.

[21]I.e., "self-causation" or "liberty of indifference." Helm (1994), 67.

it is actual is, at least in part, up to the free actions of the agents who are actualized, once God has decided to actualize that universe.[22]

In effect, Helm believes indeterministic freedom is flatly inconsistent with God's ability to know the outcome of free decisions for certain. At any point in the actualizing of a possibility, a being with indeterministic freedom can muck up God's best-laid plans—by matter simply of definition, so far as I can tell. Though we should be wary of dismissing the Molinist tradition with reference to only a paragraph,[23] the remainder of this section will nevertheless assume that the compatibility between free will and God's risk-free governance of the universe is only demonstrable by assuming deterministic freedom: "people perform free acts when they do what they want to do ... [T]hey are not constrained or compelled in their actions, but what they do flows unimpededly from their wants, desires, preferences, goals and the like."[24] Such a combination is Helm's third alternative for a risk-free providence and is the form of compatibilism he spends his book elaborating.

At this point we have enough of a picture to make some comments about strengths and weaknesses. The greatest strength of any risk-free providence is the consolation it offers to the true believer. If God has promised redemption to the elect and truly risks nothing, then redemption will indeed be theirs. Predestination was supposed to be a comforting doctrine, after all.[25] Of course, the pluralist demographics of the twenty-first century being what they are, we must consider the fact that this message of hope holds unlimited promise for a large but limited subset of the human race. We will return below to the value of this proposal as a lived theology.

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[22]Helm (1994), 59. We can hardly let this interesting portrayal pass in this context without noting the metaphysical similarities between the Molinist picture as Helm describes it (God envisions all possible universes and chooses to actualize one based on divine middle knowledge) and the multiple-universe conjectures favored by some as an explanation for the fine tuning of the universe (many possible universes exist and we live in one that happens to be fine-tuned for the evolution of life). See, for example, White (2000). This strikes me as a rich place for further reflection.

[23]Even Helm devotes just a couple of pages, since a more thorough refutation is beyond the scope of his work as well.

[24]Helm (1994), 67.

[25]Many thanks to Jonathon Gray for reminding me of this fact.

The other great strength of this position is its theological coherence. As we saw, Helm makes a strong case that the no-risk view makes good sense of the biblical data. Indeed, if we were forced to accept the "stark" decision Helm presents to us, then I believe we would be right in choosing as he does. However, that very starkness ought to have given us pause. For instance, recall what Helm would have us believe about the choice to cast one's lot with the more anthropomorphic mode of biblical witness: "[in this view,] to ascribe omniscience to God is exactly like ascribing it to a human expert, to someone who knows everything about his subject." Such a claim strains credulity, if only because there *is* no human expert that has the kind of information and skills that God has, nor could there ever be.[26] One can certainly argue that the doctrine of divine transcendence forces us to admit that God's knowledge and power are different from human agents' not just in degree but in type. But that is not our only option. Indeed, by refusing to reduce God "to human proportions," we can say that God's knowledge and power are *like* humans' knowledge and power but not *exactly like* them. I believe the degree of an omnipotent and omniscient deity's knowledge and power can be coherently said to be so much greater than a human's knowledge and power that they might as well be of a different type from ours without actually being of that different type. The very fact of the incarnation suggests the possibility that part of what has been revealed to us in Christ is God's willingness to self-limit[27] God's knowledge and power—say, by sharing some of it with us in granting us indeterministic freedom. God's ways may be like our ways at least in as much as we share with God a measure of uncertainty about how the future will play out—though the measure of our uncertainty is infinitely greater than God's.[28] All this is to say that there is at least the possibility of a coherent picture of God and of providence that is more theologically coherent than Helm's because it attempts to incorporate the insights of both types of "biblical data" we have on this matter. Moreover, we should remember, with Hooker, that different passages of

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[26]That's the difference between an infinite Being and a finite being.

[27]The Christ hymn of Philippians 2 would be part of our inspiration here, although of course it would also beg the question of whether *kenosis* might be the unique work of Christ.

[28]"For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." Isaiah 55:9.

scripture have different purposes. It is not at all obvious that either set of data Helm discusses was intended to lead directly to a concept of God in the uncomplicated way Helm models.[29]

Scientific resonance is, in my view, a fairly neutral criterion when applied to Helm. Of course, one of the great paradigm shifts of twentieth-century science has been to cast serious doubt on determinism in the physical world, so expecting someone who is familiar with quantum mechanics or chaos/complexity theory to accept determinism as regards human freedom might be difficult. So Helm takes a hit there. On the other hand, Helm's view of human freedom is that it is determined by human "wants, desires, preferences, goals and the like," and the biological and social sciences have played a part in softening the landing for this kind of determinism in a culture that puts great stock in such research.[30] So, for better or for worse, Helm's doctrine may resonate with scientific understandings in this latter respect.

Helm's response to charges of interventionism are a case in point of the surprising scientific resonance of his position. Helm wants to emphasize the balance between "'horizontal' causal relations" (efficient causality) and "vertical" causation (God's interaction with creation).[31] If I am reading him correctly, Helm believes that the vertical dimension upholds the horizontal one:

> If this vertical dimension is kept in mind, then the concept of a miracle is not a problem. For a miracle is then simply the way in which God has chosen to uphold the universe at that moment. Whether he chooses to uphold the universe by giving some aspect of it a character which is (by human experience) unprecedented is clearly a matter for his wisdom and goodness. God does not have to 'overcome' or 'violate' the laws of nature.[32]

Such a picture is unlikely to sway a convinced materialist. But at least it acknowledges the materialist's reasonable objection and attempts to address it in a thoughtful way. His answer

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[29] For instance, Isaiah 55 is devotional and spiritual in tone, which is not to say that it does not have systematic-theology value but is to say that we must be critical about what that value is.

[30] Roman Catholic novelist Walker Percy was sharply critical of the "mindless mechanism" he saw as underwritten by the American behaviorist school of social science. See, for example, Percy (2000), 87.

[31] Helm (1994), 81.

[32] Helm (1994), 82.

depends, of course, on a key piece of philosophical thinking that is crucial in a more general way to the internal coherence of his position: the "long and honourable tradition according to which there are both *primary* and *secondary* causes. The primary cause (or causes) is the divine upholding; the secondary causes are the causal powers of created things."[33] That God can be the primary cause of eventualities that may appear, to us, to unfold only through secondary (i.e., efficient) causality is an important claim in the providence literature,[34] and we will have cause to return to it in our final synthesis. My point for now is that this claim is fairly neutral with respect to our preaching of providence in a scientific context: On the one hand, the success of science as the study of efficient causality in the material world has convinced some modern Westerners that efficient causality is all there is. On the other hand, a proper understanding of the epistemology of the sciences will show that science is, almost by definition, blind to the very possibility of non-efficient causality. Making this point to materialists may allow us to make the one that naturally follows, which is that we cannot rule out, on the basis of science, modes of causality that science cannot reasonably expect to notice. This was Temple's point in the material we discussed in the previous chapter.

Helm's fair marks so far are not, in my view, sufficient to overcome the major objection to any no-risk providence, which is of course theodicy. Helm is not ignorant of this challenge, as we have already seen. He begins by noting that the free-will defense is unavailable to him, and so he will argue from the greater-good perspective: "[The greater-good defense] does not, in the final analysis, attribute certain evils to the human will and certain others to natural causes; rather, all are finally attributed to the divine reason and will. …[O]nly in permitting evil (evil which God could have prevented by creating men and women such that they freely only ever did what was right) could certain ends be secured."[35] So clearly God, in ordaining specific events we experience as evil (the suffering of a child, say), is attempting to bring about

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[33]Helm (1994), 86.

[34]Maurice Wiles has a particularly helpful discussion. See Wiles (1986), 33–38. For my part, I have my doubts about whether the primary and secondary causes argument gives a coherent picture of God's influence. If the primary cause is the divine upholding, but if we have no reason to suspect that God ever refrains from upholding the chain of secondary causality, then where is the realized divine agency?

[35]Helm (1994), 198.

a good or goods that are necessarily related to the evil or evils in question.[36] Helm's *O felix culpa!* defense[37] distinguishes between two types of such goods, soul-making (non-punitive) and justice-serving (punitive): "The soul-making aspect of the approach maintains that without the occurrence of moral evil certain other goods could not, logically speaking, arise. Without weakness and need, no compassion; without fault, no forgiveness, and so on. This insight must be preserved. The other insight, that offered by the punitive view, is that of the universe as a moral order in which justice reigns."[38]

This is the sketch of a fine answer, as far as it goes. However, even accepting Helm's various arguments that divine compatibilism does not require us to believe that God is the author of evil,[39] for many of us the idea that God nevertheless ordains the evil that other human agents or natural causes have authored is enough to eliminate this theology from consideration. As a preacher at a child's funeral, I am not prepared to say (nor therefore to believe) that the child's death is God's special will in a larger plan, even if God was not the direct author of this part of the plan. The difference between God's command (which can be thwarted) and God's decree (which cannot be) begins to become a distinction without a difference in such a context. Indeed, I need to say to the parent and to myself that God's will for this child has been seriously (if temporarily) thwarted in the event of the child's death. So while the no-risk view may have some advantages in our pursuit of a livable theology (as we saw above), we realize now that it has some other much more negative consequences as well. The magnitude of those consequences are, for me, sufficient grounds to suspend interest in a theology that—although counter-intuitive to me and to many others—obviously carries considerable theological and philosophical weight.

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[36]Helm (1994), 202.

[37]From Adam's "happy fault" in the Fall, "happy" in the sense captured by the collect for the Second Sunday after Christmas, which begins: "O God, who wonderfully created, *and yet more wonderfully restored*, the dignity of human nature." The Episcopal Church (1979), 214, emphasis added.

[38]Helm (1994), 213.

[39]God can uphold and even ordain the free human action (or the naturally caused action in the case of, say, an earthquake) without being responsible for it: "God ordains evil but he does not intend evil as evil, as the human agent intends it." Helm (1994), 190.

3.2.2 "General providence" approaches

Many important modern theologians have presented theologies of providence that move in quite the opposite direction from someone like Helm's. These are the so called "general providences," which deny some or all of what traditional doctrines call "acts of God" in the strong or specific sense. According to these theologians, God acts in general ways, not in particular actions. We will focus here on John Hick's portions of *Why Believe in God?*, co-written as a debate with Anglican-priest-turned-secular-humanist Michael Goulder,[40] as well as Hick's expanded Gifford Lectures, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*.

Hick begins by stressing the apparent reality of religious experience and critiquing the Cartesian tendency to fall into a kind of "bottomless scepticism" about such experiences. He offers instead the view that "[i]t is perfectly reasonable and sane for us to trust our experience as generally cognitive of reality except when we have some reason to doubt it."[41] With this realist trust[42] in place, Hick claims that human beings should, in general, trust their variously felt religious conversion experiences to be effects of the actual reaching out of the living God, who seeks relationship with the "children of God."[43] He writes in the case of mystical experience that "the information dramatised in this way originates at the interface between the Real and the human psyche, being generated by the impact of the one upon the other. Such information is accordingly relational, expressing the relevance or meaning of the transcendent reality to human life."[44]

Still, it is important to understand Hick's sense of divine initiative in these providential experiences. To use again words that are crucial to Hick's theology, God's initiative is general

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[40]The book adapts and recreates an in-person debate at the University of Birmingham in 1982. Goulder and Hick (1983). It is especially attractive for its accessibility and its direct treatment of some of our concerns about science and secularity.

[41]Goulder and Hick (1983), 34. He calls such experiences "uncontroversial instances of religious experience" and includes cases where "the 'information' is mediated through our material environment" (e.g., information about the divine presence interpreted from the events of history) and cases where "the information is received by a direct influence" (e.g., a mystical experience). Hick (1989), 153–154.

