Providence in a World Come of Age

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SCEPTICISM concerning the reality of divine providence as proclaimed in Christian tradition is hardly a new phenomenon. For centuries the concept of divine or supernatural interventions in the natural order has been assailed because of its apparent conflict with theoretical findings. With each impressive scientific advance, men have found such challenges still harder to ignore. Theology had to come to terms with the scientific world-view, and for many this meant abandoning the concept of providence.

In the early years of this century the discoveries of Sigmund Freud added a new dimension to the assault. Not only was the traditional teaching conceptually suspect, but its validity was further questioned in the light of the unconscious motivation thought to be lying behind it. Appeals to the deity were described as projections onto the cosmos of the child's dependence upon the parent, whom he regarded as omnipotent. Faith in divine providence was attributed to a powerful longing on the part of those not strong enough to live in a world without a supernatural benefactor.

At the level of apologetics, Christian theologians have been able to provide a reasonable defence of their position in the face of such critiques. Increasingly, however, the voice of protest is being raised from within the community of faith, and the grounds for the attack are no longer based on an external system or philosophy but on an appeal to Christian faith and experience itself. Even so, these religious criticisms have a strong similarity to the form of the older arguments; one can distinguish those reflecting a pastoral or moral concern in some ways analogous to the Freudian position and those arising from theological concerns with definite similarities to the old nature-supernature debate. It is my intention in this paper to examine such pastoral and theological critiques, recognizing their elements of validity but challenging their adequacy as full statements of Christian faith and experience. I suggest that we are once more tempted to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

I

For many, one voice associated with the pastoral assault upon belief in providence is that of the martyred Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer's prison writings must surely be classed as one of the great and moving testimonies of faith. That such a testimony should contain an expression of scepticism concerning the traditional views of God and his relationship to the life of men is, consequently, of great significance.

For Bonhoeffer one of the unquestionable facts of our experience, which theology must accept and comprehend, is what, at first sight, might be described as the growing irrelevance of God for human existence.

> Man has learned to cope with all questions of importance without recourse to God as a working hypothesis. In questions concerning science, art, and even ethics, this has become an understood thing which one scarcely dares to tilt at any more. But for the last hundred years or so it has been increasingly true of religious questions also: it is becoming evident that everything gets along without "God," and just as well as before. As in the scientific field, so in human affairs generally, what we call "God" is being more and more edged out of life, losing more and more ground.[1]

To be sure, this is not a German form of Christian atheism, an early "death of God" theology.[2] Rather, it is a declaration of faith, for this growing irrelevance is seen to be actually the work of God. "God is teaching us that we must live as men who can get along very well without him. The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us."[3] Be that as it may, we are left with the assertion that to turn to God when human resources fail, to call upon his assistance in the extreme situations of life, is to fall back on religion and miss the even greater reality of faith. We must come to understand Christianity, we are told, in a "religionless" manner. We must learn to speak of God without religion, which means, in part, without invoking the *Deus ex machina* of traditional religious conception. The future of faith lies in religionless Christianity, in obedience to a seemingly irrelevant God.

One of the most fascinating features of Bonhoeffer's thought is his enigmatic phrase "religionless Christianity." Clearly it was a concept of considerable importance to him, one to which he returned on several occasions in his last letters, yet which he never had opportunity fully to develop. (It was to have been the subject of a later work.) Perhaps its dramatic setting has heightened the power of the phrase to stimulate thought. Daniel Jenkins, for example, has explored its meaning and relevance for understanding the nature of theology and the Christian life in general.[4] I wish now to examine only its moral and religious significance for the problem of providence.

In theology it is never sufficient merely to note what a man has said or written; one must also ask why he said it. Bonhoeffer bears witness to the absence and irrelevance of God for three reasons, all of which, I would argue, are important and valid.

