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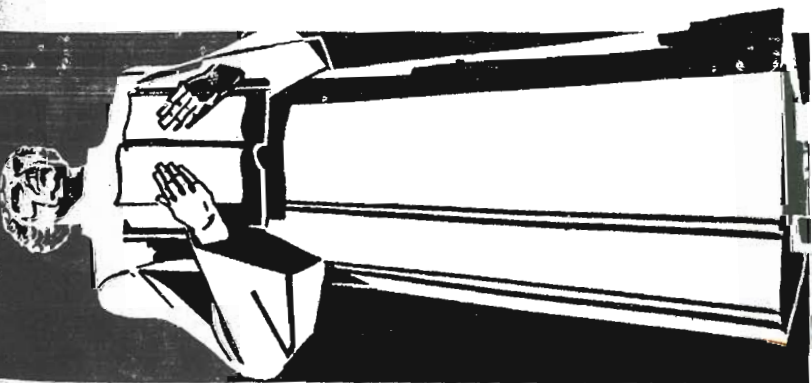
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# The Caring God

(A review article)

EUGENE F. KLUG

AUGUSTINE LOOKED AT THE world and life in it and, mindful of God's teaching in Holy Scriptures, announced that "God is not a workman who, when He has completed His work, leaves it to itself and goes His way." In a very real sense, therefore, one could hardly imagine a more appropriate title for a book that deals with the existential facts of life—men, events, and things in history—than "The Caring God." (THE CARING GOD. Perspectives on Providence. Edited by Carl S. Meyer and Herbert T. Mayer. Concordia, St. Louis, 1973. \$8.95. Cloth. 240 pages.)

The subject lies at the very heart, not only of theology, but of every person's life. God's provident might and grace funnel directly upon the head of this old aching world and every aching soul in it.

Fatalism and determinism, secularism's favorite and so ancient alternatives, are unacceptable to the Christian. As usual, the Greeks had a word for it, in fact very pronounced notions about some mysterious, irreversible force controlling men and events. *Tyche* they called it, Fate, Chance, or "Whatever-will-be-will-be"—men and nations dealt with as impersonally and whimsically as chaff in the wind.

The Christian knows that in this world of his, or of which by the goodness of God he is a part, it is God's creative and supportive power which accounts for everything, also the natural laws which are so basic to continued existence. God's concurrence in all that happens, however, is never merely remote or indirect, tangentially connected with the world He created. On this whole matter of God's providential concurrence in all things, Luther reminds us that "however it may appear to us to be done mutably and contingently, (it) is in reality done necessarily and immutably in respect of God's will." (*Bondage of the Will*, Packer-Johnston trans., 80) While Luther steadfastly rejected the notion of coercion or determinism in the sequence of human and world events, upholding always the full accountability of man for what he does, particularly the evil man does, the Reformer stresses heavily the fundamental Scriptural truth that, if God indeed be God, "then what He foreknows must necessarily come to pass; otherwise, who could believe His promises, and who would fear His threatenings?" (*Ibid.*, 213)

Thus, through all of Lutheran theology runs the sobering dictum, articulated so plainly in Holy Writ, that "except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it." (Ps. 127, 1) The fact that our activity is simultaneous with God's supportive, providential action accounts for the synthesis. He is the One through Whom we live and have our being; and without His continuing, upholding preservation, divine providence, things would wind down rather quickly, let us say, immediately; and we, in short, would be helpless, utterly. (Acts 17, 28) "It was through Him that everything was made, . . . every single thing" and "He is both the first principle and the up-

holding principle of the whole scheme of creation . . . Life from nothing began through Him, and life from the dead began through Him; He is, therefore, justly called, the Lord of all." The whole issue of "The Caring God" could hardly have been stated any better than in these words of the Apostle Paul to the Colossian Christians. (1, 16ff)

Sin's entrance into this world and its despoiling of man, to the extent of the fateful, terrible loss of God's image and likeness, did not alter the fact of God's continued providential care. Sin took its awful toll, but God neither withdrew His supportive hand from the realm of nature, nor from man the sinner. In His wondrous, unspeakable mercy and grace, God provided for sinners' salvation. "For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men." Jesus Christ was the promised Seed and Savior, in Whom we trust and in Whom we have forgiveness, as we now are "looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works." (Titus 2, 11ff) "Tell men of these things," Paul urges Titus (and us), "and urge them to action, using a reprimand where necessary with all the authority of God's minister—and as such let no one treat you with contempt." (v. 15)