[42]To borrow the phrase from Polkinghorne once again.

[43]Goulder and Hick (1983), 73–74.

[44]Hick (1989), 168.

rather than special or particular. The religious conversion is not "a special divine volition in relation to each individual at the time of their conversion" but "human response to a universal divine self-disclosure."[45] So according to Hick, "God's activity in self-revelation"[46] forms a kind of continuous, universal broadcast that is subjective in that it is experienced differently (or not at all) by different people,[47] but is objective in that it really is from God and not, in most cases, merely invented. Religious experience "involve[s] human interpretation and projection" but is not by any means reducible to them.[48] This general proposal takes on special explanatory power with regard to the "pluralistic hypothesis" towards which Hick's *Interpretation* builds; for example, it offers some insight into the problem of why "it is invariably the Catholic Christian who sees a vision of the Blessed Virgin Mary and a Vaishnavite Hindu who sees a vision of Krishna, but not *vice versa*."[49]

Hick draws the same kinds of conclusions about other kinds of divine activity. Following Irenaeus[50] and Schleiermacher, he writes that "the whole process of the universe (and not only a few exceptional incidents within it) constitutes the divine creative action." And so healing, for instance, is always part of God's "personal and purposive" work, because it is "an aspect of the process [of] creation/salvation."[51] Such a process is "person-making," which reminds us of half of Helm's "greater good" defense, but this growth process is "growth in *freedom*,"[52] so Hick also has a kind of free-will defense available within this "teleological theodicy."[53] However, notice the consequences of this doctrine for any particular healing: "just because health, realized so far as our own individual and social patterns of life permit it, is an aspect

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[45]Goulder and Hick (1983), 75, 76, respectively.

[46]Goulder and Hick (1983), 74.

[47]Each according to their gifts and circumstances, it would seem, though again "gift" in the general sense rather than the particular.

[48]Goulder and Hick (1983), 64.

[49]Hick (1989), 166.

[50]For a few more details on the Irenaeus connection, see Hick (1989), 118–120.

[51]Goulder and Hick (1983), 72.

[52]Hick (1989), 119, emphasis added.

[53]To wit: "the tragedies of human breakdown and descent into moral evil . . . are part of the price of creation through finite freedom within a challenging environment." Hick (1989), 121.

of God's universal action, it would be redundant to postulate particular *ad hoc* divine interventions."[54] Another example is perhaps more illustrative of the obvious strength of this position. Hick tells of a particularly important transatlantic flight on which he had left Washington three hours late. Had he been inclined to pray for God's deliverance in this circumstance, he would have found in the end that he had received it thanks to an unusually strong westerly wind: "the pilot announced at one point that we were flying faster than he had ever flown before, at almost the speed of sound; and as a result the plane landed at Heathrow on time." The punchline, of course, was that the "providential" wind had other effects: "the convenience to myself and others flying in one direction must have been balanced by the inconvenience to the hundreds of passengers flying that night in the opposite direction."[55] So, to sum up, claims of God's particular action can either be redundant (particular healings are just individuals' participation in God's universal will to heal) or mistaken (God does not intervene to help one person or tribe over against another person or tribe).

In contrast, then, to the compatibilist account, Hick maintains that "[t]o say the entire process of the universe is God's action is not, of course, to say that God directly does everything that happens . . . God creates us partly through our own freedom. Thus *by no means everything that happens in this world is what God wishes to happen*."[56] Some things, perhaps most things, "just happen" or, rather, some things happen through natural causes (i.e., the self-regulating laws of nature[57]) or through the agency of beings whose own wills are at odds with or ambivalent to God's will. God's will can be seen in the broadest of history's strokes, but rarely in the tiniest details.

The obvious strengths of Hick's position are its scientific resonance and its handling of the theodicy problem. It is no coincidence that Hick routinely uses phrases like "ad hoc divine interventions" to describe postulated special acts of God. Whereas I would prefer to follow Rowan Williams and attempt to reframe the concept of intervention in a way that still makes

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[54]Goulder and Hick (1983), 72.
[55]Goulder and Hick (1983), 78.
[56]Goulder and Hick (1983), 74, emphasis added.
[57]See Hick (1989), 120.

an argument for objective acts of God (at least the incarnation and resurrection), Hick would agree with the secular humanists that this idea must be dispensed with.[58] The reliability of physical law and efficient causality is certainly a strong piece of evidence for Hick's argument.

Similarly, Hick will have no sloppy thinking about providential deliverances, as the airplane example illustrates. The fact of the matter is that biological life is always at least partially in competition, and the success of one individual frequently results in the failure of others. If God specially provides for some, this would seem to imply that God specially refuses to provide for others. Hick is aware of the ethical consequences of such a view, the way it seems to make God responsible for evil, and he explicitly chooses to steer well clear of them.

As for weaknesses, the first may be that Hick tries to squeeze more out of his stripped-down providence than it can really provide. Consider this excerpt about "God's continuous act of creation/redemption": "Its universality does not negate its character as personal action. The fact that God is acting simultaneously towards all his creatures and not only towards me . . . does not mean that he is *not* acting towards me. It means, rather, that God's action is of infinitely greater complexity and scope than mine."[59] Hick seems to be trying to have his cake and eat it too in a way that I suspect is not internally coherent. I can agree that God's action could be personal without being particular. Hick's metaphor of a "broadcasted" sense of divine spiritual outreach serves as a good example. Of course there can be some weak sense in which, say, a radio broadcast is personal communication between the hosts and all those people who are listening to their program. But the show's universality precludes the stronger sense in which Hick seems to imply that God acts "towards me." The radio host has no way of knowing about my interests about a particular story. Granted, this particular objection is not true of an omniscient God. But I doubt that even an omniscient broadcaster can tailor the same story to the *particular* interests of a large number of *particular* listeners. The problem, it seems to me,

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[58]Indeed, Goulder compliments him for the "force and clarity" with which he reinterprets providence to remove these "initiatives and interventions." Goulder and Hick (1983), 87.

[59]Goulder and Hick (1983), 74, emphasis original. Recall also the "relational" work at the interface of the Real and our subjective experience of it. Hick (1989), 168.

is over-constrained. No matter how great the "complexity and scope" of God's action, if it is truly (and solely) universal, then it cannot, objectively, be all things to all people.

It is possible that I am misreading Hick and that he does not wish to imply that "personal" also means "personalized." In this case, the objection shifts somewhat. If he wishes to say that the only personalizing or particularizing enacted in God's agency is in our subjective experience of it or response to it, then the incoherence is not internal but theological. If the revelation of scripture tells us something about God and not just our response to God,[60] then Hick's picture fails to capture scripture's sense of a God who, in word and act, "calls us each by name."[61] Such passages surely claim that God meets us in our particular need, in our particular petitions. As we have said, here Hick pleads for some wise discrimination and is surely right to do so, pointing out how "pray[ers] for divine interventions" smack of tribalism and worse and that "often …the answer to prayer …is a change in ourselves."[62] We will of course have more to say on the concept of divine intervention in the physical world.[63] But if even the consolation of God's felt presence in a particular life must be understood as a general impulse rather than a particular response and embrace, then Goulder's final critique starts to ring true: "[Hick]

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[60]That is, if biblical theology is more than simply "a study of Hebrew religion," as Gilkey worked to (re)establish. Thomas (1983), 33.

[61]The Episcopal Church (1979), 225. See, for example, John 10:3, as well as the moving call narratives of the Old Testament: Abraham, Moses, Samuel, Isaiah, etc.

[62]Goulder and Hick (1983), 77.

[63]Interestingly, Hick anticipates much of what Polkinghorne, Ward, and others have to say on the matter:

> [T]he world is not a totally determined system within which every event, large and small, is mechanically necessitated by the previous states of the world. It is a partially open system within which the limited freedom of mental life is able to interact with matter and affect the developing pattern of events. The nature of mind and of its interactions with matter is perhaps the greatest mystery on the frontiers of science today, and it is at present only possible to speak in very general terms about the system of mental and psycho-physical law in virtue of which 'miracles' of healing, astonishing 'answers to prayer,' remarkable instances of 'luck' and what Jung called 'synchronistic' events occur. Goulder and Hick (1983), 71.

The fact that he is so reluctant to go on to say that God's mind could conceivably have psycho-physical effects on the material universe—and the fact that what he goes on to say instead seems to grant some of these same powers to human minds, albeit in mysterious and unpredictable ways—these facts are important reminders that it is not *primarily* the physical implications of a "divine intervention" that Hick objects to but the ethical implications. The problem is that special acts on God's part would have positive consequences for some and negative consequences for others. Hick is more comfortable with the generally providential rain falling "on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45) than with God's specially providential grace being offered to those "to whom [God] will be gracious" (Exodus 33:19, cf Romans 9:15).

has taken away too much. He has made it too plain how little there is left."[64] When I call to God out of the depths, the word that would be my hope ceases to fulfill its purpose if I cannot believe it is a word for me in my moment of need. I pray that I will never stop asking God why faithful disciples like Michael Goulder never seem to receive such a word despite their fervent prayers. But it would be difficult to persuade me that the only acceptable conclusion is that God is unwilling to enter into particularly personal relationships with individual human beings.[65]

3.2.3 Process-theology approaches

Process theology represents a very different approach to rethinking the classical concept of God and our standard pictures for God's interaction with the world. As is well known, much process theology works from and extends the process metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne. This essay will treat John Cobb and David Ray Griffin's *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition*. We emphasize with the authors that their exposition merely spells out one set of process-theological views among many, so—as with all our overviews in this essay—the statements here should not necessarily be considered generally representative. One final preliminary: In my judgment, there is a danger of dismissing the insights of process theology simply because Whitehead's metaphysic is so counter-intuitive as to be, more or less from the outset, unconvincing to many thinkers.[66] So it is tempting to forgo the metaphysical

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[64]Goulder and Hick (1983), 96.

[65]I believe a doctrine of the Holy Spirit that does not preclude the Spirit "blowing where it will" among non-Christians does some of the work of addressing Hick's strong ethical claims about the tribalism of much Christian thinking about providence. But of course that doesn't solve the problem of willing recipients like Michael Goulder.

[66]See, for example, this assessment from Maurice Wiles:

> "The striking nature of this pan-psychic vision of reality is well illustrated by Whitehead's remark that 'the Castle Rock at Edinburgh exists from moment to moment and from century to century, by reason of the decision effected by its own historic route of antecedent occasions.' The implausibility of such language needs no underlining." Wiles (1986), 32.

To be fair, such dismissal is similar to my own rejection of Helm and other Calvinists simply because I find so troubling the notion of God explicitly ordaining all that happens.

preliminaries and move straight to the theological implications.[67] But the approach we out-lined in the previous chapter affirms the need to match our worldview to our providence, so we will take the time here to outline, in parallel, the process metaphysic and its implications for providence within process theology proper.

Let's begin with an analogy. An image that probably occurs to many scientists trying to understand Whitehead comes from the calculus. In calculus, we conceptually divide the domain of a function into tiny intervals. In many functions, the domain of a function is the time variable t. So the quantity Δt represents a small interval of time, during which the function y changes by some amount Δy (see Figure 3.1). The ratio $\frac{\Delta y}{\Delta t}$ is an approximation of the derivative function, $\frac{dy}{dt}$, which measures the rate of change in y's value at a particular time. Geometrically, the value of the derivative function at a particular time gives the slope of a line that is tangent to the function at that point. In some sense, this derivative line gives the direction the function is heading at a particular moment, though that direction will change by some small amount in the very next moment unless the function itself is a straight line whose direction is not changing.

