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Article abstract

How to present God's commitment in the world and in history in the most appropriate way? This article advances two proposals. First, to privilege the motif of God's action as being the most integral such motif, compared to causality, event, and meaning. Second, to spell out Christian faith in Providence according to the three main articles of the Creed. The challenge of conceiving God's sovereignty in an opaque world and in a shattered history remains, but the confession of faith nonetheless proves the best starting point and guideline.

DIVINE ACTION, PROVIDENCE, AND THE THREE MAIN ARTICLES OF THE CREED

EMMANUEL DURAND, O.P.

In this article, I intend to present God's commitment in the world and in history in a "phenomenological" manner. Divine action and Providence are most often considered from a metaphysical or hermeneutical perspective. Metaphysics builds up a theory of Providence and/or divine action on the basis of certain common features of created beings, such as structures and order, causalities, necessity and contingency, physical models, and so forth.¹ Hermeneutics focuses on the ways that Providence and/or divine action might be discerned and interpreted by individual human subjects, relying on their experiences, expectations, and faith.² Thus, for the metaphysician, Providence is thought of as a preordered fine tuning of the whole creation in relation to its ultimate end, whereas the hermeneutician looks on the divine action as something to be discerned and confessed through individual narratives, as we find in St. Augustine's *Confessions*. In this article, I would like to consider a possible "middle path" between metaphysics and hermeneutics by exploring a "phenomenological" way of addressing Providence. Phenomenology intends to perceive phenomena in their self-manifestation. I propose to apply this kind of approach to human action – as the best analogy for Providence – and to the Creed – as the best short testimony to effective Providence in this fallen world.

First, I explain why one might privilege the motif of God's action as being the most integral such motif, compared to causality, event, and meaning. In a second step, I spell out Christian faith in Providence inasmuch as the latter is applied in this world, broken and sinful, according to the three main articles

* The French draft of this paper has been translated by Dr. Matthew K. Minerod.

1. Among the very best ones, see Michael J. DODDS, *Unlocking Divine Action. Contemporary Science & Thomas Aquinas*, Washington DC, The Catholic University of America Press, 2012; Ignacio SILVA, "Revisiting Aquinas on Providence and Rising to the Challenge of Divine Action in Nature," *The Journal of Religion*, 94 (2014), pp. 277-291; Id., "Providence, Contingency, and the Perfection of the Universe," *Philosophy, Theology and the Sciences*, 2 (2015), pp. 137-157.

2. See the seminal proposal of Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," in Hans W. BARTSCH (ed.), *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, London, SCPK, 1953, pp. 1-44.

of the Creed. The premise of this theological reflection is the following: God is sovereign in the world and in history, on the ground of both Creation and Resurrection. The testimonies of Creation and Resurrection are solid; nevertheless, God's sovereignty awaits eschatological actualization and manifestation. The challenge of conceiving God's sovereignty in an opaque world and in a shattered history remains, but the confession of faith nonetheless proves the best starting point and guideline.

I. Interpretive Options: Causality, Action, Event, Meaning?

In order to think theologically about the commitment, involvement, or presence of the God of Revelation in this world, one of the main challenges is to adopt categories that are not too restrictive or reductive in relation to God's sovereignty. He reveals himself and hides, speaks and acts, calls and warns, makes himself present to groups and individuals, as he wills according to his design. Theology draws from faith a constellation of testimonies rendered to God's saving action in the history of his people. Choosing categories, whether carefully considered or not, and handling them more or less accurately, have consequences for how a given theology honors or disfigures testimonies of faith.

1.1 Resources of Causality

Causality is one of the ancient resources of theological thinking. This notion is analogical. It is modulated in various but coherent ways. The four ancient causalities (formal, efficient, material, final) answer fundamental questions of human intelligence before that which is unknown: What is it? Where does it come from? What is it made of? For what purpose does it exist? In addition to these four causes, there is a variant of the formal cause, namely the exemplar cause, which provides the answer to the question: On what model is this done or made? Whatever the critics of metaphysics may say, these causalities remain operative in contemporary philosophical thought and scientific research.³ Even final causality, which is often rejected as being anthropomorphic and projective, is relevant in accounting for certain physical or biological phenomena that are difficult to explain otherwise.⁴

Causality is very useful for analyzing certain human phenomena without being satisfied with an indefinite description of surface symptoms. For exam-

3. See Michael J. DODDS, *Unlocking Divine Action*, pp. 153-154. The author shows the deep affinities which exist between the four classical causalities and new formalizations of causality: *top-bottom*, *whole-part*, *bottom-up*, by attraction, etc.

4. See Karl POPPER, *A World of Propensities*, Bristol, Thoemmes, 1990; Robert J. RUSSELL (ed.), *Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action: Twenty Years of Challenge and Progress*, Vatican – Berkeley CA, Vatican Observatory – CTNS, 2008.

ple, the 2008 stock market crash becomes partly intelligible if banking parameters and economic sequences are analyzed in terms of causalities. Such a causal reduction of this phenomenon is certainly not commensurate with the roots and human consequences of the crisis, but it makes it possible to understand certain mechanisms of the phenomenon in order to imagine new regulatory systems that might provide a little better protection for companies and households.

The use of causality delivers some intelligibility concerning God's actions toward his creatures, such as electing, creating, governing, justifying, saving, resurrecting, etc. Facing the testimonies of faith by which such divine acts are attested, the cardinal questions of a causal search enable us to identify, with respect and rectitude, some degree of human intelligibility concerning the divine action: What is it? Where does it come from? Out of what does it proceed? On what does it operate? In view of what does it accomplish?