In the first place, this concept stands as a critique of infantile and neurotic faith. Bonhoeffer's own life is a rebuke to those who see in religion a kind of pious escapism, a retreat from the harsh realities of existence. Man, he urges, must accept the full challenge of his freedom and responsibility. To do less is to reject his calling as a child of God. Thus a world come of age, a world in which man senses that the great problems facing him are his to solve, is to be

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Prisoner For God* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), pp. 145f.
2. Cf. Kenneth Hamilton, *Revolt Against Heaven* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), pp. 169ff.
3. Bonhoeffer, *Prisoner For God*, p. 164.
4. Cf. Daniel T. Jenkins, *Beyond Religion* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1965).

seen as a divine gift, as a reminder that he is responsible – both response-able and accountable – and that God is not a heavenly magician to be called in to lift that responsibility. The religion which Bonhoeffer is rejecting is one which fosters a puerile abdication of mature freedom and hides behind the illusion of a kind old god who will always fix things up. Man come of age is man who knows he must live without such a god. Religion which encourages such magical dependence is pointless, ignoble, and unchristian. Bonhoeffer is critical of much modern theology for being religious, for seeking to define some need, some problem to which God alone can supply the answer, thereby encouraging an undesirable dependence. In short, Bonhoeffer advocates faith rather than religion, the latter being essentially that which Freud decried – neurotic dependence upon a magical father figure.[5] True faith is never an escape from life, but rather a call to it. Real Christianity is a message about this world and not simply a comforting vision of "a better world beyond the grave." In contrast to religion, the Christian hope, born in the resurrection, "sends a man back to his life on earth," back to responsible freedom in a real world, not to the soothing tranquillizer which convinces him that, when all else fails, God will fix it up for us in heaven.[6]

In the second place, Bonhoeffer's proclamation of the absent God is, in reality, a preliminary to asserting his more vital presence. The god of religion, he feels, has become so identified with the *Deus ex machina* invoked in the various crises of life that the deity has in effect been confined to the border situations of human existence. Christ no longer is the Lord of all life but merely Sovereign of its moments of collapse; God becomes relevant only when human resources fail. Whereas the god of religion is a god in the gaps, in the gaps of human knowledge and skill, the God of faith dwells in the midst of life, not on its borders. He is God at the point where man is strong, competent, and full of hope, not merely where he is weak, helpless, and despairing. Bonhoeffer, I suggest, turns away from the traditional view of divine providence because he believes that it can so readily lead to a god in the gaps, a god confined to a segment of life. So he charges Heim and Tillich with "... having as their objective the clearing of a space for religion in the world or against the world."[7] Bonhoeffer denies the god of our emergencies in order to affirm the Lord of all life. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he is willing to cast doubt on such a god in order that Christ may be real for the free responsible man come of age. "On the borders," he writes, "it seems to me better to hold our peace and leave the problem unsolved."[8] Thus from this perspective also the world's coming of age can be a positive force for Christian faith. The god of religion has seen his domain grow ever smaller before the advance of science; "there is no longer any need for God as a

5. Actually he goes further than Freud, turning his critique against psychoanalysis itself. Therapists, along with the existential philosophers, are criticized for seeking to convince happy and effective men that they are beset with needs which only the former can meet.

6. Bonhoeffer, *Prisoner for God*, p. 154.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 148.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 124.

working hypothesis."[9] The ultimate questions which at one time religion alone could answer now are losing their urgency. "Is even death," he wonders, "... still a genuine borderline?"[10] Man in a mature world must find God in the wholeness of life if he would find God at all.

Finally, I suggest that Bonhoeffer rejects much of the traditional teaching on providence because he feels that it conveys a false idea of God. It offers the image of the heavenly problem-solver, revealed and defined most clearly as power, force, invincibility – a combination of Cassius Clay, Ben Casey, and Mr. Fix-it. This, again, is the strong god of religion described by Freud, the god that weak, dependent man wants. This is an image of god dear to the heart of natural man, but not the God who was in Christ. Religion's God is a barrier to Christianity, to the shocking truth that the God of Christian confession was not revealed supremely in brute power controlling the forces of nature and of history but in apparent weakness. God's character was best displayed, not by turning stones into bread or by exercising undisputed dominion over the nations of the earth, but by submitting to the wrath of men and dying. "God is weak and powerless in the world. . . ."[11] In a world come of age, where God seemingly has been edged out, men must ask themselves some basic questions. Do they really know God's intention? Do they understand the nature of the one whom they call Lord? What does discipleship mean? Bonhoeffer here reminds us that God was revealed on a cross and not by a crown; it is this fact and its consequences for mature manhood in Christ which seemingly have influenced his mode of expression. The recognition that God's sovereignty may be exercised in suffering shatters man's easy faith in the heavenly need-fulfiller and guardian angel whose primary function is to protect him from the harsher aspects of life, and sets before him the loving, self-giving God who calls upon men to lose their lives for his sake.