Process metaphysics also assumes the reality of time,[68] and it too finds meaning in con-sidering very small time intervals. Unlike in calculus, where we only consider the case of the limit of Δt becoming so small that the function really is smooth in time, in process thought the series of brief moments cannot be smooth:[69] "If the process constituting our world were a single smooth flow, the boundaries of events would have to be placed upon them by perception or thought, and there would be no real individuals."[70] So time, for the process philosopher, is a series of moments, irreducibly so. Thus, "true individuals are momentary experiences" and "what we ordinarily call individuals, the sorts of things that endure through time, are not true

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[67]As some theologians have done, according to Wiles. Wiles (1986), 32.

[68]Cobb and Griffin (1976), 16.

[69]The assumptions of smoothness, called continuity and differentiability, preclude functions that have a dis-connected or jagged behavior in time—abrupt changes where the derivative either doesn't exist or has some value in one moment and then jumps to a much larger or smaller value in the very next moment. When writing a non-cursive letter *V*, we create a non-differentiable point where we change directions halfway through the stroke and a discontinuity when we pick up our pen to begin the next letter.
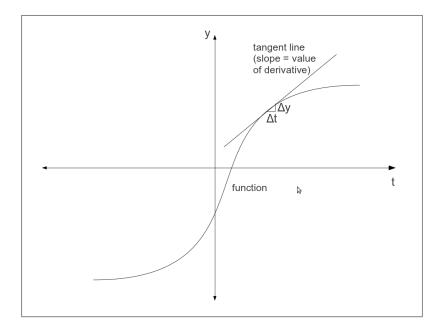
[70]Cobb and Griffin (1976), 14–15.

Figure 3.1 Plot of a function, y, against time, t. The ratio $\frac{\Delta y}{\Delta t}$ is an approximation of the derivative function, $\frac{dy}{dt}$. Since the derivative of the function gives the function's rate of change at any time, if we think of Whitehead's small "moment" of time as Δt, then thinking of the derivative at a particular time reminds us that becoming or "concrescence" occurs for Whitehead in each small moment (Cobb and Griffin's film-and-frame analogy fails to capture this sense of change-in-the-moment, because the moment is represented by a single, static frame of the film). Of course, one of the places where our analogy breaks down is that the function y is smooth (in the calculus, Δt and Δy can get as small as we want), whereas Whitehead believes the passage of time happens in fits and starts; its apparent smoothness is ultimately illusory.

individuals, but are 'societies' of such."[71] So, in our analogy, the plotted shape representing what appears to be a smooth function varying in time (perhaps it represents our mood or fortunes or some other dynamic value) is, in reality, a massively discontinuous "society" of tiny moments (in our analogy, momentary "individuals") that, when viewed from our conscious vantage point, appears to be continuous.[72]

What happens in each of these occasions or moments? Simply put, the moments are where we *become*: "From the external, temporal point of view they happen all at once, yet at a deeper

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[71]Cobb and Griffin (1976), 15.

[72]Cobb and Griffin use the analogy of a motion picture ("the picture appears to be a continuous flow, whereas in reality it is constituted by a series of distinct frames"), which is similarly helpful but breaks down in a key sense that we will consider next. Cobb and Griffin (1976), 14.

level they are not to be understood as things that endure through a tiny bit of time unchanged, but as taking that bit of time to become. Whitehead calls this becoming 'conscrescence,' which means becoming concrete."[73] Each moment is fraught with potential, and in each moment some potential is actualized. This is why the calculus analogy is illustrative, because the derivative $\frac{dy}{dt}$ represents the change taking place in the function at the given time. So the plot of a function is like Whitehead's "society of individuals" (remember: each person is such a "society" in time, for Whitehead). The difference is that, for process thought, the smoothness of the function (i.e., one's experience of the passage of time) is an illusion. Time moves forward in little discontinuous fits and starts.

But what forces shape that movement? This is the key question from our perspective, because the shape of the function traveling through time is analogous to the temporal unfolding of experience for what we would, were it not for Whitehead's claim, normally call the individual. In other words, process theology's picture of providence depends precisely on how conscrescence happens, how potential is actualized, how the grand "society of societies" that is the temporal universe moves forward into the future together. We have space here for only a few comments.

A key concept for understanding how the universe chugs along under God's influence is enjoyment:

> To many people the term "process" suggests something external and objective, but for Whitehead the units of process are always as much internal as external, as much subjective as objective. They are . . . "occasions of experience." In the moment of concrescence, each unit of process "enjoys" what Whitehead calls "subjective immediacy." Only when its process of concrescence is completed and hence is past does that unit of process become a datum or object for new processes to take into account. The word "enjoy," which Whitehead frequently uses, is more suggestive than the term "process." This is both advantageous and disadvantageous. It is

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[73]Cobb and Griffin (1976), 15. This is where the motion-picture analogy fails, "since the individual pictures are static whereas our individual occasions of experience are dynamic acts of concrescence." Cobb and Griffin (1976), 15.

advantageous in that the statement that all units of process are characterized by en-
joyment makes clear that every such unit has intrinsic value, an inner reality in and
for itself. It is disadvantageous in that it tends to suggest connotations that cannot
be attributed to all units of process, even though all are occasions of experience
... To be, to actualize oneself, to act upon others, to share in a wider community,
is to enjoy being an experiencing subject quite apart from any accompanying pain
or pleasure. ... In this sense, every individual unit of process enjoys its own exis-
tence.[74]

So individuals (including, say "[m]ountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars"[75]) realize
their futures and relate to one another harmoniously[76] through moments of "enjoyable" becom-
ing.

Properly understood, this doctrine can bring into better balance the Judeo-Christian per-
spective on the Creator/creature relation and roles. In short, process theology holds that "[t]he
world is indeed creation ... but it is also creative."[77] God has played a unique and essential
role in bringing this universe to this moment (more on God's role below), but all of creation
takes part with God in actualizing it.[78] From the perspective of this moment, the current en-
vironment has been given to us by the working of efficient causation in a chain of momentary
baton-passings that we can look back at and describe via the concept of cause and effect. But
in the concrescence of *this* moment, we see that efficient causality was not the only "force" at
work in that process. In each moment, "[f]inal causation finishes what efficient causation had
begun ... The purpose of every occasion of experience is enjoyment of an appropriate kind.
The aim of the present occasion of experience is first of all to create an enjoyable experience

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[74]Cobb and Griffin (1976), 16–17.
[75]Psalm 148:9 (BCP translation). The Episcopal Church (1979), 806.
[76]Indeed, all individuals are "essentially related," which is part of what distinguishes Whitehead's understand-
ing of process from Leibniz's; Leibniz's monads are islands to themselves, whereas Whitehead's moments "be-
gin[], as it were, as an open window to the totality of the past"—the past of both other "societies" (people and
things) as well as their own. Cobb and Griffin (1976), 20.
[77]Cobb and Griffin (1976), 24.
[78]Cobb and Griffin (1976), 24.

for itself out of the available materials."[79] Final causation *pulls* the future into being, in a way that complements the apparent *push* of efficient causality.

The source of this magnetic attraction is the desire all individuals have for enjoyment. Cobb and Griffin write, "This doctrine of the partial self-determination of every actuality reconciles efficient and final causation, real influence with real freedom." If they're correct in this judgment, then they help prevent us from falling into the Calvinist trap of being so "overwhelmed with the sense of dependence [i.e., ours on God] that [we] deny that we have anything to do with the kinds of beings we become."[80] The trade-off here is that we must again, as Hick does in a different way, surrender any desire we have to hold a no- (or perhaps even low-) risk providence. Guiding creatures to actualize opportunities for enjoyment is an inherently non-coercive act on God's part, and the creatures can always choose differently.

However, God's role is nevertheless unique and necessary. Although process thought accepts the notion that "all of the possibilities in an actuality arise by means of prehending other actualities," this does not mean that there is nothing new under the sun. God is the source of the potential for the new: "The possibilities that were previously unactualized in the world are derived from the divine experience. One aspect of God is a primordial envisagement of the pure possibilities. They are envisaged with appetition that they be actualized in the world."[81] And so God is the source of what Whitehead calls *novelty*, which together with enjoyment forms the economy, as it were, of process theology. God wants to actualize creaturely enjoyment, but God also wants to bring about the new and unexpected and previously unexperienced. Sometimes the new comes about at the expense of the previously enjoyed but previously experienced. Sometimes the enjoyable comes about at the expense of novelty that might have been, and might have therefore become an opportunity for fuller subsequent enjoyment.

If we are hearing in this economy the beginnings of a theodicy, then we are already recognizing the greatest strength of process theology from the perspective of our criteria. As does Hick's, Cobb and Griffin's providence holds within it the opportunity for a two-pronged attack

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[79]Cobb and Griffin (1976), 25.
[80]Cobb and Griffin (1976), 25.
[81]Cobb and Griffin (1976), 28.

on the problem. First, since "the power of God is persuasive, not controlling" it follows that "[f]inite actualities can fail to conform to the divine aims for them."[82] This is a free-will argument. And yet if we and the beings we are essentially related to (i.e., all of them) are to seek out novelty together, then we are to avoid unnecessary triviality, and this avoidance can give birth to evil as well as good: "But if [eliminating discord] were the sole criterion of moral perfection, then . . . God would have abstained from creating a world altogether, that being the only way to guarantee the absence of all suffering! Within the context of process thought, this would mean that God would not stimulate the chaos to incarnate increasingly complex forms of order."[83] We are back, in a sense, to Helm's point: "Without weakness and need, no compassion; without fault, no forgiveness, and so on." This is a greater good defense. In their treatment Cobb and Griffin give a thorough analysis of how "the capacity for intrinsic good," "the capacity for intrinsic evil," "the capacity for instrumental good," "the capacity for instrumental evil," and "the power for self-determination" are related in their process-thought framework. They claim that the correlation between all five is necessary rather than contingent[84]), so that increasing the capacity for intrinsic good also increases the other four "dimensions of experience."[85] As with Helm, we have here a strong argument for why evil exists in God's good creation; unlike with Helm, we make no claim that God could have brought about a world without suffering, and, more importantly, we are not forced too closely to associate the evil with God's will.

The other strength of Cobb and Griffin's process providence is its (surprising?) internal coherence. Whatever Whitehead's philosophical eccentricities, he certainly has a mathematician's knack for rigorous systematic thought.[86] Because God's role in the unfolding of time is a matter of ideation, there is no need to worry about the causal joint problem.[87] And I believe there is great promise in Cobb and Griffin's picture of the complementary working of efficient and final causality, where efficient causality helps make concrete the reality toward

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[82]Cobb and Griffin (1976), 69.

[83]Cobb and Griffin (1976), 70.

[84]Unlike in traditional theism, where contingent reality is created "out of absolute nothingness." Cobb and Griffin (1976), 71.

[85]Cobb and Griffin (1976), 71.

[86]Though I fear an abbreviated treatment like this one can never make this fact appropriately apparent.

[87]Assuming we are not materialists, of course.

which (God's) final causality is gently tugging us. This picture strikes me as having a better shot at coherence than Helm's appeal to "nested"[88] primary and secondary causality. Indeed, in reducing the passage of time to a series of finite moments, they help us to see in a heuristic way how two types of causality can work together. In each moment, God as final cause presents the present, as it were, with alternative futures to be realized by efficient causality.

Of course, the glaring potential exception to this coherence comes from the way in which process thought at least appears to be pan-psychic, to borrow Wiles's term. For instance, when it comes to "subjects" like nucleons and chaotic pendulums, it may be that efficient causality can unfold in different ways; for instance, a chaotic pendulum will behave differently in two different sets of swings from the same release point, or a radioactive isotope might be presented in each moment with the "decision" to decay or not to decay.[89] But surely the Castle Rock has no real choice about the future it will self-actualize, no real opportunity for release from what looks (to a human subject) to be the very definition of triviality.[90]

One serious challenge for process thought is theological coherence. Although the inter-working of the concepts of essential relatedness, enjoyment, and novelty create fertile ground for reflection on love of God and love of neighbor, in my judgment the system shows some strain when it is stretched over the skeleton of Christianity's other dominant concepts and metaphors. To use Helm's terminology, I wonder if too much biblical data goes unaccounted for. For instance, it is difficult to resist the tendency to understand this theology in an overly creature-centric way, even if we avoid the predictable misunderstanding of Whitehead's idea of enjoyment—confusing it with human enjoyment in our usual sense of that word. It's tempting (and perhaps unavoidable) to understand process theology as a kind of divine utilitarianism (realize the greatest enjoyment and novelty for the greatest number) that Luther would surely

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[88]My term, at least so far as I know.