Thus, according to the grand biblical narrative, when God elects, he assigns to a person or a people a specific mission. This type of calling is the result of God's free initiative. The convocation is addressed to interlocutors who do not possess sufficient qualities or plans adjusted to God's design beforehand. The election is not given to the elected representative primarily because of his or her personal achievement, but rather, is bestowed with a view to an outcome that goes far beyond him or her while including him or her. Such a qualification of divine election, however rudimentary it may be, is based on causal analysis.

The presupposition of such an approach is that there is an analogy and coherence between the fundamental questions of human intelligence, the structures of human and physical reality within our reach, and a true—albeit limited—intelligibility in what God himself accomplishes with his creatures in the logic of the covenant. Analyzing God's involvement with his creatures provides considerable intelligibility, but the abstract part of such an approach is always likely to take away from God his own spiritual physiognomy as a personal subject engaged in a covenant with his people and with his creation.

1.2 The Irreducible Singularity of Action

When we conduct a causal analysis to advance in the understanding of any of the acts of the biblical God, we assume the paradigm of action as appropriate to apprehend those phenomena in which God might be involved as a personal subject. It is only natural that this should be so, for action is the analogical notion by which we intuitively grasp most human activities that have meaning and completeness, as opposed to work and transformative activities that tend toward a material outcome or result. Awakening, engaging, conversing, loving, playing, reading, are all common human actions that include a form of intrinsic completion, having pleasure or joy as the sign of such consummation.

The choice of the notion of action to qualify the commitments of the biblical God in history gives credit to an intuition rather than analytical unpacking. It even seems that action somehow resists causal decomposition. Surely, it is always relevant to grasp an action by questioning its nature, object, purpose, motivations, impact, etc. For example, God promises descendents to Abraham so that the latter might become the vector of the election and a blessing to future generations. This act can be duly analyzed and formalized as a specific promise. Still, stating the properties of a singular act always reduces the originality of the action as perceived in person or through the words of testimony. Indeed, the essence of action, in its full sense, is to be surprising and new, so that it reveals unexpected and intriguing aspects of the subject that engages in such activity.⁵

To consider the involvement of the biblical God in history under the paradigm of action directs theology towards a perception of the Author who is revealed in a surprising way each time through the uniqueness of his actions. The work we must do in order to move forward in this direction does not consist in analyzing God's commitments by means of causal decomposition, however enlightening this exercise may be. Rather, it is advisable to let oneself be guided by the particularities of each biblical narrative or testimony, in order to perceive the part of revelation that is quite specific to this or that instance of Revelation.

For example, in Gen. 12, God's first words to Abram spring forth from nowhere and manifest a singular authority on the part of the one who speaks. The sovereign command to leave all familiar ties for an unknown destination is coupled with grandiose promises that only God can responsibly make to someone. It remains theologically relevant to categorize this expression of God in terms of vocation or promise. However, something irreducible remains here in the uniqueness of the one who speaks and in the singularity of his elective action. This is left to the intuition of the listener or reader who is a witness to the unprecedented authority of this primordial call.

The main asset of the action paradigm is to highlight the revelation of God's singularity as a personal subject through his involvement in his actions and words. The limit of such an approach lies above all in the anthropomorphisms attached to human patterns of action, starting with the presupposition of a way out of inaction.

5. See Hannah ARENDT, *The Human Condition*, Chicago IL, University of Chicago Press, 1958, pp. 175-181.

1.3 *The Unmastered Nature of the Event*

Even if the difference between God and creation can be honored in this way, thinking of God's commitment to his creatures as an action is grounded on an analogy whose first field of experience is ethical: God is considered as the superior and ultimate agent based on the defining elements of human action. This does not in itself lead to a competition between divine and human action, but the analogy of action is partial, as is any theological similitude.

Another possibility might be to consider God's involvement in history by using the paradigm of the nature of events. What happens as an event goes beyond the limited scope of action. An event cannot be attributed to a single agent or even to a few key players. An event is not simply a historical fact or circumstance. In a full sense, it is characterized by novelty. It happens in an unexpected way. It could not be projected or deduced from the usual framework of causalities, actors and circumstances. An event is a milestone because it comes out of the predictable and surprises everyone. It changes the course of history and forces contemporaries to reconfigure their worldview.⁶

An event radically alters those involved in it or witnessing it. This can be verified at the level of an individual, a family, a people, or a nation. For example, the unexpected or hasty death of a loved one forces the bereaved spouse to learn how to live differently. The announcement of a fatal disease completely changes the existential conditions and the perception of time for the person involved. On a larger scale, a revolution or war often forces people and individuals to alter their usual behavior and design new types of human relationships. Those who experience such an event are summoned by what happens. Some are even commissioned as witnesses as they rush to find the words to translate the unseen past and transmit to their children the memory of the event. Some Holocaust survivors thus felt compelled to write down their experiences in order to put into words something which had hitherto been unthinkable.

An authentic event is not some manageable affair. It triggers off a new story, that of a gradual appropriation by witnesses. The grand narrative of salvation history is marked by such events, accessible through a chain of witnesses and transformative effects. An event-paradigm is well suited to the qualification of God's vivid implications in the history of his people.

One limitation of the event-paradigm is that an event is most often woven together with interactions so complex that it is not attributable to anyone in its own right as a singular agent. This approach therefore tends to portray God as an unknowable Author upstream of the facticity of the events in which he is involved. A risk associated with this paradigm is that it can lead us to

6. See Claude ROMANO, *L'événement et le monde*, Paris, PUF, 1998, pp. 35-77.

systematically conceive of God's commitment in terms of discontinuity and objective evidence. However, the Judeo-Christian tradition confesses a God who is also involved in the most ordinary and quotidian details of life, as is evidenced by the law of God and the contemplation of the wise. Despite the hidden character of God's presence in everyday realities, we also confess that he is committed, present, and sovereign in the non-events of the long journey of his people and every believer.