In sum, what at first appears to be a rejection of the concept of providence, Bonhoeffer's dismissal of the *Deus ex machina*, must be seen as a rejection of a gross but not uncommon perversion of Christian faith. "Away," he cries, "with the heavenly Superman called in as occasion demands, called in to be a cover for our inadequacies and to lift our responsibilities!" Away, too, with the god whose lordship is measured in terms of might and power and not in terms of unfailing love which dares to be defeated, even to die! Provided this argument is correct, one can accept Bonhoeffer's remarks as basically an assault upon irresponsible faith, upon the use of faith as an escape from life's challenges and demands for moral action. Providence, he warns, can become a screen behind which we hide in the pious hope that God will act in our stead, lifting from our shoulders the pain of unpleasant and costly decisions and the agony of life's ethical ambiguities. It can become as well the comforting delusion that good old God is in charge and will not let anything unpleasant befall us. In short, it may cut the nerve of moral responsibility and

9. *Ibid.*, p. 163.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 124.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 164.

deaden the divine call to stand upon our feet. This is not Christian faith, certainly not the faith of him who "steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem," and not the faith of Dietrich Bonhoeffer who refused to sit out the war in the security of North America but returned to Germany, to active opposition to National Socialism, and to the plot to assassinate Hitler. If providence is but a facade for a pious escape from the realities of life, then we must reject it, and this, I submit, is what Bonhoeffer really wanted to do.

However, we must go on to ask whether in another context his strong statements may not be inadequate to the depth of religious experience and truth.[12] Can we really dismiss such a concept of God as totally invalid? What, then, should we say about the Exodus? Was the faith of Israel founded upon an act of God, a divine intervention, or upon an illusory interpretation which the Hebrew's religious instincts placed upon a purely fortuitous event? Indeed, is not our whole Old Testament, as George Ernest Wright maintains, basically a recital of the mighty acts of God by which he was revealed and Israel was redeemed and guided?[13] For the Christian does not this *Heilsgeschichte* reach its climax in the event of Jesus Christ? Completely to dismiss the whole complex of ideas associated with the notion of the intervening God would be to run the risk of denying the fundamentals of biblical faith; Yahweh *is* the Lord of history and the Ruler of nature who directs both to achieve his loving purposes. Furthermore, while such a concept of God can become the pious escape of those who would flee from life, it is equally true that we can veer in the opposite direction, exiling the deity from any significant involvement in life. To deny that God can take any initiative to affect the course of human events is to open the way for an arrogant self-sufficiency. Man come of age may accept his full moral responsibility, really claiming thereby that God is superfluous; as the master of his own fate, he has no further need of the divine love and power. It was pride, not faith, which gave voice to the taunt, "Where is your God?" It was faith, not irresponsibility, which answered, "Hope in God." Despite the extreme nature of Bonhoeffer's words, one cannot read his prison writings without being convinced that he knew the present, acting God.

We must avoid, then, both extremes – Christian Deism and pious escapism – but more is involved here than a simple balancing of apparently conflicting truths or demands. Full Christian responsibility can only be exercised in the light of a faith in divine providence; God's active and caring involvement is part of the reality in which and to which we must respond. Indeed, Roger Shinn maintains that in the face of the present nuclear threat to mankind Christian responsibility can only be achieved on the basis of a mature and thoughtful faith in the providence of God.[14]

Some forty years ago Donald Baillie wrote that "the strength of Christianity

12. Indeed, in a fuller examination of Bonhoeffer's own theology we would find a larger and more adequate concept of deity.