[89]Granted, there is no easy answer to the question of whether efficient causality is operative at all at the quantum level.

[90]The reply, presumably, is that the Castle Rock continues to "enjoy" a perfectly self-expressive existence in each moment, since "although there is no absolute line between the inanimate and the animate worlds, in the former the presence of the Logos is barely distinguishable from the repetition of the past. It is in living things that the proper work of the Logos is significantly manifest." Cobb and Griffin (1976), 98.

label a "theology of glory" rather than a "theology of the cross."[91] Consider, for example, the understanding of God as "the divine Eros urging the world to new heights of enjoyment."[92] This is a lovely picture, to be sure. I would like to understand God primarily as Enjoyment-itself and as an ideational agent reaching out to me in a non-coercive call to make the enjoyment- and novelty- maximizing decisions available to me and those around me. But as a master metaphor, this image does beg the question of whether process theology can appropriately understand, to use Luther's phrase, "God hidden in suffering."[93] To be clear: I am not saying that process theology does not offer a response to this challenge, nor that more classical theologies do not or should not contain the "divine Eros" insight that is so central in process thought. But to me, the centrality of enjoyment in this theological system, even when that term is properly understood, interferes with our ability to see in this theology the fullness of the Christian tradition's insights into the nature of God, our lives of discipleship, and the actual unfolding of God's purposes.

I will be briefer as regards our remaining criteria, scientific resonance and the consolation of hope. With respect to the former, Polkinghorne believes that modern physics has not shown itself to be a very soft landing spot for Whitehead's metaphysics, despite "the fitful jerkiness of quantum theory."[94] I am inclined to agree, to the extent that I have reliable insight into either. More generally, a scientific culture tending generally toward materialism may be puzzled by all this business of inanimate objects having experience, however limited. On the other hand, there is no physical divine intervention in process theology, so that is one cup removed from the list of challenges process theology faces from the apparent witness of science.

As for the consolation offered by this theology, we have a similarly mixed set of issues to consider. On the positive side, process theology explicitly rejects some of classical theism's

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[91]"Now it is not sufficient for anyone, and it does him no good to recognize God in his glory and majesty, unless he recognizes him in the humility and shame of the cross." Luther (2008), article 20.

[92]Cobb and Griffin (1976), 26.

[93]Luther (2008), article 21. Of course, Luther's view has its own problems to overcome, problems that Cobb and Griffin are probably reacting against in some ways.

[94]Polkinghorne (1996a), 22. An interesting speculation: "It may be significant that it was in 1924 that he [Whitehead] left the applied mathematics department at Imperial College, London, to take up a chair of philosophy at Harvard. Thus the period in which he would have been in closest touch with the thinking of physicists came to an end just before the *anni mirabiles* of 1925–26 in which modern quantum theory came to birth." Polkinghorne (1996a), 22–23.

difficult pills to swallow, including God as "Unchanging and Passionless Absolute" and as "Sanctioner of the Status Quo." Those yearning for a God-With-Us who does not ordain injustice will find Cobb and Griffin's account attractive. On the other hand, we should mention here a challenge we could have introduced when discussing Hick: the question of what grounds our *ultimate* hope as regards God's promises. Any co-creatorial providence that does not tackle the causal joint problem will be vulnerable to the criticism that God's plan for a final and at-least-partially-material redemption could be permanently frustrated. Will the non-coercive lure of a more perfect future be powerful enough to draw us into it? In process theology, God takes risks. A question that will linger in our minds is, "Are they too high?"

3.2.4 "Open theism" approaches

Our final position shares many insights with the process-theology approach but does not, in my view, quite require so radical a rewriting of the classical concept of God. A comparatively recent development (recent even with respect to process thought), it is generally known as "open theism" and was articulated by Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*.[95] I will discuss in this essay Hasker's later *Providence, Evil, and the Openness of God.*

One of the major achievements of the process theologians was to present a compelling argument that a shift away from divine timelessness, immutability, and impassibility need not endanger God's perfection. Open theism also makes this shift (though without some of process theology's other baggage). For Hasker, "God is not remote, closed off and self-contained. Rather, God is open to us his creatures, to the world he has made, and to the future."[96] This is not to say that the God of open theism is unreliable and vulnerable, or that God shares our precise experience of time; the account is more dialectical, portraying God "as majestic yet intimate, as powerful yet gentle and responsive, as holy and loving and caring, as desiring for

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[95]Pinnock et al. (1994).
[96]Hasker (2004), 97.

humans to decide freely for or against his will for them, yet endlessly resourceful in achieving his ultimate purposes."[97]

For the purposes of an essay on providence, the reconsideration of timelessness is our most important concern. Hasker believes timelessness has not been "shown to be incoherent or unintelligible," but he does find it lacking, partly because he thinks it is unbiblical—merely "read into a few biblical texts only after we have already settled, on other grounds, that this is the way God must be understood."[98] An additional concern is the well-known possible incoherence of the idea that a timeless deity can have any meaningful personal relationship with time-bound creatures: "a timeless God would be able to know us human beings only as timeless representations in his 'eternal present'; this . . . detracts seriously from the personalism and intimacy which are so important to our relationship with God."[99] Recall from Helm's discussion that Calvin handled this problem with his doctrine of accommodation; our experience of God as Being-in-time is a necessary by-product of God's condescension to us creatures—and nothing more. Hasker would reply that our time-bound experience of God is not entirely misleading as regards God's character, that something like a personal relationship exists between God and human beings, that God's "personality" is not purely for show, as it were. He writes, "To be sure, a flatly literal reading of the biblical descriptions of God's emotions is implausible; surely there is much here of anthropomorphism—or, more precisely, 'anthropopathism.' Nevertheless, when we read that 'As a father pities his children, so the LORD pities those who fear him' (Psalm 103:13), we take this for a true description of the inner life of God."[100]

Of course, the question of whether God has at least some experience of time is important because it affects the options available to God for bringing about a providential future. A quote of some length will both illustrate and provide some review:

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[97]Pinnock et al. (1994), 154.

[98]Hasker (2004), 100. Notice, of course, the subtitle of *The Openness of God*.

[99]Hasker (2004), 100. In this light, it's not hard to see the potential appeal of this position to an evangelical like John Polkinghorne.

[100]Hasker (2004), 105.

> If God is not all-determining, as the Calvinists think, if he does not possess middle knowledge, as urged by the Molinists, if he does not possess "simple foreknowledge" of the actual future, and if, like us, he experiences the passage of time moment by moment and not all at once in the "eternal now," then it follows ineluctably that God's knowledge of the future, incomparably greater though it is than any knowledge we could possess, is not the complete, certain and infinitely detailed knowledge posited by most of the theological tradition.[101]

As Hasker says elsewhere, God still "knows everything that logically can be known," but "it is logically impossible for God to have foreknowledge of creaturely actions that are truly free."[102] And so the implication is that "God knows an immense amount about each one of us—far more, in fact, than we know about ourselves—but he does not, because he cannot, plan his actions toward us on the basis of a prior [certain] knowledge of how we will respond. That is to say: he is not a manipulator, relating to us by 'pressing the right buttons' to get the exact response he desires to elicit.'"[103] But, as we shall see, and in contrast to Hick's more general account, this does not mean that God doesn't push some specific buttons, does not act in some specific ways. This statement requires some careful qualification, of course, and we will return to it below.

One obvious criticism of this position, even if we buy Hasker's argument about the logical impossibility of foreknowledge, is that it least appears to put some troublesome limits on God's power. But Hasker is quick to note that he is not claiming that God could not have created a universe that would be subject to a divinely deterministic providence. His supposition is that God had that option available but chose, instead, to create a universe wherein some creatures have libertarian (i.e., non-deterministic) freedom. Thus, "the difference does not concern the essential divine attribute but rather the sort of universe God has freely chosen to create."[104] As is so often the case in theology, we should at this point humbly acknowledge that we cannot

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[101]Hasker (2004), 100–101.
[102]Hasker (2004), 101. Recall that this observation was Helm's reason for rejecting Molinism as incoherent.
[103]Hasker (2004), 101.
[104]Hasker (2004), 127.

make confident pronouncements about what God has done, let alone what God might have done. Nevertheless, this speculation seems at least plausible.

With the above ideas about God's character and God's knowledge in place, our remaining questions are about God's interaction with the world and the reflections on theodicy that emerge from such a view. In open theism, God does not determine everything that happens (Helm), but neither is God limited to general action (Hick) or to the non-coercive lure of presenting each moment with a godly and beneficial aim (Cobb and Griffin). To put it crudely, "God can do anything that is logically coherent and consistent with his own moral perfection." Hasker is surely right to point out that, "to our eyes, at least, there is a great deal that could be done."[105] So we are left in a challenging put potentially rich position, a middle ground between general and special providence. The territory is challenging because we will have to explain why a God who *can* act in specific ways *does not* act more often to avert moral and natural evil. It is rich because our providential hopes are better grounded in this account than in Hick's or Cobb and Griffin's, and yet we are not forced into Helm's position of attributing the circumstances of evil (if not the moral responsibility) to God's determining will.

In his defense of the possibility but apparent infrequency of God's intervention with the regular workings of the laws of nature and human free will, Hasker puts forward four propositions:

1. The problem of divine non-intervention is a serious difficulty for free-will theism only if it is clear that there are situations in which God ought to intervene but fails to do so.

2. Frequent or routine divine intervention would negate many of the purposes for which the world was created in the first place.

3. In order for the problem of divine non-intervention to be an effective objection, we must be able to identify specific kinds of cases in which God morally ought to intervene but does not.

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[105] Hasker (2004), 144.

4. The needed criterion cannot be provided by supposing that God must prevent all "gratuitous" evils.[106]

The first proposition reminds us that not just any occasion that displeases or saddens us should be grounds for questioning a good God's existence. Hasker writes, "What is needed here is a sober argument, one which is compelling after mature reflection, showing that a powerful and morally good being would *of necessity* intervene."[107] The second—and I believe most important[108]—proposition invites us to imagine what a chaotic and unreliable place the universe would be if God were to go around intervening in a non-self-limited way. Indeed, Hasker's words here remind us of Rowan Williams's agreement with Richard Dawkins in Chapter 1: "If part of the purpose of creation was to bring about a rich, intricate, closely-interrelated natural order, then it would be a sign of failure if that order required frequent interference in order to function properly."[109] Hasker's third point is the most difficult to grasp and requires further elaboration:

> It is clear . . . that for God to [intervene] on a routine basis would undermine God's purposes in creation. In fact, it seems that the amount of special intervention that could occur consistent with those purposes may be rather small; almost certainly far less than would be needed to materially affect the overall balance of good and evil in the world. Now it still might be the case that we can identify certain specific evils, or certain classes of evils, such that a wise and good God could not permit *those particular* evils to occur. But if not, we must remember that we are (by hypothesis) dealing with a God of infinite wisdom, and we must be prepared to defer to that wisdom concerning the suitable occasions for special intervention . . . [T]hose who would employ the problem of divine non-intervention as an argument against traditional theism need to be looking for a strongly supported

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[106]Hasker (2004), 145, 145, 146, and 147, respectively.

[107]Hasker (2004), 145, emphasis added. A larger-than-expected income tax bill, for instance, is hardly grounds for accusations of divine dereliction or nonexistence.

[108]Because I am a critical realist living in an age so shaped by scientific assumptions.