1.4 Extra Meanings that Rise from Immanence?

For fear of understanding the relationship of God with human history in far too extrinsic a manner, too easily assimilated to the paradigms of causality, action, and event, some contemporary theologians seek to situate the divine fully within the immanence of human subjectivity.⁷ In full truth, neither causality, nor action, nor an events-paradigm necessarily leads us to detract from human realities so as then to aggrandize God with this element would thus be removed from our domain of being and experience.⁸ None of these paradigms require a partitioning of causalities or a separation of effects, setting the divine on one side and the human on the other. God's radical difference from the causalities of the world, human actions, and historical events makes his involvement perfectly compatible with the full consistency of the systems of creation. Without associating extrinsecism with the three avenues of exploration mentioned so far, let us give fair consideration to the fourth approach proposed as an alternative.

God is made present and revealed in the abundance of meaning and the flowering of grace that rise from human existence without coming to it from the outside. To discern God's involvement as an extra life or an epiphany of grace, thus, involves a kind of turning of our gaze. To discern and interpret the fullness of human existence empowered by God, we must have the double depth of vision that faith offers. The Word of God plays a vital revelatory role here, offering interpretive keys that enable us to relate to God the multiple experiences of transcendence that rise from immanence.

It is undeniable that certain human experiences, beginning with those that involve a labor of conversion that has been engaged in for a long time, manifest that God is actively present in the depths of human existence, with its desires, its shortcomings, its rhythms, its complexities, etc. Saint Augustine's long journey of conversion, leading up to the eighth book of *The Confessions*, is a good example of this long labor of grace in immanence. Nevertheless,

7. See Robert MAGER, "Un enchantement de l'histoire?," in Robert MAGER (ed.), *Dieu agit-il dans l'histoire?*, Montréal, Fides, 2006, pp. 47-74.

8. See BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX, *De gratia et libero arbitrio*, XIV, 47; THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, 70, 8.

through his rereading of faith, Augustine relates each step of the process to various modalities of God's action. Through the gaze of faith, he even discerns God's mark in the sorrows, disappointments, illusions, and disgusts of his sinful existence, wherein God was ever at work.⁹ Here, the sinner's human experience in no way impedes the sovereignty of the Creator, the holy, immanent and transcendent God.

Under the guise of opposing extrinsecism, God should not be locked into a false alternative between immanence and transcendence. God's transcendence has nothing to do with the exteriority of a god merely endowed with hypertrophied worldly attributes, as is the case in deism. Because of his true transcendence, God is present within the innermost part of the human being and makes his voice heard even in the wanderings and infernos of the sinner.

Moreover, limiting God's involvement to extra meanings discernable by faith in the density of human existence leaves out of sight everything that remains hidden away in seeming nonsense. As Qohelet expresses it, the test of human beings is their ability to embrace the sequence and cycles of life without being able to penetrate its meaning: "I have seen the business that God has given to the sons of men to be busy with. He has made everything beautiful in its time; also he has put eternity into man's mind man, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end." (Qoh. 3:10-11, RSV) The difference between meaning and nonsense is related to our experiences, our perceptions, and our more or less theological penetration. Let us think of the ultimate experience of nonsense: the lynching of the Innocent One. At the foot of Jesus' cross, human nonsense almost completely blurred the possibility of meaning. Only Mary and a disciple saw a paschal sense in this chiaroscuro of a terribly tried and tested faith.

Yes, the extra meanings and dazzling grace that rise from the depths of the human being probably bear witness to God's presence within human immanence. The tree will be judged by its fruits... It is essential to recognize that God can act not only in objectivity but also in interiority or subjectivity. It is even reasonable to think that he does so by coordinating both of these kinds of activity. Nevertheless, God's involvement in such experiences can be honored in terms of causality, action, or event, without artificial exteriority or preclusion of his immanence in the depths of our being.

First Assessment: The Semantics of God's Action

To my eyes, the motive for God's action remains the conceptual pivot of a theology of God's commitment in the world and in history. The semantics of

9. See Emmanuel DURAND, *Évangile et Providence. Une théologie de l'action de Dieu*, Paris, Cerf, 2014, pp. 91-129.

action are in line with the current language of faith. The divine action orients its beneficiaries and witnesses toward its utterly unique Author. It includes a dimension of personal revelation, something that loses something if it is conceptualized merely in terms of being an event.

Certainly, like any theological concept, the notion of God's action requires adjustments and corrections. We must avoid conceiving divine action as an exit from inaction, passivity, or rest. "My Father is working still, and I am working" (Jn 5:17, RSV), Jesus replied to the Jewish authorities in a controversy on the Sabbath. It is not appropriate to conceive God's action exclusively in terms of discontinuity and rupture with the usual course of intramundane phenomena and human affairs.

Through faith and reason, three possible registers of God's action can be schematized. Let us remember that the divine activity does not add external layers to intra-worldly happenings and human decisions. Because of its difference and transcendence, divine action suffuses both necessary and contingent processes. Thus, for example, at the very moment when a professor is teaching a theology course on God, God himself can personally speak in the intimate depths of one of his or her students. The professor does not need to be silent in order for God to be able to speak. God can pass through certain words spoken by the teacher, although it is also possible that the connection between these human words and the divine word to the intimate depths of a listener be accidental. God speaks without competing with the teacher.

Thus, we can consider three registers of activity:

- At any moment of created time, God acts by means of conservation, accompaniment, orientation, amplification, attraction, etc. However, some of God's actions contrast with the natural course of things and human possibilities.
- At certain times in human history, as Scriptures testify, God acts through mighty deeds of salvation and events of speech, which trigger off new phases in the lives of his people, nations, servants, and friends, etc.
- On the temporal scale of singular human lives, God also acts by inspiring grace, converting one's gaze, bringing about intimate growth, etc.

