

## ***Science and Religion: Providence***

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*More than two thousand years ago, the wisest of men proclaimed that the divine persuasion is the foundation of the order of the world, but that it could only produce such measure of harmony as amid brute forces it was possible to accomplish.*

—Alfred North Whitehead

Ancient Witnesses:   Genesis 22:13-14 (Hebrew Scriptures)  
                              Matthew 5:44-45 (New Testament)

Today I finish up my series on science and religion. Now, my point in this series is not to teach you any science. My point is to *allow scientific understanding to change our model of God*. What I'd like us to do is to *think theologically in light of science*. Just as scientific thought evolves and changes—goes through paradigm shifts—so should religious thinking! Being part of a progressive Christianity means that we always need to be progress-*ing*, it seems to me.

Just about every time I watch a big sporting event, I see it. After the game, there is an interview, and the athlete thanks God and give all credit for the victory to God. Don't get me wrong; I'm happy that these folks are talking about their faith. But their theology has left me scratching my head. Maybe you have the same questions of this sports theology: Isn't God present in both victory and defeat? Isn't God present and active in the lives of both of the opposing teams? Does God really care that much about sports?

It occurred to me that the topic that these multi-millionaire heroes were talking about is "providence." The doctrine of providence is about how God interacts with nature, how God is active in the world. And today, let's look at that question. How can God act if the world is governed by scientific laws? From football to weather patterns, from the stock market to warfare, how do we make sense of God's providence today?

Abraham made a great affirmation, "God will provide." And in the great tradition of our faith, we too, can make the same affirmation, "God will provide." Whether or not God provide is not the question. The question is *how* God provides is where we might see things differently today.

Let me give you an example of what I mean: The ancients believed that God created the world in three layers. You had the earth, and under the earth there was Sheol. Above the earth was the firmament. And God hung the moon and the stars on this dome above the earth the way we hang ornaments on a Christmas tree. Now today, we obviously do not think that God created the world in the same way as the ancients thought. We perhaps agree that God is the creator, but we differ in our understanding of *how* God creates. We have integrated our faith with our understanding of astronomy.

In the ancient world, they saw God's activity in nature as one continuous miracle. In this pre-scientific world, they saw God's activity much differently than we do today. For example, God

was directly responsible for each plant that the farmer planted. The farmer put the seed in the ground, the seed was thought to have died, and then God causes a miracle of a new plant to grow. There were no laws of nature, no understanding of biology or genetics, nothing about fertilization and germination. Everything was completely controlled by God, from crops to opposing armies.

This view of God's activity was continued by Luther and Calvin. According to them, every detail of our lives depends upon arbitrary decisions of God. Chance plays no part in the universe. Not one drop of rain falls without God's command. Calvin said that when a branch breaks off and falls from a tree, then kills a passing traveler, that, too, is at God's express command. God decides who wins football games.

Most of us today, I think, see things a little differently. John Polkinghorne writes that Christian theology has striven to find a way between two unacceptably extreme pictures of God's relationship to the creation.

*One is that of the cosmic tyrant who brings everything about by his will alone. He is the puppet-master of the universe, pulling every cosmic string and keeping all with his tight control. Such a God could not be the God of love, for the characteristic gift of love is of freedom to the beloved.*

The other extreme is the detached God of deism, simply watching it all happen. This view first appeared after the birth of science, and it takes seriously that events are caused by laws of nature. However, the God of love cannot be an indifferent spectator, either.

And so, says Polkinghorne, we seek a middle way today in which God interacts with the creation without overruling it. He refers to God's interaction as opposing to God's intervention because he wants to affirm that God is continually and consistently related to the world, and not fitful and arbitrary.

And so when we talk about God's hidden action in the world, God's providence, we need to be able to affirm that God's action is natural (not supernatural), it is within the laws of nature. It also exists alongside of chance and human freedom. It is also constant and continual. Ian Ramsey, an English theologian, told a story of two men crossing the plains of North America in a covered wagon in pioneer days. They are set upon by bandits. The horses are whipped up, and the two men make their escapes. One of the men has survived the attack; his partner has been killed. Ramsey says that if the survivor is to speak of God's providence in his survival, he must be prepared to speak also of God's providence in the death of his friend. God is active and provides no matter if we win or lose. After all, the cross is at the center of the Christian story.

I was listening once to one of my favorite podcasts, "On Being," by Krista Tippett. She and her guest were talking about the great Jewish scholar and activist, Rabbi Abraham Heschel. As a theologian, Heschel talked about the limited nature of God's providence. We tend to read the Bible looking for the mighty acts that God does, he said, but in the Bible, it is always God who is waiting for human beings to act. God will not swoop down and save us from the catastrophic effects of global warming, for example. Rather, God provides the wisdom, courage and compassion for us to act.