[109]Hasker (2004), 145.

criterion by which to discern the situation in which intervention would be mandatory.

This is a subtle point. Its strength is that it acknowledges that the omniscient and wholly good God whose existence we are considering would naturally know better than us, in general, which kinds of evil are worth endangering the reliability of the natural order in order for God to prevent. So if we're going to attack God's moral goodness or very existence, we had better be prepared to articulate precisely what sort of evil it is God's moral responsibility to prevent. And now it is clear where Hasker is leading in (4), which is where, he writes, the argument "departs from the conventional wisdom on this topic."[110] The argument, which Hasker notes requires article- and chapter-length treatments to execute in full,[111] hinges on the fact that our belief in libertarian freedom is motivated in part by our belief in human responsibility. If God were known to swoop in and prevent gratuitous evil, what reason would we have for working to prevent it ourselves? "For whatever the evil in question, we could be certain that, if the evil in fact occurs, it has been allowed to occur by God only because its occurrence will lead to some greater good, or to the prevention of some other equal or greater evil."[112] The consequence, says this line of thinking, is that our moral instincts for preventing gratuitous evil ourselves end up being calibrated exactly backwards: "By preventing some [gratuitous] evil that would otherwise have occurred, we are most certainly not increasing the total goodness of the world, and may very well be causing the world overall to be worse than it otherwise would be."[113] Now, this strikes me as one of those formal arguments that is more impressive for its cleverness than its resonance. But the basic insight, that a God who makes a habit of "bailing us out" cannot hope for us to grow as responsible moral agents, seems sound. In this understanding of providence, God faces the same kind of "slippery slope" situation that we human beings routinely face when weighing costs and benefits of a particular action. We cannot know how God makes up God's mind, as it were. But what this argument makes clear

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[110]Hasker (2004), 147.
[111]See his note 16 for a list of starting places. Hasker (2004), 150.
[112]Hasker (2004), 147.
[113]Hasker (2004), 147.

is that, even for the absolute worst evils we can think of, perhaps God's moral situation is not so simple as it first appears.

Let us therefore begin our assessment of Hasker's proposal with respect to our five criteria. This section will be short because (1) I have not been as diligent as I might have been in hiding my strong positive assessment of this position as we've gone along, and (2) this position will form the basis of my own, and so I will have much more to say about its merits in the following chapter. For instance, it should be clear from the sketch above that I believe Hasker's providence scores better on theodicy than does Helm, but not as well as Hick and especially Cobb and Griffin. However, in my judgment, open theism's other virtues are considerable, and its theodicy is about as strong as one can expect for a position that upholds the possibility of God acting in specific, objective ways (as I believe God does).[114]

Regarding theological coherence, open theism scores very highly, in my view, avoiding as it does Helm's false choice[115] about whether to discount one large swath of biblical witness about God's character or the other. And it certainly makes better sense of the Bible's general picture of a God who *acts* than do Hick and Cobb and Griffin. Of course, to support this doctrine of providence commits us to a concept of God that is at odds with a vast majority of our inherited theological tradition, so we mustn't be too confident too soon just because it seems to solve more problems than it creates. Still, the outlook is bright, I believe. I have commented as well on the internal coherence of this position, reciting Hasker's argument that a God who lacks full knowledge of the future is still omniscient; this God is simply limited in what can be known by virtue of God's choice to give us libertarian free will.[116] So too can God still be all-powerful even though God self-limits the divine power in order to ensure the reliability of the natural order.[117] I find these arguments persuasive.

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[114]Of course, we need to put limits on what we might suppose those ways are. We need to ground them in a concept of God that is loving rather than punishing. I am prepared to defend God's failing to prevent the recent earthquake in Haiti but not to entertain the notion that God was the interventionist cause of it.

[115]Grace is either irresistible or as resistible as a human gift; God's knowledge is either complete in past, present, and future or is like the knowledge of a human expert, etc.

[116]Hasker (2004), 101.

[117]This should remind us of Hooker's idea that "[t]he being of God is a kinde of lawe to his working." Hooker (1977b), I.2.2 (59).

I believe the scientific resonance of this position is better than it may first appear. Of course, Hasker is not shy (as I will be) about using the term *intervention*. But whatever we call it, God's concrete action poses a problem to the idea of a universe that unfolds through natural causes alone, and so we will have to spend some considerable time with the causal joint problem. Hasker does not treat this problem in any depth, though he notes "God's causal activity in the world is of a different sort than the causal activity that creatures exercise on each other."[118] Thankfully, other open theists have devoted considerable thought to this question, notably John Polkinghorne and Keith Ward. Of course, that no less a physicist than Polkinghorne could find this position persuasive should be a hint that there is considerable potential to rehabilitate its scientific resonance. The key to such an approach, I believe, is to ground the appeal to the possibility of "actual divine activity" in what we have learned about "the intrinsically open character of physical process."[119] But more on this task in the next chapter.

The cost (to our theodicy and our scientific resonance) of affirming the possibility of objective divine action, as open theism allows us to do, is in my opinion well worth paying. The benefit, as I have hinted, is that we have renewed reason for our confidence in God's ultimate promises. If we affirm that there is injustice in the universe that violates God's will (*contra* Helm), then we must affirm too that God has the power to ultimately and materially redeem that injustice. I am not optimistic that God can merely lure us to effect the redemption ourselves (process thought), especially if God cannot even inspire individuals in specific ways (Hick). However, open theism presents us with an attractive alternative. As Hasker concludes one of his chapters, so shall we finally conclude our survey of open theism and of approaches to providence more generally:

> The ultimate victory of God's cause is not in doubt, [though] at present that victory for the most part *is not evident to us*. Our God is a *fighting God*, one whose arm is strong and whose final triumph cannot be prevented—but in the meantime, much can and does happen that is contrary to his loving will and purpose for his

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[118]Hasker (2004), 99.
[119]Polkinghorne (1996a), 79.

creatures. It is this vision of God, and his providence, that the open view of God seeks to capture.

In this essay's final substantive chapter, I will attempt to play my own small part in capturing a part of this divine vision.

3.3 Summary of assessments

In summary, then, we have presented criteria for assessing doctrines of providence and have used them to survey four distinct approaches: Helm's no-risk compatibilism, Hick's general providence, Cobb and Griffin's process-theological account, and Hasker's open theism. Although the following chapter attempts to learn from the insights from each approach, I have ultimately decided to base my own position on Hasker's. Helm will probably never convince me that theological determinism and human freedom are ultimately reconcilable, and the insights of twentieth-century science seem to me to provide further evidence that determinism in any form is not an accurate description of the way things are. Regarding Hick, I agree with Goulder that the former has removed too much from the traditional concept of God. Though the position is strong in its theodicy and scientific resonance, it leaves us with little reason to trust in the divine promises—even the promise of God's personal presence with us in a way that "calls us each by name." Finally, I believe process theology is significantly appealing and that its chief virtues are in the theological subjects this essay treats. Nevertheless, Cobb and Griffin give us no more reason than Hick to take God at God's word about our ultimate hope of redemption, and, in my view, their commitment to the process metaphysic creates some difficult and perhaps unsolvable challenges for giving an account that sufficiently captures whatever consensus we have about what constitutes the Christian life. We are left, then, with Hasker and open theism. I am convinced that this position is most faithful to the biblical witness and—despite the historical dominance of classical theism in learned circles—that it best describes the God of Israel as experienced by countless Christians and Jews throughout the axial and post-axial age. I think it is the most well-balanced with respect to our five criteria, and I am

encouraged by the work that has occurred in the past decade or so to improve its scientific resonance. In this last matter in particular, see Chapter 4 for more detail.

Chapter 4

Position: A forward-looking providence

It is time to bring the substantive part of this essay to a close. What follows is a brief theology of providence in which I will describe, in three parts, my position about God's ordering and governing of the universe. The chapter will be primarily theological, though I will treat as necessary some of the important philosophical and scientific questions that have been with us all along. Obviously, whatever I could say in the space that remains will be tentative and qualified, even by the standards of a self-consciously speculative discipline and an intrinsically mysterious subject matter. My goal is to sketch out a position that brings together some of what we have learned and responds to the concerns we have been developing about doing theology in a secular and scientific age. We're striving not for a rigorous treatment that settles or even addresses all our questions and challenges (especially our scientific questions) but a big-picture view that leverages both our lens and the brief survey we have performed with it. We will label this position "forward-looking providence," a view that sees God *in* the moment but not *of* it[1]— working now to realize "Divine presence and purpose" but also considering "the consequences [such action] would have elsewhere in the system"[2] in the future. It is a view of "true becoming"[3] heavily influenced by not only Hasker but especially John Polkinghorne and Keith Ward.

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[1] *pace*, process theists
[2] Ward (1990), 129.
[3] Polkinghorne (1996a), 61.

4.1 A God of possibility

As I said in Chapter 3, I agree with Hasker's assessment that an open concept of God
coheres well with the biblical witness. That witness is to a God who journeys in the desert
with a chosen, pilgrim people and eventually even becomes such a pilgrim, Jesus of Nazareth.
In this sense, our account can benefit from the exegesis of Jürgen Moltmann's *Theology of
Hope*. Moltmann insists that the God of our theological speculation is the Hebrew God of the
exodus people, not a Parmenidean god of Greco-Roman agrarianism. Thus, our understanding
of history is pointed and dynamic:

> The stories of Israelite history . . . are treated as themes pregnant with future. Even
> where the historic tradition passes over into legendary tradition, the peculiarly Is-
> raelite tradition is still dominated by the hopes and expectations kindled by Yah-
> weh's promises. Since the history that was once experienced contains an element
> that transcends history in its pastness and is pregnant with future, and to the extent
> that this is so, two things follow: first, this history must again and again be recalled
> and brought to mind in the present, and secondly, it must be so expounded to the
> present that the latter can derive from history an understanding of itself and its
> future path and can also find its own place in the history of the working of God's
> promises.[4]

Here Moltmann claims not just that God has shaped our historical experience but that God is
present to our current experience as we tell the story of our walk with God and as we embrace
a future pregnant with divine possibility. What I am claiming is that there is a sense in which
God experiences the whole process in something like this nomadic way, walking with us, as
it were.[5] To be sure, God's role is different from ours: God is the creator and sustainer of us
pilgrims and of the landscape through which we journey, and God is the giver of the promises
that carry the ultimate meaning of that pilgrimage. Moreover, God has a manifestly fuller

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[4]Moltmann (2010), 95.

[5]See Micah 6:1–8, including not just the instruction to "walk humbly" but the recitation of "the saving acts of
the LORD."