These three registers are not mutually exclusive. Christian faith confesses that God acts in at least these three ways.

God's action is most often discreet because of its very transcendence. On occasion, it can be acknowledged under the influence of a kind of supernatural coefficient, but recognizing it still requires a willingness to believe. There are always pharaohs who are capable of denying any exodus. For God's commitment to be perceived in the external traces of his activity, he must also act within the intimate depths of certain observers, who thereby become witnesses in the fullest sense, with God opening their minds and hearts to what they see. Otherwise, it is always easier to look without understanding and to deny the invisible, which nevertheless sends forth visible signals of its presence and activity.

2. Conceiving Providence as a Confession of Faith

It is solid and fruitful – I think – to conceive of Providence on the basis of the characterization of God as Pure Act and Creator of all beings. Thomas Aquinas developed this path in a powerful way in the third book of the *Summa contra Gentiles*. However, in an era when metaphysics has become inconceivable for most of our contemporaries, it is also necessary and, indeed, opportune that we offer alternative paths of access to these mysteries. In his own time, marked as it was by empiricism, John Henry Newman argued that it was always possible to consider history and worldly sequences indefinitely with a simple vision of immanence.¹⁰ Such logic often saturates the immediate need for explanation. According to a Humean understanding of causality, we do not need to seek out some kind of transcendence beyond the multiple states prior to any given phenomenon. The religious man is free to believe in a transcendent and benevolent God, but inferring a first cause no longer meets the necessary requirements of contemporary thought. Undoubtedly, such a rejection of metaphysical inquiry is questionable and, indeed, open to legitimate criticism, but it no longer suffices that we lock ourselves, digging in our heels as metaphysicians who speak a tongue that resounds with a foreign philosophical tone. For the sake of making the word of God intelligible, we must also attempt to provide other possible paths of accesses to the theology of Providence and God's action.

Sketching a theology of Providence in the form of a confession of faith is very appropriate for another reason, not only drawn from our current, generally anti-metaphysical but also from a structural dimension. Christians are summoned by the Gospel to believe in Providence while facing a world shaken by evil.¹¹ The real problem lies quite deep. The common condition of sinners, structures of sin, historical woes, and the entanglement born of personal sins all blur the human ability to decipher creation as being a work of God, conceived and sustained, directed and governed by him. The disproportionate nature of evils remains the most commonly shared justification for unbelief. In such a context, adhering to Providence and discerning its traces in this world partly disfigured by evil, is, most often and to begin with, part of an approach grounded firmly in faith and hope. Thinking of Providence becomes a spiritual exercise based on the Creed shared by the various Christian confessions. It is from this perspective that I would like to state the essence of

10. John Henry NEWMAN, "Milman's View of Christianity" (1841), in *Essays Critical and Historical*, II, London, Longmans, 1897, pp. 196-197. A similar debate took place in France; see Guillaume CUCHET, "Comment Dieu est-il acteur de l'histoire? Le débat Broglie-Guéranger sur le 'naturalisme historique,'" *Revue des Sciences philosophiques et théologiques*, 96 (2012), pp. 33-55.

11. See Emmanuel DURAND, "The Gospel of Prayer and Theories of Providence," *The Thomist*, 78 (2014), pp. 519-536.

Christian faith in divine Providence. We can ground it on three key propositions related to three articles in the Creed.

2.1 *Providence as Divine Sovereignty*

Belief in Providence presupposes that we confess God the Father “Almighty,” not thereby meaning a kind of theoretical omnipotence, postulated by reason’s own projections, but in the sense of the *Pantocratoria* spoken of by the Antenicene Fathers: the sovereignty of God.¹² God “bears all things” and “contains all things” through his Word in his benevolent designs in creation and in our filial adoption through grace. God leads each creature to its own end and to its ultimate end, according to a benevolent design of elevation, care, and fulfillment. For spiritual creatures, the orientation of the created becoming is properly filial. He is “almighty” through his “maintenance” of and solicitude for every creature.

Confessing Providence as God’s sovereignty today implies a serious clarification, because the asymmetry of the relationship between God and human beings tends to disappear, and even to be reversed, in some contemporary theologies.¹³ One observes a strange transfer of sovereignty from God to human beings. Throughout contemporary discussions concerning Providence, human autonomy and freedom stand forth like inviolable premises deserving a central place in this domain of theology. One of modernity’s positive conceptual acquisitions is to have revealed human freedom’s potentials, doing so through a multifaceted process of emancipation and empowerment.¹⁴ This holds true in the inter-connected domains of religion, knowledge, and action. In contemporary thought, human autonomy represents a common foundation for reflection, something ultimately shared by those who hold some form of atheist humanism as well as by the defenders of Christian theism.¹⁵ Therefore, it is not surprising that contemporary debates surrounding the topic of Providence adopt these premises. Nonetheless, it is fitting that we take a moment to question them. I will do so at the level of lived existence, not that of principles.

The reign of autonomy and freedom sometimes so saturates contemporary thought that it partially conceals certain commonly experienced realities: in

12. See ORIGEN, *Treatise on Principles*, I.2.10; Jean-Pierre BATUT, *Pantocrator: “Dieu le Père tout-puissant” dans la théologie prénicéenne*, Paris, Institut d’Études Augustiniennes, 2009.

13. For an earlier sketch of this argument, see Emmanuel DURAND, “Repenser la Providence sans perdre Dieu dans l’opération,” *Recherches de Science Religieuse*, 106 (2018), pp. 539-554.

14. See Wilhelm DILTHEY, *Weltanschauung und Analyse des Menschen seit Renaissance und Reformation*, Stuttgart – Göttingen, B.G. Teubner – Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1964, pp. 246-283.