13. Cf. George Ernest Wright, *God Who Acts* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1952).

14. Cf. Roger L. Shinn, "Faith and the perilous future," in John C. Bennett (ed.), *Nuclear Weapons and the Conflict of Conscience* (New York: Scribner's, 1962), pp. 173ff.

lies in its putting the requirements of moral faith before those of logical simplicity."[15] Theologically it would be far simpler, when facing the question of an unknown future, either to assert that all is in the hands of God or to proclaim that the course of events will be governed by the decisions of men. Such simplification, moreover, can be instrumental in lending emphasis and conviction to one's words. The theologian who has witnessed the atrophy of social responsibility which is engendered or supported by escapist dependence upon divine providence will naturally tend to accentuate the free moral agency of man and to neglect the role of divine action. Nevertheless, the full moral realities of Christian experience demand that we affirm both sides of this seeming paradox, the full responsibility of man and the absolute authority of God. However, we must acknowledge that this is a paradox, and not simply affirm the two as though no rational difficulties were involved. In his *Institutes* Calvin asserts both divine sovereignty and free will but does so in a manner which is hardly satisfactory, seemingly refusing to concede that there is any rational difficulty in his presentation. Thus he can affirm that a murderer is justly executed for his crime, while recognizing that his action must also be the will of God, finally attributable to divine intention. He declares this to be quite simple and admonishes the confused to accept the word of God, but surely he fails to meet "the requirements of moral faith" when he denies the reality of paradox and thus summarily dismisses discussion. The theological task is not only to affirm both sides of the paradox but to enable men to enter more fully into its reality.

Baillie finds himself facing this issue in his discussion of God's supreme action, the event of Jesus Christ. "Did the Incarnation depend upon the daily human choices made by Jesus, or did He always choose aright because He was God incarnate?"[16] Again the Christian must affirm that both are true. If he was truly a man, then his actions must have been the result of genuine, human decisions. Yet faith declares that in a deeper sense all that this man was and did was God-in-action, the Incarnation being the supreme example of God's mighty acts. Baillie in no way removes this paradox, but seeks to bring it into relationship with more common experience. He suggests that this dimension of the problem of providence can be illuminated by the paradox of grace.

> Thus while there is a human side to every good action, so that it is genuinely the free choice of a person with a will, yet somehow the Christian feels that the other side of it, the divine side, is logically prior. . . . It is not as if we could divide the honours between God and ourselves, God doing His part, and we doing ours. It cannot even be expressed in terms of divine initiative and human co-operation. It is false to this paradox to think of the area of God's action and the area of our action being delimited each by the other, and distinguished from each other by a boundary, so that the more of God's grace is in an action, the less it is my own personal action.[17]

Here we learn that this paradox must be affirmed, not simply because in

15. D. M. Baillie, *Faith In God* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), p. 300.
16. D. M. Baillie, *God Was In Christ* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), p. 130.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 116.

every moment of history there is an action of God meeting an action by man, but because in a profound sense they become one action. To recognize the fullness of divine action in no way limits the sphere of personal initiative and responsibility. In short, the paradox of grace, when properly understood, holds together the full spectrum of moral realities surrounding the experience of human choice. "While it transcends the moralistic attitude by ascribing all to God," Baillie writes, "[it] does not make us morally irresponsible."[18] We might well add that, conversely, while it affirms our full responsibility by attributing all to human action, it does not arrogantly deny our weakness and need. The just concern felt by Bonhoeffer must be understood within this wider frame of reference. His moral and pastoral appeal for Christian responsibility in society can be maintained without rejecting one's faith in the sovereign Lord of history.