(but necessarily incomplete) knowledge of what lies ahead and which forks in the road God's human pilgrims might choose. But I believe that the process theologians are essentially right that God is present to us as possibility because God is considering possibilities and presenting them to us as choices to embrace (or not). To my reading, Moltmann himself seems to hold this view as well: "God is not first known at the end of history, but in the midst of history while it is in the making, remain[ing] open and depend[ing] on the play of the promises . . . Knowledge of God is then a knowledge that draws us onwards—not upwards—into situations that are not yet finalized but still outstanding."[6]

A God of possibility experiences the circumstances of the present as a given, a given that God and God's creatures have arrived at together and from which they will proceed together, through the people's obedience and disobedience and by God's steadfast grace and mercy. A helpful text for us to consider in this light is the Joseph narrative of Genesis 37–50, which we will consider here and return to throughout this chapter. Recall that this narrative involves great personal tragedy but results in Jacob's family surviving the famine that strikes in the years following Joseph's being sold into slavery. For now, what we need to recognize in the story is the way it unfolds. Why do Joseph's brothers "conspire[] to kill him"[7]? Because they are jealous of his father's love for him[8] and resentful of his condescending "dreams" and "words."[9] Why does Joseph arrive at the house of Potiphar? Because the latter "bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there."[10] Why does Joseph get sent to the king's prison? Because "Joseph was handsome and good-looking,"[11] and Potiphar's wife makes an unsuccessful advance and then sets him up after he flees. The story goes on and on, and we are told several times that "The Lord was with Joseph."[12] But it is not until Chapter 41, the point at which Joseph hears Pharaoh's dream, that we learn anything about the famine,

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[6]Moltmann (2010), 105. John Sanders includes Moltmann in what he calls the "dynamic omniscience" (as opposed to "exhaustive definitive foreknowledge") school. See Sanders (1998), 168.
[7]Genesis 37:18.
[8]Genesis 37:4.
[9]Genesis 37:8.
[10]Genesis 39:1.
[11]Genesis 39:6.
[12]E.g., Genesis 39:2 and 39:21.

deliverance from which Joseph famously ascribes to God at the end of the story.[13] The story is certainly not presented to us as one in which God originally sets out to bring Jacob's family to Egypt to ride out the famine. On the contrary, God seems to work with the characters' free actions and the circumstances of the situation *as they arise*. Eventually, the situation is such that Jacob's sons find in Egypt a powerful if conflicted ally when they show up there. If things had happened differently, presumably God would have had to find another way to bring about an outcome that would be favorable for Jacob's family.[14] From the perspective of this story, faithful living for God's covenant peoples becomes a matter of paying expectant attention to the circumstances presenting themselves (the same circumstances God surveys and responds to in each moment). This is life lived "on tip-toes, hoping for the coming promises of God"[15] and discerning the ways in which the Holy Spirit is working to bring those promises to fulfillment.

Notice that our emphasis on the moment of the present and God's almost improvisational[16] work in that moment is a natural byproduct of the fact that the present is the threshold beyond which even God's knowledge is necessarily incomplete. However, this is not to say that the purposes of the God of possibility cannot be far-reaching. There are two senses in which this is the case.

First, we note that part of what it means to be a God of possibility is to *preclude* certain possibilities. Hasker's definition of open theism noted that God can do any logically consistent

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[13]"Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today." Genesis 50:20.

[14]John Goldingay puts it this way: "The First Testament story never talks about God having a plan for the world or a plan of salvation or a plan for people's individual lives, and the story it tells does not look like one that resulted from a plan ... The story does not give the impression that from the beginning God had planned the flood, or the summons of Abraham, or the exodus, or the introduction of the monarchy, or the building of the temple, or the exile, or the sending of a messiah. It portrays these as responses to concrete situations." Goldingay (2003). Sanders discusses this quotation under the heading "Divine Goals with Open Routes," a helpfully descriptive phrase for capturing what we're getting at here. Sanders (1998), 168.

[15]I am indebted to Kate Sonderegger, in a lecture on Moltmann, for this charming expression. She continued, "They do so not because they have some meta-theory, but simply because they hope in God. You don't explain it, you simply live it."

[16]I say "*almost* improvisational" as a sloppy shorthand way of acknowledging that our experience of improvisation is different indeed from God's analogous experience. Given complete knowledge of the past and present, it is difficult to imagine God being genuinely surprised very often. When you have a very, very good guess for what is going to happen in the next moment, the sense in which your response will bear the harried mark of improvisation is small. How much more so for the God "from whom no secrets are hid." The Episcopal Church (1979), 323.

thing, but this does not mean that God routinely does so. Here we are in a position to ground our account explicitly in soil enriched by centuries of scientific observation and theorizing. Our account stresses the *reliability* of God and God's ordering of the universe through regular natural laws. So, for instance, we will not expect rigid bodies with a small drag profile to fall in Earth's gravity at a rate other than 32.2 $\frac{ft}{s^2}$ or a chemical reaction to proceed without the required activation energy. God has generally ruled out certain possibilities, like falling up or changing the total energy of a closed system. In short, "God's relationship with the world must be continuing and not intermittent; it can have nothing capricious about it, but it must be characterized by the most profound consistency."[17] (What's so exciting about the study of cosmology is that we can watch, or at least imagine, these laws coming into being as the unfolding of cosmic history proceeds.[18]) The universe might have been certain other ways,[19] but God has chosen this particular way and, as such, eliminated certain other possibilities. Thanks be to God that it is so, since we can well imagine more arbitrary universes much less suitable to our flourishing.[20]

A second sense in which "the arm of the LORD is not too short"[21] to reach into the future is that God can set in motion relatively autonomous processes that will continue into the future. A fairly simple and relatively short-lived example might be the Holy Spirit's inspiration[22] of a congregation to start a soup kitchen or other feeding ministry. God doesn't in that moment determine every detail about if and how the program will be institutionalized, what days it will be open, what food will be served, etc. But God does set in motion a process that results in

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[17]Polkinghorne (1989), 6. He writes later, "God is no celestial conjurer, doing an occasional turn, but his actions must always be characterized by the deepest possible consistency and rationality." Polkinghorne (1989), 45.

[18]See Polkinghorne (1996a), 71–73, for an evocative description.

[19]Though bear in mind that the anthropic principle suggests that "the evolution of carbon-based life depended upon a very delicate balance among the basic forces of nature." Polkinghorne (1996a), 195. So other universes are possible but not necessarily beneficial, from the perspective of God's desire to be in relation with creatures made in God's image.

[20]Indeed, ancient peoples thought they lived in such a world, where the combative forces of a pantheon of gods created a certain havoc and unpredictability that the development of monotheism and the discoveries of modern science have worked together to tame considerably.

[21]Isaiah 59:1, NIV.

[22]See below for more on inspiration.

the fulfilling of God's general purposes in a particular context, and God can work within that process in more specific ways on future occasions, perhaps guiding the ministers to respond to the changing needs caused by an economic downturn. Of course, the seed of this possibility may fall on rocky soil;[23] perhaps the congregation loses interest, or decides it doesn't have the resources, or is forced to shut its doors altogether. This is the risk[24] God takes in creating a universe in which libertarian free will exists and efficient causality brings about new circumstances through the play of chance interconnected with cause and effect. But the parable of the sower is a marvelous illustration for the working of the God of possibility; God is utterly gratuitous in spreading the seed, and the needed feeding program may spring up among another congregation, or among people who do not consciously acknowledge the sower's role in spreading the seed that has taken root among them.

In our context, the process of cosmic and, later, biological evolution is the most telling example of this working of the God of possibility. Arthur Peacocke has discussed this process under the theological rubric of *creatio continua*, which theme he believes has been "resuscitated" by our growing awareness that evolution is an "open-ended ... process of the emergence of new forms" through "the interplay of chance and law."[25] Recall that it is the surprising effectiveness of this interplay that Richard Dawkins captures in the analogy of the blind watchmaker and that leads to phenomena like convergent evolution (the fact that the mechanisms of evolution seem to arrive at similar solutions to similar problems via very different evolutionary paths).[26] This, it seems to me, is the God of possibilities at work within creation—playfully bringing about elegant but reliable solutions to the problems confronting creatures in a particular time and context. It is a providential process marked by novelty and fruitfulness.

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[23] Surely this happens often in wealthy countries, if only because we know God's purposes are for the hungry to be fed, and we know there is enough food to feed them.

[24] Polkinghorne discusses this aspect of God's providence under Maximus the Confessor's category of "acquiescence" or "concession." Polkinghorne (1989), 7.

[25] Peacocke (2004), 304.

[26] For instance, "The leg of a litoptern is all but indistinguishable from the leg of a horse, yet the two animals are only distantly related." The two species each independently "lost all their toes except the middle one on each leg, which became enlarged as the bottom joint of the leg and developed a hoof." In both cases, nature brought forth "the same qualities to cope with the problems of grassland life." Dawkins (1987), 103–104. So too evolved only distantly related "specialists" in the ant-eating game and also independent practitioners of the "many different branches of the ant/termite trade." Dawkins (1987), 106.

4.2   A philosophical aside on causality

So a part of our picture of providence involves God envisioning possibilities, possibilities for realizing God's purposes amid the not-completely-predetermined eventualities we arrive at in the present. We have talked about God being the ultimate source of our intuitive sense that the present is pregnant with future possibility, and we have said that God sets some of these possibilities in motion. But before we say anything theological about God's causative role in "possibility-actualization," a philosophical aside is first necessary: We must say at least something about how (not just why) God might act. But this is dangerous territory. Keith Ward writes, "There is no possible answer to the question 'How does he do so?', any more than there is a possible answer to the question 'How does one raise one's arm?' One just does!"[27] So perhaps a better formulation of the question is to ask about how *we can say* that God acts.[28] To answer that question is to give an account of why we believe it is reasonable to posit object divine action, why it needn't be thought of as requiring regular suspension of physical law. If we do not ask questions like these, we are vulnerable to the materialist critique that all these claims about divine action are nonsense because efficient causality is, according to the materialist, the only causality that exists.

I have already hinted that I find what I have called "nested" agency problematic. This is my term for the Thomistic approach of distinguishing between primary and secondary causality, where God is the primary cause effecting, from outside of creation, the outcomes of secondary causes unfolding within it. The teacher[29] of my seminary course on Thomas Aquinas describes one understanding of this position roughly as follows: "God is so powerful that God can use the free actions of human agents to accomplish whatever God wants." Aquinas himself puts it this more precise way: "What the plan of divine providence has arranged to result necessarily and without fail will come about necessarily and without fail; what too it has arranged to result

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[27]Ward (1990), 18.

[28]Another common way of capturing this subtlety is to note that we are speculating about the *mode* of divine action rather than its *mechanism*.

[29]Fr. John Baptist Ku, OP.

contingently will come about contingently."[30] I strongly agree with Wiles that "it is difficult to know what sense to give to the concept of an *arranged* contingency."[31] Surely the insight of the *Doctor Angelicus* penetrates more keenly into these mysteries than mine, but in truth or in error, I remain unconvinced. I agree that God is almost infinitely resourceful in finding other ways to bring God's purposes to fruition. But if we truly believe in libertarian freedom, we must admit the possibility that, as regards at least some eventualities, contingent causal chains might not suffice.

So although I cannot prove that God does not work as Aquinas believes, the picture seems unlikely to me. We have given an account of a risk-taking God who cannot absolutely "count on" any given action by a free agent, still less a chain of such actions. And even then, if the secondary causes *could* suffice, then it is unclear to me in what sense God could be considered a cause.[32] To make this negation more concrete, I believe we should reject the claim that, for instance, God is the primary cause of Jacob's family finding sanctuary in Egypt and that the secondary agents are Joseph's brothers, Potiphar and his wife, Pharaoh, Joseph himself, etc. Rather than nesting the characters' agency within God's own, better to think of God as another one of the volitional actors, albeit a uniquely knowledgeable and powerful one and one who can still exercise a different kind of causal force. But what might this look like?

We saw in our assessment of Cobb and Griffin a sketch of how this might be so. Rather than stressing primary and secondary causality, we saw in Chapter 3 that process thought proposes a complementary scheme in which efficient and final causality work together. Because I do not wish to be bound to a process metaphysic, I will return to William Temple's sacramental universe, which is influenced by but not so tightly bound to the intricacies of process thinking.

We have in Temple a view of history that is both pushed and pulled, that is, determined not just by efficient causality but also, ultimately, by final causality or purpose (the purpose of the Divine Personality).[33] The means or medium of this second causal force is the influence

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[30] *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, 19, 8. Translation from Wiles (1986), 18–19.

[31] Wiles (1986), 19, emphasis added.

[32] The exception is the idea of God upholding all of these actions. But if we do not believe that God makes a habit of *not* upholding secondary causality, this volitional contribution on God's part is pretty weak.