15. See Paul CLAVIER, “Le jeune Sartre et le vieux Sertillanges: le chassé-croisé de la création,” *Revue des Sciences philosophiques et théologiques*, 96 (2012), pp. 493-511.

birth and death, man is dependent, and human action struggles to attain true freedom. Perhaps our fascination with autonomy in fact reveals how much it falls short in the midst of the circumstances of real life. Rather than being an exercise of absolute autonomy, human maturity involves in taking up and accommodating the dependencies – be they familial, affective, institutional, and economic – which press upon us without our own choosing. Human actions wend their way through an entire network of circumstances, conditions, and positive or negative solidarities, including structures of sin. If autonomy and freedom are essential properties of man considered in his positive capabilities, we must acknowledge the fact that we stand in need of a kind of apprenticeship, requiring support, community, patience, and great clarity of mind if we are to realize this autonomy and freedom in the midst of the real conditions besetting our life and action. Freedom often is actualized in the nooks and crannies of life's realities, indeed, sometimes even emerging like a kind of miracle springing forth from unsuspected resources in the human person faced with adversity, deprivation, and oppression.

Now, having nuanced these points, let us willingly admit that autonomy and freedom should be integrated into any sound theology of Providence, for they are inalienable properties of man, considered in his positive capabilities, along with his historicity, bodily nature, social existence, morality, and so forth.

Here, however, we face a disconcerting reversal which deserves serious reflection. Whereas for centuries it seemed evident to believers that the divine will could hold evil human wills in check, contemporary thought insists, so to speak, on the opposite power relationship: man must be able to foil God's will. This seems to be a point of capital importance for a number of contemporary theologians, who wish to respect the freedom which God has bestowed upon human beings. However, God curiously seems to be deprived of an analogous power: It is said that he cannot hold human wills in check. The impulse animating this conviction is the human observation that he has not, in fact, held them in check, neither in the past nor in the present, in the midst of the earthly hells of human history. This is no mean argument.

Allow me to raise two questions here.

First, have we taken the time to describe the criteria that should rule the discernment of God's action or inaction towards wicked human wills? According to what criteriology can we affirm that God does or does not act at a given moment of history, in this or that evil occurrence? In the absence of a kind of tacitly presupposed interventionist model of God's activity, whose principal criterion would be the experience of observable discontinuity in a supposedly predictable world, the task of establishing parameters for identifying God's action is not at all an easy task. In another work, I have attempted to propose such a criteriology, presenting a spectrum spanning from rather objective modalities found in God's action (vestiges, effects, gestures, works,

and institutions) to partially subjective modalities (meaning, grace, inspiration, persuasion, revelation, and conversion). At the intersection of these two registers, we find the actions, words, presences, and events in which faith discerns that God acts.¹⁶

For example, is it appropriate to conclude that God did not hold the wicked wills of Jesus of Nazareth's persecutors in check simply because he did not intervene in order to stop his trial and execution? However, we are quite justified in thinking that God is opposed to the wicked and proud in a way that differs from what we find in the power struggles of men.¹⁷ This remains disconcerting, difficult, and even revolting when judged according to human standards, including those of believers. However, I still think that we should maintain that God also has the power—though, one that is different, for it is divine—to hold free, human wills in check. This need not lead us to deny the scandal that we experience, even as believers, when we are presented with mob violence against the innocent, as well as with man's dehumanization of his fellow men.

Second, if man can hold the divine will in check, whereas God supposedly could not hold human wills in check, do we not find ourselves thereby tacitly asserting that man is God and God a creature? If we envision the relationship between God and man along such lines, thinking of possible or impossible interpersonal defeats, do we not thereby run the risk of reducing their relationship to one more intra-worldly power-relation? It is indeed possible that God would thus surreptitiously become another intra-worldly actor, potentially rivaling his creatures and, consequently, no longer God. Thus, we would *de facto* lose God in the process of rethinking Providence in relation to human freedom.

We face another major problem in contemporary theology of Providence: is there a divine self-determination to allow God to be determined by his free creatures? The concept of self-limitation is ubiquitously found all throughout

16. See Emmanuel DURAND, *Évangile et Providence*, pp. 61-89; Hans JONAS, "Is Faith Still Possible? Memories of Rudolf Bultmann and Reflections on the Philosophical Aspects of His Work," in Lawrence VOGEL (ed.), *Mortality and Morality: A Search for the Good after Auschwitz*, Evanston IL, Northwestern University Press, 1996 (originally presented, 1976), pp. 144-164.

17. Here, we are in agreement with a quite astute thesis: "God's almightiness does not lead to any neutralization or annihilation of powers which are contrary to God's creative purpose, but consists in depriving them of the power to impede it conclusively." See Marc VIAL, "God's Almightiness and the Limits of Theological Discourse," *Modern Theology*, 34 (2018), pp. 443-456 (here, 447). In its developed and masterly form, see Marc VIAL, *Pour une théologie de la toute-puissance de Dieu: L'approche d'Eberhard Jüngel*, Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2016. This work opens with a deconstruction of Hans Jonas, "The Concept of God after Auschwitz. A Jewish Voice," *The Journal of Religion*, 67 (1987), pp. 1-13. This deconstruction is undertaken in order to resituate the Christian theology of the divine "omnipotence" on a different terrain than that of theodicy, in the wake of Eberhard JÜNGEL, *Gottes Anfangen als schöpferische Selbstbegrenzung* (1986), in *Wertlose Wahrheit. Zur Identität und Relevanz des Christlichen Glaubens. Theologische Erörterungen* III, 2nd edition, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2003 (1st ed. 1990), pp. 151-162.

contemporary literature about God, often inspired by Karl Barth's intuitions, as they were conveyed and systematized by Eberhard Jüngel.¹⁸ God, *in himself*, is infinite by his very essence, but he has determined to become God *for us*. Creation, the election of the Chosen People, the covenant, and the Incarnation, all consequently imply a self-limitation by God.¹⁹ This outlook is not utterly novel. The concept of such a divine self-limitation represents an interesting and updated form of the themes of *kenosis* and *katabasis* which did in fact play an important role in the Church Fathers' own thought.