II

In Bonhoeffer's criticism of the traditional views of providence we have a religiously motivated critique in many ways analogous to the Freudian assault. So also one can find a theological movement which has strong similarities to the earlier scientific criticisms of providence, criticisms arising from the apparent tension between the scientific and religious interpretations of natural events. Seventeenth-century English scholars such as Newton and Boyle, once they had accepted the mechanical universe of scientific conception, found it increasingly difficult to reconcile this with their theological traditions concerning divine providence. In various forms their problem remains with us. Here again mature faith faces a paradox, the one which Baillie calls the paradox of providence. All events are the expression of a divine purpose working itself out, not only in the form of a general structure of reality but also in terms of unique responses to specific aspects and events within reality. All that happens is God's will. At the same time, however, these events are recognized as elements within a chain of cause-and-effect relationships; they occur as the result of interacting human choices and the relentless application of the laws of nature. The reconciliation of these two disparate interpretations has on occasion been achieved in ways tending to undermine the reality of providence.

One expression of this tendency has arisen from the attempt to clarify the meaning of faith and to establish the nature of its authority. Carl Michalson's *The Rationality of Faith* is representative of this attempt, although one can trace its ancestry back much further to works such as H. R. Niebuhr's *The Meaning of Revelation* and Martin Buber's *I and Thou*. Michalson's designation of history (*Geschichte*) as the unique realm of faith has proven to be a useful clarification of its nature and meaning, but this line of thought can isolate faith from the realm of nature with unfortunate consequences for the understanding of God's role in history. It is this tendency which concerns us here.

18. *Ibid.*

One aim of such discussions is the rejection of the frequent attempts to establish faith on a non-religious, essentially natural, basis, by an appeal to the objective facts of external history (*Historie*)[19] and nature. Faith, in such circumstances, becomes dependent upon the authenticity of certain events such as the rising from the dead of a first-century Jew. But such affirmations can never establish an adequate foundation for faith. One can always accept the reality of the external fact, while still rejecting the assertions of faith. The historicity of the resuscitation of a corpse would not necessarily verify the claims of Christianity, any more than the incident at the Sea of Reeds established the truth of Mosaic Yahwism for all Israelites. Nonetheless there remains the constant temptation to fortify faith by such appeals; man possesses a "passion for securing the interiority of faith by attaching it to some exteriority."[20] Both Michalson and Niebuhr allude to this danger, pointing out that it has led to the dichotomy of nature and supernature. "The distinction between the history in which revelation occurred and that in which there was no revelation was transferred to persons and things having history; there were natural and unnatural events, persons and groups."[21] The unity of reality affirmed in attributing all events to God and simultaneously to the natural order was replaced by a discontinuous structure of natural and supernatural orders. In effect, God was again restricted to a limited realm, here defined not by human needs but in relation to its supernatural character. The aim of Michalson and Niebuhr, then, is a more adequate definition of faith and its basis together with the overcoming of the false dichotomy of nature and supernature. "One ought no longer to juxtapose nature and supernature," Michalson suggests, "but nature and history."[22]

These men see faith as related, not to special areas of life or experience, but to a particular dimension of all experience; for them faith becomes a correlate of the realm of meaning and values by which a man understands himself, his world, and his God. "A man's faith is what infuses his life with the meanings which make his life negotiable."[23] Faith is man's response to the address of life. Furthermore, such meanings and values by which a man defines himself and which govern his responses to life, that which psychology calls his identity or self-image – these are themselves defined in historical terms; man understands himself in terms of the significant events of the past, events in his own life and experience, and in the larger history of his community as well. "The standpoint of faith, of a self directed toward gods or God, and the standpoint of practical reason, of a self with values and with a destiny, are not incompatible; they are probably identical. To be a self is to have a god; to

19. The term *Historie* signifies impersonal history, history as observed and classified from without, history as the disinterested record of events. *Geschichte*, on the contrary, signifies personal history, history as lived and interpreted from within, history as the story in which man finds the meaning of his own existence and of his *Historie*.

20. Carl Michalson, *The Rationality of Faith* (New York: Scribner's, 1963), p. 72.

21. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan, 1941), pp. 75f.