[33] *Purpose*, not *plan*, notice.

exercised *within* the lower strata of the universe (mechanical matter and living matter, recall) by the upper ones (mind and spirit)—most of all by spirit, which comprises the system's "highest principle of unity."[34] This is in contrast, I believe, to the nested conception of a master push from outside that shapes the secondary pushes within. What's so compelling about Temple's appeal to purpose is that it is warranted by more than just a vague intuition that all of causality cannot be explained by ever-finer analyses of the subtle variables at work in a fully determined dynamic system. Indeed, he places front and center explicit counterexamples to that claim:

> Yet so soon as there is an entity which has even once been determined in its con-
> duct, not by the impulse of efficient causation but by the lure of apparent good,
> a new principle, utterly incapable of reduction to efficient causation, has made its
> appearance, and any coherent account of the universe must account for it. But to
> do this is at once to pass from a materialistic to a spiritual interpretation of the
> universe. For if among the principles found to be operative in it [the universe] is
> determination by good, no limit can be set *a priori* to the application of this [this
> new principle?].[35]

For Temple, much of human action meets this "irreducibility" criterion. Although human beings "obey[] the laws of physics and chemistry and [are] fitly studied by biology, zoology, and physiology," it is nevertheless true that "[w]hen a being capable of spiritual discrimination blindly obeys an appetite, this is not, as moral conduct, identical with obedience to the same appetite on the part of an animal . . . In the animal it is natural, even when to human taste it is distressing; in the man it is evidence of defect when it is not proof of depravity."[36] So it's not as if science's exploration of efficient causality is somehow invalid. It's just that the unfolding of this more mechanical action takes place primarily in the material stratum,[37] a stratum that imposes concrete bottom-up limitations on life, mind, and spirit even while it is subject to their

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[34]Temple (1934), 479.

[35]Temple (1934), 474.

[36]Temple (1934), 479.

[37]Of course, it's even more complicated than that, because in the twentieth century we learned that even inert matter is not so simple as it seems: "The quantum theory . . . holds that there are a number of changes happening in the atomic sphere of which there is at present no scientific explanation at all." Temple (1995), 29.

top-down influence. The key piece of evidence here is the existence of "'free ideas' by means of which the fully mental organism exercises comparison of one good with another."[38] If we are truly free to choose between goods, Temple claims, it is not just possible but necessary to posit that the unfolding of history is energized not simply by the primarily efficient causality of the material stratum but also by the properly purposive causality of the mental and spiritual strata. God and human beings both, as partakers in mind and spirit, work together to shape the direction things ultimately head by considering the purposes that spirit has in mind for the universe (in a way that mechanical and biological matter cannot consciously do). Sometimes, as when Joseph is sold into slavery, the failure of creatures to act in accord with God's purposes can create a subsequent occasion where those purposes can nevertheless be realized, as when Pharaoh (for both selfish reasons and more virtuous ones) shows favor to one in whom he discerns God's blessing.

To summarize, we see in Temple an ultimately metaphysical but empirically grounded conception of a hierarchy of being and a model for how this hierarchy partakes in God's providence. He is at pains to articulate the subtle interrelation of the strata of that hierarchy, particularly with regard to the forces of causality at work within them. This picture puts us in a position to make a final, closing observation. As he begins the final section of his chapter, Temple writes the words we read earlier (in Chapter 2): "In the sacrament then the order of thought is spirit first and spirit last, with matter as the effectual expression or symbolic instrument of spirit. That is the formula which we suggest as an articulation of the essential relations of spirit and matter in the universe."[39] Under Temple's conception, the Christian need not worry overmuch about what the relative autonomy of efficient causality means for our providential hopes. Without the material, the spiritual cannot be communicated in sacrament, but it is the spirit that determines what does get communicated via the material. Temple notes that though a sacrament "is not independent of symbolism or of the psychological processes set in motion by symbols," still "its operation and effectiveness does not consist in these."[40] In other words,

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[38]Temple (1934), 487.

[39]Temple (1934), 492.

[40]Temple (1934), 491.

God as spirit can still realize God's purposes, i.e., exercise God's will in the lower strata, despite the dignity and relative independence of those strata. If Temple is right that the universe is sacramental, then the fact that cosmic history should unfold largely through efficient causality is merely an affirmation that the material and the spiritual are so linked. Becoming could hardly happen otherwise.

As I have said, I find Temple's view compelling. It speaks much of the language of science while remaining soundly philosophical and theological, and it takes seriously the explanatory power of science without giving in to scientific materialism. In its insistence that mind and spirit (God's and ours) exercise shaping influence on mechanical and biological matter, it warrants our confidence in God's promises, offers an explanation for human beings' relative co-creatorial autonomy, and values the significance and necessity of material experience. And in its Whiteheadian belief that God actualizes *telos* "by the lure of apparent good," it suggests to us the primary (but not the only) means by which God interacts with the world: inspiration.

4.3   A God of inspiration

One way that we can address some of the negative aspects of the atheist claim of interventionism is to affirm with process thought that God acts through inspiring but not coercing the actions of human beings. Under this view, God interacts in some way with our minds and our souls but not necessarily with matter. While convinced materialists will still argue that mind "is not a thing at all,"[41] I agree with Ward that such a view depends upon the "basic dogma [that] all causes must be physical,"[42] and so I cannot accept that the burden of proof lies entirely with proponents of the traditional view that the mind-body problem remains a genuine problem.[43] In any event, surely the idea that God might put ideas in our heads is less offensive than a more physical "intervention"; aside from the "basic dogma" above, there is no obvious physical law

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[41]Ward (2010), 36.

[42]Ward (2010), 35.

[43]Not to be grumpy about it, but it may be telling of the state of philosophical literacy in the scientific age that it takes little more than the invocation of neuron configurations and intriguing fMRI studies to convince so many people that minds correspond to brains in an unproblematic way. Would that I could summon more Rowan-esque generosity on this particular point.

being broken by a divine action that is purely mental. And I do think that, to put it crudely, putting ideas in our heads is the main way that God guides us on the providential path.

Holy Scripture, of course, is one of the ways Christians believe God puts ideas in our heads, and it is the source of additional stories about more direct inspiration. For instance, when the "the word of the LORD" visits the prophets, they receive a timely message of which they are the instrument but not the source. When we read that message under the guidance of the Spirit, we are inspired to take up their office of pronouncing and working for God's justice in the world. Of course, we should be careful about attributing our ideas to the Almighty; whether the Word has come to us in prayer or study or anywhere else should always be a matter of discernment on our own and within a trusted group of prayerful advisers. In a twist that seems suspicious at first, but which I believe renders divine inspirational all the more credible, we find that the Word that speaks most clearly to us is he who "calls us each by name,"[44] suggesting to us that God is attentive to especially fertile soil on which to sow seed. And so the person who has spent years working in soup kitchens receives inspiration for a new way to approach feeding ministries, or the dreaming servant of the God of Israel receives the gift of interpreting dreams (dreams that are themselves communicative of a message from God).[45] To use the language of ascetical theology, "grace fulfills but does not destroy [our] nature."[46] God works with what we have and who we are.

We shouldn't underestimate the power that an idea-inspiring God can wield in the world. By themselves, ideas—from $F = ma$ to $E = mc^2$ and "all men are created equal" to "justice denied anywhere diminishes justice everywhere"—are already undeniably powerful. And an appropriate idea coming at an appropriate time can be the difference between success and failure in any context, from the football pitch to the high-level diplomatic negotiation. Groups of people, when they're listening to each other with attention and generosity, are especially likely to discern the wisdom of an inspired idea, and even to help refine it. Individuals and

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[44]This is why I react so strongly against Hick's assertion that our spiritual experience is not the result of a special divine volition.

[45]Genesis 41:1–36.

[46]Tracy (1995), 98. Better still is this quotable gem from Evelyn Underhill: "Not grace alone, nor us alone, but [God's] grace in us." In Rowell et al. (2004), 572.

groups can also share ideas, a powerful means of augmenting and spreading their power (see, for example, the Great Commission, or the African-American action-proverb "Each one, teach one," or Thomas Aquinas's inaugural lecture *Rigans montes*[47]). Indeed, the ideas of our and God's minds are one of the chief ways that spirit is communicated in the material world.

4.4 A God of action

So far, we seem to be in all-but-metaphysical agreement with the process theologians. But it is in the final category of *action* that our positions part ways. I do believe that God is non-coercive in offering us possibilities and inspiring us to action. But I am convinced that—if we are to fully trust God's promise of the material coming of the kingdom and fully believe in some literal conception of the incarnation and resurrection—we must concede and indeed embrace the possibility of objective divine action in the physical world. For the purposes of scientific resonance and because we are committed to pursuit of the truth, we must carefully qualify the kinds of particular action we believe God might engage in. I am in very close agreement with John Polkinghorne on this matter. In appropriating his position here, I will address the ways in which it is theologically motivated, scientifically plausible, and "philosophically mysterious" in the way that we might hope a divine doctrine would be.

We need to be clear that it is theological concerns that warrant and necessitate our affirmation of objective divine action. Although scripture surely contains much that is "incredible" in the sense that we should not accept it as literal historical testimony,[48] I believe Christians have binding theological reasons to believe that God has acted materially on some occasions

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[47]The gist of which is that inspiration flows down through intermediaries as God "waters the mountains" by inspiring the teachers of the church.

[48]We can entertain this possibility for most biblical miracles. Is it necessary that Jesus walked on water? No, though I am reluctant to rule out the possibility entirely. Is it necessary that he multiplied loaves and fishes? No, although these miracles demonstrate particularly well the firmly biblical notion that what John calls "signs" are—like the laws of nature—communicators of divine reality (here: something like "all shall be fed") and not the self-aggrandizing parlor tricks found in some of the non-canonical gospels and in Satan's three temptations (Matthew 4:1–11). But I am uninterested in developing some criterion for discerning authentic versus inauthentic biblical miracles except to say that the creedal "miracles" of incarnation and resurrection should be considered normative. The danger of our discussion of objective divine action is that it can lead us to an unfounded confidence in our claims about what God has done (or not) and a tendency toward over-explanation. I want to steer clear of these temptations, to the extent that this is possible.

and does so continuously if mysteriously. In particular, I agree that we must "overcome" what Thomas Torrance called our "scientific horror of unique events" in order "to do justice to the Christ-event."[49] More generally, I think Polkinghorne is also right that much of the science-and-religion conversation "only thinly covers" an "implicit deism" in the "garment of personalized metaphor."[50]

A couple of examples should suffice to make this point. For starters, I think Rowan Williams's phrase about "history open[ing] up to its own depths" in the incarnation is a lovely way of gesturing at the reasons why Christians find this doctrine to be plausible. But Dawkins is right that the phrase is poetic shorthand for more objective content, and that content claims that Jesus was fully human and fully divine, a son of Mary and the Son of God. If we're serious about the fully human part, then whatever we think about the scriptural basis for and theological necessity of the Virgin Birth, we must admit that something very strange indeed happened in the incarnation, something that strains our understanding of natural causes and their fruit.[51] We're talking about an undeniably singular event, both continuous with and discontinuous from what we might expect in the normal course of things, as Williams's phrase suggests. We should at least be clear and honest about this fact. The same is doubly true of the bodily resurrection, about which scripture tells us a great deal more as a matter of both history and theology. So did the Father somehow knit Jesus's genes together from Mary's DNA and from God's own

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[49]Quoted in Polkinghorne (1996a), 140. It seems to me that the idea of a scientific singularity may have some bearing for us here. Science may abhor them, but it does have to put up with "naked singularities" like black holes and (possibly) the big bang. Consider also Ward's probabilistic argument, grounded in the mathematical machinery of quantum mechanics: "Generally speaking, the more improbable an event is, the less often God can make it happen." Ward (1990), 122. But this does not mean God cannot occasionally do a very improbable thing. Of course, we need to be cautious here, since Ward is describing "one elementary particle, with a specific amount of energy." Ward (1990), 121. The situation is "exponentially" more complicated when we consider "the actual physical universe." Ward (1990), 124. But, to be bold, perhaps singularities or the very, very improbable are exactly what we should expect when "history opens up to its own depths" (see below).