Finally, to make sense of God's providence, it is helpful to see that God doesn't act with coercive power, but with persuasive love. The God of love does not manipulate things and people. The biblical image is of one who stands at the door and knocks, who never forces entry. The life of Jesus embodies the power of persuasive love. Alfred North Whitehead once wrote,

*The life of Christ is not an exhibition of over-ruling power... Its power lies in its absence of force.*

The way of the world is by might. The way of the gospel is not by might or by power, but by persuasive love. I think that one of the best images is that of a loving parent relating to a growing child. As the child matures, the parent exercises persuasion and holds up moral standards rather than acting coercively. (When a parent does try to intervene with force, it is a sign that they have become powerless.) When the child fails to respond, the parent suffers when the child suffers. God does not promise that we will be protected from life's dangers. The promise is that God will empower us with endurance and insight if we are open to them.

I read an article once about a biology professor, Thomas Lindell, working to integrate Christian faith with scientific understanding. His faith community modified their liturgy to reflect that "God is love, period."

*Our service has done everything it can to get rid of power imagery. We do not pray as though we expect the big guy in the sky to come and fix everything.*

Meanwhile, the President of Southern Baptist Seminary, Al Mohler, called this absurd:

*If God is not all-powerful, why worship? A God who is not powerful cannot help, much less save.*

But this is exactly what I'm talking about this morning: a God whose only power is love and wisdom, and the kind of saving and help that that kind of God can provide.

Over 35 years ago, I remember a similar exchange when Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote his classic, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Chuck Colson, like Mohler, condemned the God Kushner described for not being omnipotent. Such a God, Colson said, is "sick and feeble."

But, to say that God interacts with nature without controlling it does not diminish God in the least. It does not take away from God's majesty or glory. Instead of having a God who acts occasionally with sheer power, we have a model of God who acts continually in all things. In fact, without God's continual gentle presence, things would fall apart. God is the one "in whom we live and move and have our being." (Acts 17:28) Paul wrote that "in Christ all things hang together." (Colossians 1:4) Without the continued presence of the Creator, the world would fly apart. Charles Birch talked about this aspect of the Sacred Presence that unifies and connects all things:

*When I go down to the ocean and swim on its shores I get to know one part of the ocean; its near end. But there is a vast extent of ocean way beyond my ken that is nevertheless continuous with that bit of ocean I know. So it is with God. We touch God at the near end, yet that same God extends into the farthest reaches of the universe and there too is pervasive love.*

I'll end today with a story by Kent Newborn from his book, *Small Graces*. It happened when he was a young man living in Marburg, Germany. It was a time when he was broke, depressed, isolated, and full of despair. He was working for a man who was a bitter alcoholic. Now, the mother of his boss, a survivor of the Nazi horror, took an interest in him.

*One day she took me aside.*

*"I watch you" she said. "I see the loneliness in your eyes. I watch your heart running away. You are like so many people. When life is hard, they try to look over the difficulty into the future. Or they long for the happiness of the past. Time is their enemy. The day they are living is their enemy. They are dead to the moment. They live only for the future or the past. But that is wrong."*

*"You must learn to seek the blue moment," she said.*

*She sat down beside me and continued. "The blue moment can happen any time or any place. It is a moment when you are truly alive to the world around you. It can be a moment of love or a moment of terror. You may not know it when it happens. It may only reveal itself in memory. But if you are patient and open your heart, the blue moment will come. My childhood classmates are dead, but I have the blue moment when we looked into each other's eyes."*

*I turned and stared into her lined and gentle face.*

*"Listen carefully to me," she continued. "This is a blue moment. I really believe it. We will never forget it. At this moment you and I are closer to each other than to any other human beings. Seize this moment. Hold it. Don't turn from it. It will pass and we will be as we were. But this is a blue moment, and the blue moments string together like pearls to make up your life. It is up to you to find them. It is up to you to make them. It is up to you to bring them alive in others."*

*She brushed her hand through my hair and gave me a pat on the side of the head.*

*"Always seek the blue moment," she said, and returned to her work.*

In light of our scientific worldview, I believe that we can still say that "God provides," that every day, every hour, every second God provides. And what is it that God provides? Wisdom to act; unity to recognize; peace to experience; love to transform our souls; presence to give us hope.

So yes, God provides. At every moment, at every place, in every circumstance—God provides. However, most of the time, we don't notice. But there are times we become aware, blue moments when we are truly alive to the world, when we feel ourselves connected with all things. Our cup overflows. Let us give thanks.