22. Michalson, *The Rationality of Faith*, p. 23.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

have a god is to have history, that is events connected in a meaningful pattern, to have one god is to have one history. God and the history of selves in community belong together in inseparable union."[24] Thus the realm of faith is no longer viewed as the supernatural, set over against the natural, but as the realm of personal meaning and definition, set over against the impersonal and objective which are detached from man and devoid of personal meaning. This distinction, which Niebuhr develops by contrasting internal and external history, is expressed by Michalson in terms of history (*Geschichte*) and nature. "*Nature*, then can be said to be the *structure of reality exterior to and silent about man. History is the structure of reality interior to and vocal about man.*"[25] In each instance the emphasis is upon differing orientations towards reality, and not upon a division within reality. The dichotomy of internal and external history or that of history and nature is purely methodological and does not reflect any ontological dichotomy in reality *per se*. The contrast is not between "kinds of reality" but between "structures of reality." In other words, reality is one, with God and faith no longer being restricted to the supernatural.

Set in the context of this distinction, providence becomes a fact of history and not of nature. It is an interpretation which faith places upon events, a meaning the believer finds in experiences which the unbeliever accepts solely as the consequence of human freedom functioning in relation to the impersonal structures of scientific reality. The classification of providence as "historical" demands the abandoning of all attempts to provide an objective basis for such assertions. Belief in divine care is an act of "historical" faith and not the product of "natural" certainty, much less of supernatural verification. Rudolf Bultmann emphasizes this fact without using the precise terminology of either Niebuhr or Michalson.

> In faith I deny the closed connection of worldly events, the chain of cause and effect as it presents itself to the neutral observer. I deny the interconnection of the worldly events not as mythology does, which by breaking the connection places supernatural events into the chain of natural events; I deny the worldly connection as a whole when I speak of God. . . . This is the paradox of faith, that faith "nevertheless" understands as God's action here and now an event which is completely intelligible in the natural or historical connection of events.[26]

With all this, one can heartily agree.

A problem arises, however, when the refusal to seek objective verification for providence eventuates in a tendency to deny any significant action of God in nature, when the assertion that providence is an historical reality carries with it the implication that it has no natural correlate. Something of this difficulty may be sensed in Michalson's discussion. While affirming that the distinction between nature and history constitutes only a methodological dichotomy, he tends to maintain this difference in an extremely rigid manner.

24. Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, p. 80.
25. Michalson, *The Rationality of Faith*, pp. 26. (Emphasis in the original.)
26. Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Scribner's, 1958), pp. 64f.

"The scientist points to nature, the theologian to history, and these two structures have nothing in common."[27] "Nature and history are not dimensions which, though methodologically separate, nevertheless interpenetrate. They are poles apart in man and tend to rend his life interiorly."[28] Michalson asserts that history as a realm of meaning is related to a real world. "It has a materiality, an externality, an *extra nos* character."[29] But the distinction between history and nature is emphasized to such a degree that there appears to be no reason to develop any bridge between the externality of history and the world of nature, with the result that events in nature are isolated from events in history. To be sure, Michalson is aware that history may include nature in the ordinary meaning of that word; a sunset or a wooded valley may have great meaning for the man of faith. (Conversely, persons may be aspects of nature.) But his use of the terms "nature" and "history" tends to convey an exclusiveness which is not implied in Niebuhr's use of internal and external history. Certainly Niebuhr seems to make a greater effort to examine the bridge between history and nature, to develop the relationship between the world of nature (or external history) and the world of history (or internal history), for, according to him, "the God who is found in inner history, or rather who reveals himself there, is not the spiritual life but the universal God, the creator not only of the events through which he discloses himself but also of all other happenings."[30] Failure to articulate this relationship can lead to a spiritualization of divine activity which becomes in effect a dematerialization, the external dimension of providence being lost in a pure affirmation of meaning.

The rigid isolation of history from nature confines religious verities such as providence to the limits of revelation (i.e., to that which possesses meaning for man) and ultimately to the meaning which it possesses. However, this very emphasis (upon meaning as opposed to objective reality) finally undermines such meaning. Michalson, to be sure, does not deal extensively with the specific question of providence in *The Rationality of Faith*, but, in comparison with the earlier work by Niebuhr, his accentuation of the nature-history division seems to have moved somewhat in this direction. Paul Tillich provides us with an even more extreme treatment. "Providence," he writes, "is not a theory about some activities of God; it is the religious symbol of the courage of confidence with respect to fate and death."[31] But if such a symbol is to have any real meaning, if it is to be other than a neurotic delusion, then it must be correlated with an externality which could be expressed in "natural" terms. Christian faith is founded upon our understanding of certain "activities of God." Furthermore, these activities are not restricted to the interpersonal encounters which convey meaning and self-awareness; they also include actions in *Historie* and nature which may or may not be recognized by men.