In contrast with some of his predecessors, Barth was careful in how he interpreted the notion of *kenosis*, being clear that he thought of it as a kind of unveiling of given divine attributes and not as the disappearance or suspension of these traits. Let us consider an important extract from his *Kirchliche Dogmatik* IV, where the theologian from Basel maintains that the divine essence remains immutable in the Incarnation:

God is always God even in his humiliation. The divine being does not suffer any change, any diminution, any transformation into something else, any admixture with something else, let alone any cessation. The deity of Christ is the one unaltered because unalterable deity of God. Any subtraction or weakening of it would at once throw doubt upon the atonement made in him.²⁰

One condition for the true efficacy of Reconciliation by Christ through the Paschal sequence (the Passion, Resurrection, and Pentecost) is that "God is always God even in his humiliation." Nonetheless, Barth rejects every projection of "God" as being nothing more than a mere idol, simply being freed from the limitations befalling man's essence:

We may believe that God can and must only be absolute in contrast to all that is relative, exalted in contrast to all that is lowly, active in contrast to all suffering, inviolable in contrast to all temptation, transcendent in contrast to all immanence, and therefore divine in contrast to everything human, in short the he can and must be only the "Wholly Other." But such beliefs are shown to be quite untenable, and corrupt and pagan, by the fact that God does in fact be and do this in Jesus Christ. We cannot make them the standard by which to measure what God can or cannot do, or the basis of the judgment that in doing this he brings himself into self-contradiction. By doing this God proves to us that he can do it, that to do it is within his nature.²¹

18. See the seminal work of Eberhard Jüngel, *God's Being is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. John Webster, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001.

19. On the relevance played by the concept of self-limitation in a related domain of issues, see Marc VIAL, *Pour une théologie de la toute-puissance de Dieu*, pp. 22-29.

20. Karl BARTH, *Church Dogmatics* IV.1, § 59.1, Geoffrey W. BROMILEY and Thomas F. TORRANCE (ed.), London, T&T Clark, 2004, pp. 179-180.

21. Karl BARTH, *Church Dogmatics* IV.1, § 59.1, p. 186. In the background, see Ludwig FEUERBACH, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George ELIOT, Amherst NY, Prometheus Books, 1989.

Hence, the divine essence, whose immutability is preserved through the Incarnation, is the divine essence which was revealed in Scripture and not an essence that is philosophically postulated after the manner of a kind of grotesque inversion.

In light of all this, let us return to the relationship existing between Providence and creatures. Is an immutable Providence of itself a grotesque caricature? Does it contradict the freedom which God bestows upon certain creatures? Must we purely and simply rid ourselves of Providence's immutability in order to assure that created freedom receives the full respect owed to it? Just as we find that faith's correct response to the Incarnation is to maintain the paradox we experience in thinking about the relationship between the Son's divine essence and the humanity of the Crucified One, so too would it not be more just in the matter facing us now to retain the paradox existing between these two great powers (i.e., Providence and created freedom) without being too quick to cry out concerning their supposed contradiction?

If God determined himself in his nature to allow himself to be determined by his free creatures, I cannot see how God would not thereby be reduced to a kind of superior creature, negotiating with the consents and refusals offered by his creaturesly partners. As is attested in the granting of prayers of request, God quite obviously "can give to the requests of [his] creature a place in his will."²² Clearly, according to the story presented to us in the Bible, he does so. However, in my opinion, this is different from a determination to allow oneself to be determined by another person. Such a relational schema is perfectly suitable for partners in a covenant established between beings of the same nature. For example, by sealing their union, spouses determine that they will each be co-determined (rather than simply determined) by each other, as well as by the children who may one day be born, along with their own freedoms. In these scenarios, it is part of our very human condition that we bind ourselves by making promises, even though the other person's freedom is unpredictable in the mid-range.²³ This may well have some similarity with God's relationship with man; however, we ultimately must admit that God and man do not share the same nature.

One thing that distinguishes the mutual covenant between human spouses from the covenant existing between God and humanity is quite precisely the absence or presence of sovereignty in the covenantal structure itself. Despite all the various existential and historical asymmetries that may exist between the spouses, we recognize that they are by rights equal and fully co-determined

22. Karl BARTH, *Church Dogmatics* III.4, § 53.3, London, T&T Clark, 2004, p. 109; cited by Jean-Baptiste LECUIT, "L'épreuve de la providence," *Recherches de Science Religieuse*, 106 (2018), pp. 255-274, here 264.

23. See Hannah ARENDT, *The Human Condition*, Chicago IL, University of Chicago Press, 1958, pp. 243-247.

in this covenant. By its very nature, the relationship between God and humanity is asymmetrical, precisely on account of the infinite distance separating their natures. God is sovereign, and humanity is not. This quite clearly comes to the fore in the biblical passages where the metaphors of marriage or of parentage are used for signifying the relationship involved in the covenant between God and his people, in particular in Hosea 1-3 and 11. Here, God's sovereignty does not take the form of "domination" but, rather, represents a primacy of initiative, an utterly unheard-of endurance, a kind of surplus in compassion, and a power that can recreate the beloved.

Undoubtedly, through the Incarnation, the Son of God exposed himself in his humanity to the possibility of being co-determined by worldly phenomena and agents, but – as we will soon see – it is precisely within this worldly scene that we come to glimpse God's creative and utterly astounding sovereignty.