There is a lack of this sense of urgency in the substance, arrangement, and overall thrust of this symposium of essays on "The Caring God." As a result, nothing exciting and significant is finally said. Eight essays, loosely laid side by side, each attempting to present a different vista out of the deliberately chosen slots of secular disciplines—philosophy, history, psychology, sociology, literature, biology—finally end up with no clear, distinct message. Perhaps the fact that the chief editor, Carl S. Meyer, died before the project could be completed, accounts for the gap being left, for things "kinda hanging." But then it need not have come out this way. Those to whom the task finally fell of pulling the strings together could at the very least have attempted some kind of convincing, definitive synthesis concerning "The Caring God," something to close the gap.

By itself the chapter by Meyer on the "Concept of Providence in Modern Historical Thought" is one of the best, certainly the clearest. Competely uncomplicated, and with commendable accuracy, it sums up the story concerning the concept "providence" in the annals of human history.

The initial chapter (Martin Scharlemann), designed to be the theological or Biblical offering on the subject, is likewise lucid and moves easily. Luther's threefold division of the Creed forms its basis, showing the Caring God in His creative, redemptive, and sanctifying activities in behalf of human kind, as well as the concomitant upholding of the natural realm around man. The chapter is probably too slim in view of the voluminous Biblical testimony on the subject.

"Providence in Christian Thought" (Richard Baepler) traces historically—with some redundancy when laid against Meyer's chapter—the concept of God's overarching rule and will in directing history towards its consummation. The leading figures—Augustine,

Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Schleiermacher, Tillich—are all part of the ably sketched panorama. Besides the pluses, however, there are a few minuses. Scripture appears as a sort of ancient document that simply grew out of Hebrew and early Christian thought, with no apparent connection to divine inspiration (and providence!). Luther's significant contribution on the whole subject of divine providence and the problem of evil is much too brief. At the very least a special chapter should have been devoted by editorial fiat to what Luther has to say on the key matters: God's governance of all things; divine sovereignty; "free will" as uniquely too grandiose a term ever to be applied to man, thus exclusively an attribute belonging to God alone; the problem of evil; God's concurrence in the events of history; and the fact of man's will in a bondage so deep that he is totally unable, more so even than a chunk of marble in the hands of a master sculptor, to be or to do anything which would spiritually alter his condition and status *coram Deo*. And, in view of what Luther has to say in his *magnum opus* against Erasmus, one wonders whether it is indeed true, as Baepler claims, that "he (Luther) does not wrestle with the problem of evil as it appears to be most acute to many of our contemporaries"? Actually, Luther's treatment of the problem of evil in specific cases—Pharaoh, Judas, Esau—is brilliant, to say the least. In fact, it is fair to ask: Has anyone else ever done it better and more clearly than the great Reformer? Completely debatable is Baepler's judgment that "the theology of Tillich lends itself powerfully to preaching and to apologetic work for people who resonate to the existentialists' analysis of human life." What kind of "resonating" may one rightly expect, when everyone understands Tillich, if at all, in his own way and thus is likely to resonate on his own horn?

"A Philosophical View of Providence" (Curtis Huber) is an ably written, tight piece of work, which though brief seeks to get at some of the implications of the tension between divine providence and human contingency of events as philosophy has dealt with these matters. Philosophy itself, rather than philosophers, is Huber's focus, and his main objective is to show that "we have justified the claim that belief in God's providence is rationally defensible and meaningful." Included is an effort at addressing the tension between human freedom and evil, with a spirit of readiness to let the Biblical witness inform where human reason otherwise is stymied.

"Providence and Psychology" (Ralph Underwager) is an interesting chapter, but the possible, limited value of the inquiry into this area is pretty well given by the author's own put-down, that "psychology is in a state of flux, of impending change." When, we wonder, has it not been? Inexact science that it is? So, in the final assay there is not much to hope for out of this corner. The chapter is a little weak on the proper distinction of Law and Gospel. In fact it inclines towards antinomianism with its pitch for "Gospel-Openness" in trying to describe the pattern of human behavior in the believer. Fact is, of course, that the believer is always saint and sinner in the same skin, at the same moment, till he dies, and so he stands in constant need of both Law and Gospel in their proper spheres and function.