27. Michalson, *The Rationality of Faith*, p. 25.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
30. Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, p. 86.
31. Paul Tillich, *The Courage To Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), p. 168.

The Exodus and the Incarnation were not revelations of God until men appropriated their meaning, but they still would have been mighty acts of God whether or not men recognized their divine purpose. In like manner providence has no historical validity unless it has a prior reality in nature, notwithstanding the fact that our knowledge of such divine care is an historical phenomenon. Again, Michalson does not so much dispute this contention as tend to ignore its significance: "God's word is history because it occurs in such a way as to supply meaning. Man's faith is history because it is the response of obedience to God which has its correlate in man's own quest for meaning. 'Acts of God' like floods, are nature and therefore meaningless to man. Acts of God addressed to man, like covenants, are history."[32] What one misses here is some word about those acts of God which transcend our comprehension, from which we have derived no meaning. The very differentiation of acts of God – with and without quotation marks – suggests some possible devaluation of acts in nature.[33]

I suspect that Michalson's assertions stem in part from a motivation in many ways akin to Bonhoeffer's. The emphasis upon the historical nature of faith is in part a critique of the neurotic attempt to buttress our beliefs and strengthen our wills by an appeal to objective facts. Concentration upon providence as a series of specific, objective, divine actions can readily degenerate into a misleading affirmation of supernatural interventions by a *Deus ex machina*, with all its accompanying dangers. Michalson echoes Bonhoeffer in declaring that God has called upon man to be strong, that he has turned the world over to the human race and endowed them with his power, namely, historical freedom and responsibility.[34] To all this one can give sympathetic hearing. Excessive concern for the details of providence may reflect a preoccupation with one's own security and a desire to hide in the arms of the divine protector, far from the struggles of life. But the realities of faith, I would reiterate, are not adequately proclaimed if the challenge of the crucified Christ is not coupled with a hope in the redeeming Lord of history and nature.

The major effort, however, of Michalson, Niebuhr, and indeed Buber, is the clarification of the nature of faith, a clarification achieved by differentiating contrasting stances towards reality. But when differentiation becomes isolation, when nature and history as "structures" of reality become virtually "kinds," or at any rate sections, of reality, then historical faith loses any genuine materiality or objectivity. Theology must give some attention to expounding the "*extra nos* character" of the historical world of meaning. It

32. Michalson, *The Rationality of Faith*, p. 105.

33. Bonhoeffer seems closer to Bultmann than to Michalson at this point. He acknowledges the necessary external and natural reality of providence while recognizing that such belief is a confession of faith not subject to objective verification. "One can only speak of providence on the other side of this dialectical process. God encounters us not only as a Thou, but also as an It; so in the last resort my question is how are we to find the Thou in this It (i.e. fate). In other words, how does fate become providence?" (Bonhoeffer, *Prisoner for God*, p. 104).

34. Michalson, *The Rationality of Faith*, pp. 135ff.

must, therefore, not only affirm the distinction between nature and history but also say something about their underlying unity. Unless the God of faith can be related to the world of nature in a manner which respects nature's terms, then he is Lord only of *Geschichte* – not of *Historie* – which means that *Geschichte* is finally neurotic and false. Christian faith in providence must likewise be affirmed in a manner which neither plays fast and loose with the laws of science nor excludes divine activity from the nature which science explores. This reconciliation seems to be absent from Michalson's discussion, an absence explained perhaps by his desire to affirm the distinction, but nonetheless an absence conducive to uncertainty concerning the reality of divine actions in nature.