To maintain God in his rightful place in the theologies of Providence, it is crucial that we confess that he alone is sovereign in relation to creation and history, with an ineffable and obscure sovereignty, one which is properly divine. Through faith, this lordship distanced from more or less rational caricatures taking the form of control, rivalry, oppression, competition or withdrawal... so many patterns of human power relations.

In the wake of the Ante-Nicene Fathers, Christians confess that God forever exercises his providence as Father, that is, by the mediation of the Unique and Beloved Son, who works with him in creation, reconciliation, and recapitulation. God's sovereignty will be fully established and revealed only at the end of history, through the eschatological fulfillment of history. In the hardships and trials of the present time, God's sovereignty most often remains opaque to a merely natural outlook. Nonetheless, the way that God's sovereignty is accomplished is really anticipated and unveiled by Christ's paschal mystery. To continue to think of Providence as a confession of faith, it is absolutely necessary that we move from the first article of the Creed to the second.

2.2 Providence as a Paschal Mystery

To believe in Providence in this world, which has been overthrown and disfigured by evil, presupposes that we profess the Incarnation, God's definitive historical engagement with his creatures, as well as the Pasch of the Son, the *kenosis* and restoration of the Righteous One. The concrete exercise of Providence follows no other path than that which the Son himself travelled among men.

Let us consider for a moment the way that creation is "readable" as containing in itself something like a divine message. In theory, creation should lead people to recognize God and give glory to him for the gift of creation. But

human intelligence often stops at a fascination with immanence (Wis. 13:1-8). Moreover, pushed to a certain threshold of truth, recognition of the Creator requires a change in lifestyle (Rom. 1:18-25). The testimony of creation is thus difficult to receive in all of its truth. The visible should lead to the invisible, but it can also easily veil over it for those who are satisfied with a superficial gaze or do not want to penetrate beyond the veil. The veiling can become blurred when sin gets involved. The visible, the tangible, the fashionable, the domesticated, the useful... all of these thus risk capturing our eyes and our appetites entirely. The creature becomes an idol, an object of lust and a pretext for alienation. Their role in leading the creature back to God is thus hindered.

If one moves from creation to human history, the darkness increases. By its very nature, history is much less legible than is creation. It speaks more of human beings than of God. It requires even more faith and hope to believe and eventually discern the hand of God in history than in creation. Certain segments of history, be they personal or collective, can be revisited with the eyes of faith. To establish such discernment in the present, it is necessary to have, to a certain degree, the charism of prophecy. It is the hallmark of prophecy that it illuminates with divine light the complexity of an ongoing history. But the darkness of history is not simply natural. No, indeed, it is multiplied by the weight of sin in human actions and the events that result from them. Human enterprises with the highest ideals are blurred and sometimes ruined by acts, failures, and abuses which cannot be explained by reason alone. Revolutions based on legitimate aspirations for freedom give rise to fratricidal clashes and corrupt regimes. Nothing evades suffering an inconceivable amount of waste, through the interference of narrowness, fragility, and human error.²⁴

In this world, Providence is not the subject of a peaceful rational inference. To regain its solid foundation in the testimony of the created order, we must transcend the blurring caused by disorder and sin. Admittedly, disorder presupposes order. The suffering experienced in the presence of waste, chaos, and disfigurement is made possible and enhanced by a perception of the order, beauty, and good that should prevail. But this reasoning, however solid and sane it may be, does not exempt human intelligence from experiencing a profound trial of faith when faced with evils that blur the legibility of creation and obscure the meaning of human narratives in history. This is why Providence is not only a truth of reason but also an article of faith.²⁵

How are we to penetrate the veil of the visible? How can we overcome the darkness of sin? We must elevate our eyes and convert our gaze. The believing

24. See Emmanuel DURAND, "Note sur la théologie de l'histoire," *Revue des Sciences philosophiques et théologiques*, 98 (2014), pp. 353-379.

25. Regarding two fundamental articles of faith, including Providence, see Thomas Aquinas, *ST II-II*, q. 1, a. 7, resp.

mind must consent to the paschal form of the exercise of divine sovereignty in this world. Scripture invites us to this new view. God's sovereignty is exercised in a mysterious way, through delays, failures, purifications, and unsuspected resources. Three types of passages give the measure and profile of how God exercises his sovereignty. He is not only the one who calls into existence what did not exist, but also is the one who calls his creatures from death to life, from sin to grace. God is the only one who has this creative power of overcoming or reversing: from nothing to being, from death to life, from hostility to friendship. Creation, resurrection, and justification all reveal how God is sovereign in his action and Providence. The testimony of the resurrection is accessible to faith alone, but it is of great value in corroborating the testimony of creation and that of God's friends.

God accomplishes his designs and joins his creatures anew even when they remain, to the eyes of men, in a state of utter collapse and abandonment. For as long as this age lasts, the paradoxical fate of the Righteous One remains the paradigm for God's ways: even within persecutions and under the blows of sin, God's power is committed to the righteous who, when judged in accord with this world's criteria, are nonetheless reduced to weakness. Thus, they become small, shimmering rays of paschal light, even in the midst of this world's darkness. Through the human freedom of the Son who, utterly stripped of all he has and appearing to be defeated, definitively overcomes sin, God's sovereignty attains, within our own history, the anticipated form of his final victory.

2.3 Providence as a Synergy between Spirit and Church

In order to believe in Providence so that we might cooperate with it and resist evil, we must first confess the synergy which exists between the Spirit and human beings of good will. The Spirit of Christ the Lord is powerfully at work in this world, with the same power found in the paschal mystery, able to overthrow this world's evils. The action of the Spirit is all the more discernable to the degree that men and women are open to his inspirations and to his bold summons within the world's stage.