[50]Polkinghorne (1996a), 79. Indeed, perhaps what I have written about evolution in Section 4.1 above is guilty of a dressing up of this sort.

[51]For discussion on the matter from our science-and-religion perspective, see the notably evasive remarks of Polkinghorne (1996a), 143–145, and the much more detailed analysis of Peacocke (1993), 275–279. The most compelling part of Peacocke's critique of traditional understandings of the Virgin Birth is his specificity about whether the options he names (fertilization by a sort of "divine sperm" created *ex nihilo* or reception by Mary, as surrogate mother, of a pre-fertilized "divine egg" of similarly mysterious origin) would have resulted in a genuine human being as we know it.

chromosomal creativity? Did the Spirit somehow reverse the rigor mortis (muscle rigidity), algor mortis (heat loss), autolysis (cell destruction), and putrefaction (protein breakdown) in Jesus's dying body? It seems to me that we have to be willing to admit a cautious "yes" in answer to these questions (or questions like them). I think we need to be able to say that God can, and *has*, manipulated matter in an unusually direct way on at least some occasions. If we face down this necessity for what it is, then we may later feel more comfortable with Polkinghorne's critique of science-and-religion authors' "reluctan[ce] to acknowledge any actual divine activity within" *creatio continua*.[52] So has God's activity also included, for instance, some kind of manipulative molecular influence in the course of biological evolution? I doubt it.[53] But I agree that, if we do not posit *some* kind of continuous interaction between God and the physical world, then "God is in danger of becoming no more than the abstract ground of possibility, an Absentee Landlord indeed, who provides the property but leaves it to the tenants to make of it what they can."[54]

If we have painted a grim picture of this view from the perspective of scientific resonance, let us now try to remedy that situation. Polkinghorne, Robert John Russell, and others are well aware of the implications of claims like the ones I am describing, and they have been part of a careful research project on *non-interventionist* objective divine action in an attempt to more rigorously warrant them. Much of what I have written about the "insights of twentieth-century science" assumes that these researchers' work is not in vain, that the scientific evidence joins

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[52]Polkinghorne (1996a), 79. A case in point: Arthur Peacocke writes that God may be like a (musical) "improvisor of unsurpassed ingenuity." But he goes on to say that God "appears to do so by a process in which the creative possibilities, inherent (by his own intention) within the fundamental entities of that universe and their inter-relation, become actualized within a temporal development shaped and determined by those selfsame inherent potentialities." In Russell et al. (1996), 141. But if the "actualization"—the actual playing of the music—is "determined by . . . inherent potentialities," it sounds to me like God is not an musical improvisor but merely the creator of the rules of harmony and counterpoint but is responsible for the music itself only in this limited sense.

[53]After all, that human beings turned out anatomically the way we did (and not differently) has no bearing on whether or not God could be in relation with us, could impart God's image on us, and could take *our* nature upon God's self in the incarnation. I agree with Williams that God needn't have intervened materially in the process of evolution. I suspect that the Intelligent Design theorists still gambling on the god of the gaps will eventually learn this lesson.

[54]Polkinghorne (1989), 6.

our intuitions about human freedom in pointing us in the direction of ontological indeterminism, the position that "there are some events in some domains, levels, or kinds of processes in nature which lack a sufficient efficient natural cause."[55] Of course, we have to avoid a "God of the gaps" approach in which we point and say definitively "God acts over here, in this domain of nature that we don't understand." But if we believe we *do* understand these domains, and understand genuine indeterminism to be a consequence of them, then "it would be *intelligible* to claim that God acts objectively here, in and with nature, to bring about . . . events which are otherwise not entirely determined and actualized by nature alone."[56] The tomes produced by the Divine Action Project are not for the scientifically or theologically faint of heart, and the details of their investigations are certainly beyond the scope of this survey-level essay. Let it suffice to say that I do believe there is promise here and elsewhere for the development of scientifically resonant and theologically faithful accounts.[57] Consider, for example, the following quotation from Polkinghorne, who believes the apparent openness of dynamic systems as studied under the scientific banner of chaos and complexity theory offers one possible (though opaque) dwelling place for God's more objective causal joints into the material world:

> Read from the bottom-upwards, physics provides us with no more than an envelope of possibility, within which future development is constrained to lie. Within that envelope, the path actually taken depends upon the realization of a specific set of options selected from among proliferating possibilities. These different possibilities are not discriminated from each other by energetic considerations ... but by something much more like an information-input ... One sees the opportunity for using this information-input, necessary to resolve what actually occurs, as the vehicle for a downward operating causality, a role for the "mental" (information) in the determination of the material.[58]

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[55]Russell (2007), 202.
[56]Russell (2007), 202, emphasis added.
[57]One such example is Chapter 7, "The Constraints of Creation," in Ward (1990).
[58]Polkinghorne (1996a), 25–26. See also Polkinghorne (1989), 33. For *much* more, see Russell et al. (1996).

If this passage is reminding us of Temple's mutually interacting levels of reality, then we're beginning to see the promise that may lie on the other side of continued theological, philosophical, and scientific reflection on this question.[59] But between the five disciplines surveyed by the project,[60] there certainly seems to be great potential for our ability to say with integrity that it is difficult to rule out non-interventionist objective divine action. (For example, weather being a case of an open and chaotic dynamic system,[61] perhaps we should consider that God is sometimes responsible for localized weather patterns, although we need not believe that such is the case very often.) Although his optimism may not be entirely typical, Polkinghorne himself used the following phrase to describe the outcome of the project: "The defeatists have been defeated."[62]

A final, somewhat curious goal of our discussion here is to preserve some manner of "philosophical mysteriousness" to the ways of our God of action, the God who sometimes serves as an immediate cause "in and with nature," to repeat Russell's phrase. Does this overly anthropomorphize (or at least "creaturify") God? Does God become a natural "cause among causes"? Ignacio Silva has recently recounted the evolution of Polkinghorne's thinking on this issue. He argues that the physicist-theologian gradually accepted the "natural cause" label for his understanding of providence[63] after first seeking to avoid it. The reason Polkinghorne gives for his eventual comfort with this label is that he sees "divine participation in the causal nexus of creation" as one dimension of God's divine *kenosis*—along with divine power, eternity, and knowledge.[64] Of course, I have agreed with Hasker that God indeed partially empties God's self of divine access to unfettered power and knowledge by virtue of the kind of universe God has chosen to create. Does the God who can do any logically consistent act thus choose to

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[59]Although note that Polkinghorne himself is a dual-aspect monist rather than a dualist on the mind-matter question. See Polkinghorne (1996a), 21.

[60]Neuroscience, chaos and complexity, quantum mechanics, quantum cosmology, and evolutionary and molecular biology.

[61]Indeed, weather is the example *par excellence* of a chaotic system. It was a weather simulation that contributed to the discovery of chaotic behavior and inspired its most famous illustration: the butterfly effect. See Gleick (1988).

[62]He said this to me in a personal conversation at the Christian Scholars Conference (June 2011 at Pepperdine University).

[63]For somewhat complicated reasons of internal philosophical coherence, Silva thinks. See Silva (2010), 8.

[64]Silva (2010), 3.

become what looks like a natural cause only because God has created the universe in such a way that this is how God must interact with it? Such a position hitches our wagon to non-interventionist object divine action rather more fixedly than I would care to do without further reflection. But this does seem like one promising way to protect against the criticism (from Helm, for instance) that the position I have articulated here makes God, in effect, too small. It would have the added benefit of strengthening our theodicy and scientific resonance. On the other hand, we would then need to begin asking the question of whether every miracle that we "need," theologically, as well as every outcome we need to hope for, could be met by means of non-interventionist divine action. We have not spoken much in this section about our eschatological hopes, but creating "a new heaven and a new earth"[65] in any substantially material way or somehow reconstituting our bodies in the general resurrection[66]—these seem impossible to pull off without violating, say, the conservation of the universe's total energy. At any rate, we have reached the point where further discussion would likely confuse rather than clarify, at least without addressing large swathes of new territory. Let it suffice that the matter of God's causality and its difference (or not) from our own is a major outstanding question posed by the position we have sketched in brief.

4.5   Conclusion and further work

The foregoing discussion is typical of the challenges posed by my desire that we find a middle ground between general and special providence and thus a position that assumes that God has played a special role in the unfolding of a generally self-sufficient process. Many will not accept that what we have arrived at is not ultimately interventionism through and through. I suspect these ranks would include many atheists as well as theists like Hick, Cobb, and Griffin. But in stressing that natural law does not operate "independently of the divine will"[67] and is

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[65]Revelation 21:1.

[66]Granted, we are told to expect a "spiritual body" (1 Corinthians 15:42–49), but my reading of the relevant texts is that our resurrection will look something like Christ's own, so we probably shouldn't expect *purely* spiritual bodies ("Look at my hands and feet . . . Touch and see," etc. [Luke 24:39]). I like Ward's "spirit-*filled*" bodies. Ward (1990), 265.

[67]Polkinghorne (1989), 6.

not as deterministically impenetrable as the mechanistic deists believed, I have attempted to carve out a possible path to theological territory I feel bound by faith to enter. Other critics, like Helm, will be dissatisfied with the extent to which the position tries to understand God in overly natural and even anthropomorphic terms. But on this end of the horn of dilemma, I feel bound both by the scientific picture of things and the desire for a coherent account of the interrelatedness of divine power and human freedom. For critics who object to this picture on the grounds of ethics and evil, we must refer back to Hasker's sketch of a theodicy for open theism in Chapter 3, to which my position adds little.[68] And for critics who worry that this position involves rather more objective divine action than they'd like (or rather less moral responsibility on humans' part), it's worth repeating that I believe God inspires more action than God undertakes directly, though of course this is pure speculation about an ultimately mysterious doctrine—and the point of much of what I have said is that we have no empirical way of knowing one way or the other.

To sum up more broadly, let us recall where we started. The context we carefully described in Chapter 1 described a secular age shaped significantly though not solely by the influence of science. We saw that, in this age, understandings of God as acting materially came to be problematic, especially because of the influence of science. Thus, we carved out a lens shaped in large part by this quintessentially twentieth-century discipline. But until pretty late in the game, we used that lens to ask predominantly philosophical questions, albeit questions that several scientists have been very willing to tackle in bestselling volumes. So the most obvious point for further work in this essay is a more explicit treatment of the specific questions science poses for providence, questions like the ones we considered in brief at the end of this chapter. I have mentioned some of the important sources such work would begin with. A second point requiring very serious reflection is the appropriateness of leaning so heavily on William Temple. On the one hand, I share with Temple an apologetical mission to be in close conversation with science, so it makes sense to deploy his work where it is appropriate. On the

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[68]I share Hasker's optimism, with Polkinghorne, about the extension of the free-will defense to include natural evil, though I must also share his admission that "development of these thoughts . . . must await another occasion." Hasker (2004), 144.

other hand, there is obviously something a bit strange about using the idea of sacrament as the dominant model in an account directed to a context in which fewer and fewer people have a working definition of what a sacrament is. Given more time and space, I would have expended more serious thought on ways of dealing with this rhetorical challenge. Finally, no explication of a single doctrine should be allowed to stand as an island. We have spent some time, though not enough, with the problem of evil, the obvious partner doctrine to providence. And we have sometimes blurred the line between providence and creation—as any treatment of providence must do, post-Darwin. But we have said very little about incarnation and resurrection (except that our providence needs to allow for them) and still less about redemption and last things.

My hope is that God will see fit to guide me to opportunities that may arise to pick up where this essay has left off. Of course, I have argued that even God can't know with 100 percent certainty that I won't opt out of following one of them. But I strongly suspect that the allure of these questions and the feebleness of my answers are seeds that will nevertheless be given growth by the God who is always planting—and always planning ahead.

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