In his *Chance and Providence* William Pollard attempts a detailed reconciliation of nature and history on the subject of providence.[35] Being both an Episcopal priest and a nuclear physicist, he naturally senses the inadequacy of any discussion which fails to deal with this dimension of the question. Unfortunately the proffered solution amounts to a re-establishment of the old dichotomy of nature and supernature, with the inevitable consequence that each advance in the scientific study of nature leads to a further reduction in the supernatural, to a decline in the relevance of God. His basic error, like that of Newton and Boyle, is to begin with nature and then seek to accommodate history to its structures, rather than beginning with history as the realm of personal meaning, thereafter seeking to understand nature as an abstraction from it.[36]

Pollard starts by granting to the laws of science an independent status as over against God. These laws are statistical, which characteristic is deemed to be a permanent quality of all scientific explanations. Consequently, contrary to Laplace and classical physics, the scientific world-view does not assert a rigid determinism, but recognizes a range of possible alternatives following upon any given arrangement of nature. It is this essential indeterminacy which provides Pollard with a basis for reconciling providence and natural science. Divine authority is exercised in choosing which alternative is to be actualized. By selecting the right ones ("chance" from the point of view of science) and carefully combining these choices ("accidents" from the point of view of *Historie*), the deity can yet achieve his purposes within the structure of a scientific world. Clearly providence is either unnatural or supernatural in terms of the given understanding of nature; the deity is distinctly a *Deus ex machina*, an intrusion into the regular working of nature which presumably functions normally without any divine involvement. Again we see a god in the gaps, a god confined to a limited domain of life called the supernatural, not the God of Christian confession. God for the Christian is the Lord of all life, the Creator and Preserver of all that is, the direct Governor of nature in its seemingly most routine behaviour. Moreover, by basing this reconciliation upon the prior acceptance of current views of nature, Pollard

35. Cf. W. G. Pollard, *Chance and Providence* (New York: Scribner's 1958).
36. Cf. John Macmurray, *The Self As Agent* (London: Faber, 1957).

makes the theology of providence dependent upon the maintenance of such views, and so the way is opened for another Copernican collapse of theology. The whole position rests upon the assumption that Heisenberg's indeterminacy reflects the essential nature of reality and is not merely a reflection of our limited ability to acquire knowledge. Such an assumption is at least debatable.

Pollard's discussion emphasizes two aspects of the reconciliation which must be sought between history and nature. The first is illustrated by his own failure. Our solution must begin with history, with a world of meaning, with an over-all interpretation of reality which preserves the basic essentials of historical faith and seeks to understand nature as a dimension within that reality. The second, a positive contribution, is his treatment of chance and accident. Particular providence, the special action of the deity in response to individual circumstances, action which cannot be understood solely in terms of a general order impressed upon creation in the beginning, can effectively occur without producing a discontinuity in nature. That which faith may attribute to the gracious action of God can be explained naturally in terms of chance and accident.

William Temple gives us a more adequate general structure for the relationship between nature and history in his treatment of revelation in *Nature, Man and God*. Revelation, he asserts, can only be recognized in particular events if at another level all events and reality are revelations of God. "Only if God is revealed in the rising of the sun in the sky can He be revealed in the rising of a son of man from the dead. . . ."[37] So also, only if God is the sovereign Lord and Ruler of all existence and events (even those in nature and *Historie* wherein man sees no meaning or revelation), can he be the Agent of those special events which we call providential and revelatory. In short, the Christian asserts that his God encountered in history is the agent of every moment in nature. The sun rises, not because of the angular momentum of the earth, but because of the consistent will of God. Indeed, the laws of nature are but divine consistency expressed without reference to the deity. Moreover, this very consistency which must be assumed to explain the experiences of modern science is also required theologically if there is to be any reality to the moral and intellectual responsibility of man championed by Bonhoeffer.

Thus, when properly understood and fully articulated, the Christian belief in the providential care of God remains viable and essential, even in a world come of age. It need not degenerate into a soft self-concern which seeks to escape from life and its responsibilities, nor need it become so spiritualized that it loses all contact with the world where men laugh and love, suffer and die. Rather, it can be the assurance which enables men to live responsibly and confidently before the hidden and revealed God.

37. William Temple, *Nature, Man and God* (London: Macmillan, 1956), p. 306.