Thus, in the Acts of the Apostles (5:32; 15:28), we see that believers can legitimately consider the Spirit as being the intimate partner of their ecclesial and missionary "we / us."²⁶ As the principal Actor each time that the Apostles came to cross new frontiers, especially those that had become walls of contempt (8:17; 10:44), the Spirit led Christ's disciples onward, even if this meant that he had to close off certain all-too-human paths in order to open up ones that were even more audacious.

26. See Daniel MARGUERAT, "L'œuvre de l'Esprit," in *La première histoire du christianisme. Les Actes des apôtres*, Paris – Genève, Cerf – Labor et Fides, 1999, pp. 149-174.

The book of Revelation confers a specific role on the Spirit and the Church, with a kind of divine synergy, in the ultimate completion of God's plan. From the very beginning of the book, God presents himself as sovereign with regard to a vast conflict taking place both in heaven and in history, illuminated from above by revelations and visions. God's sovereignty is immediately affirmed by a temporal declination of the Tetragrammaton. Compared to Isaiah's antecedents (Isa. 41:4; 44:6; 48:12), this new formula of divine self-presentation is characterized by an eschatological emphasis, through the use of the verb "to come" instead of the verb "to be," in the future tense: "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty (*Pantocrator*)" (Rev. 1:8, RSV).

The great opening vision of chapters 4 and 5 reveals that God's sovereignty is already acknowledged in heaven and that the sacrificed Lamb plays a decisive role in the extension of worship to all creatures.²⁷ The challenge of our current history seems to be the full extension and universal recognition of divine sovereignty, both on earth and in heaven. They are acquired, but the fighting is not over, both in heaven and on earth.

The book's final vision, opening out onto a new heaven and a new earth, also receives the seal of the sovereign God: "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end" (Rev. 21:6, RSV). However, it is Christ's responsibility to mediate the full extension and universal recognition of God's sovereignty. In this function, Christ shares God's prerogatives: "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, beginning and the end." (Rev. 22:13, RSV)

With one voice, the Spirit and the Church also have roles to play in ultimate fulfillment through an urgent call: "The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come'" (Rev. 22:17) The answer comes from Christ himself. It is he himself who finally proclaims: "Surely, I am coming soon." And this outstanding promise receives the whole Amen of the Church: "Amen. Come Lord Jesus!" (Rev. 22:20, RSV) The ultimate outcome thus involves God and Christ, the Spirit and the Church. These last two actors play their own part in an intertwined synergy. The Spirit guides, sustains, and animates the Church's urgent call and Amen, even as time passes along its course.

Final Assessment: A *Theologia Viatorum*

In order to bring about the reconciliation of Divine Providence and created freedom in a satisfactory manner, does the renunciation of God's immutability – in terms of self-determination and self-limitation to be determined by creatures – really provide a fitting solution to the problem facing us? I have argued in favor of a different perspective that does not move in this direction.

27. See Richard BAUCKHAM, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, pp. 54-65.

To suppress one of these divine attributes like a kind of troublesome fact would only offer a pure and simple suspension of the mystery, not a resolution to the aporias thus raised.

In the background of such projects which seek to unburden themselves of these mysterious aporias, we sometimes discover a hidden and erroneous conception of theology. Theology is not a kind of ultimate arbiter, resolving various rational problems arising between incompatible data posed by the mysteries of the faith.²⁸ If this were indeed theology's objective, one might well be justified in redefining the initial conditions, eliminating given inconvenient parameters from the point of departure of such reflection, so that thought might be freed from needing to reach some kind of reconciliation which is unthinkable for pure reason. Such a quest is legitimate in scientific experiments or in thought experiments, over which we ourselves are the masters. However, in a confessional theology, one's premises are received from Christological revelation in the twofold form in which it is made present to us: the witness of Scriptures and the ecclesial transmission of faith. Theologians do not have complete and utter freedom in defining their premises. Nonetheless, they must forever maintain an outlook of critical vigilance, for human groups also hand on confusions between the faith's own truth and various associated representations which sometimes come from other sources like false forms of evidence, especially ones pertaining to anthropology and cosmology. The reception and transmission of faith require us to ceaselessly purify our cultural representations.

When Christian theology approaches mysteries like that of Providence, it finds that its principle task is to avoid false representations and to overcome apparent contradictions so that our faith in God may be freer and purer, without tampering with the mystery he has revealed.²⁹ Invocation, paradox, and integration are the hallmarks of a sound *theologia viatorum* in relation to God's sovereignty.

28. This argument was developed in a masterly fashion, against a deceptive transfer of the world's suffering to God, by Thomas G. WEINANDY in *Does God Suffer?*, Edinburg, T&T Clark, 2000.

29. Basing his observation on the Fathers' practice in Trinitarian matters, this is how the purpose of theology is described by Thomas Aquinas in *De potentia*, q. 9, a. 4, resp.; also, see SCG I.9.3.

SUMMARY

How to present God's commitment in the world and in history in the most appropriate way? This article advances two proposals. First, to privilege the motif of God's action as being the most integral such motif, compared to causality, event, and meaning. Second, to spell out Christian faith in Providence according to the three main articles of the Creed. The challenge of conceiving God's sovereignty in an opaque world and in a shattered history remains, but the confession of faith nonetheless proves the best starting point and guideline.

SOMMAIRE

Comment présenter l'engagement de Dieu dans le monde et dans l'histoire de la manière la plus appropriée? Cet article avance deux propositions. Premièrement, privilégier le motif de l'action de Dieu comme étant le plus intégral, par rapport à la causalité, à l'événement et au sens. Deuxièmement, expliciter la foi chrétienne en la Providence selon les trois principaux articles du Credo. Le défi de concevoir la souveraineté de Dieu dans un monde opaque et dans une histoire bouleversée demeure, mais la confession de foi s'avère néanmoins le meilleur point de départ et guide.