"Sociology's Reluctant Participation in the Dialog Concerning

Providence" (David Schuller) points out the obvious, viz., that "an increase of secularity is a contemporary reality," as well as the fact that sociology is pagan and prefers its own humanistic alternatives to divine providence, or even the thought of it. Therefore, rather than "reluctant," sociology would be better characterized as "domineering;" at least it tries to be. Theologically, there are a number of strictures against this chapter. To claim that theological humanism is not an abandonment of the Christian faith goes beyond this reviewer's credulity. Also more than suspect is the emphasis on realized eschatology as the hope for which the Christian and the church quest in this present evil world.

"Voices of Change: The Arts and Divine Providence" (Warren Rubel) presents a survey of literature, especially modern, in its response to the meaning of divine providence in human existence. Literary art, according to the author, has at present a twofold stress: 1) a certain amount of malaise, or disquietude, over against Western culture; and 2) an emphasis on the increasing importance of hope, transcendence, and order in life. But all of this is so hopelessly sterile, because of its anthropocentricity, a fact which might have been given the heavy pedal. Puzzling, too, as a theological message is the author's enigmatic final statement: "Our Christian faith becomes pertinent when we face the old and the new Adam in ourselves and in other men, still yearning for and still needing salvation." Time and space do not allow further probing into the meaning of this theologically garbled bit of gobbledegook.

"Providentialism and Evolutionary Biology" (John Gienapp) is the closing chapter. Traced is the development from the time when science once worked with an awareness of and conviction for the transcendent and immanent support of all things by the Creator to the evolutionary science of our day, which discounts all divine providence and attributes to things themselves, to matter and the whole biological process, the wisdom, omnipotence, purpose, etc., which once were spoken of as belonging to God alone. So, Christians are "to be reminded," urges the author, "that knowledge of the way God deals with man and the world must be derived from the ways He reveals Himself in the Word, not in nature itself," for "nature reveals only the *Deus absconditus*." There is reason to wonder whether the concepts *Deus revelatus* and *Deus absconditus* are really understood or accepted in accord with Lutheran theology; or whether in fact there is not a more Barthian slant opted for, whether wittingly or unwittingly.

Now the time was there for at least a summary wrap-up in a concluding chapter, to pull various loose strands together. But there is none. So several things are left dangling, including the reader himself. Scripture, as every Christian knows, leaves no one dangling in its explicit testimony to trembling mankind concerning "The Caring God." It instructs, admonishes, consoles, holds forth solid hope in a manner without compare. Some things, it is true, it leaves unanswered for the believer, not the least being the trials, heaviness, temptations of this existence. But, although he does not always see the purpose of God's dispensations, the Christian clings firmly and

with conviction to what the Apostle Peter exhorts: "Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory; receiving the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls." (I Pet. 1, 8f) Unanswered things, judgments and purposes of God, remain still. For who will venture to be God's counselor, as Paul reminds us? (Rom. 11, 33ff)

Precisely these are some of the great truths which deserved a hearing when treating of "The Caring God." Had the closing chapter been no more than Paul Gerhardt's mighty "Befiehl du deine Wege," it would have been enough. The whole story is there in twelve beautiful stanzas, if you choose the translation in the *Lutheran Hymnal* (No. 520), or sixteen verses in John Wesley's version. The latter, while not well known or widely used (it does not fit the tune to which Gerhardt's hymn is usually sung), is by all odds the superior translation, in style and beauty.

1. Commit thou all thy griefs  
And ways into His hands,  
To His sure truth and tender care  
Who earth and heaven commands.
2. Who points the clouds their course,  
Whom winds and seas obey,  
He shall direct thy wandering feet,  
He shall prepare thy way.
3. Thou on the Lord rely;  
So safe shalt thou go on;  
Fix on His work thy steadfast eye,  
So shall thy work be done.
4. No profit canst thou gain  
By self-consuming care;  
To Him commend thy cause; His ear  
Attends the softest prayer.
5. Thy everlasting truth,  
Father, Thy ceaseless love,  
Sees all Thy children's wants and knows  
What best for each will prove.
6. And whatsoever Thou wilt  
Thou dost, O King of kings;  
What Thy unerring wisdom chose,  
Thy power to being brings.
7. Thou everywhere hast sway,  
And all things serve Thy might;  
Thy every act pure blessing is,  
Thy path unsullied light.
8. When Thou arisest, Lord,  
Who shall Thy work withstand?  
When all Thy children want, Thou giv'st;  
Who, who, shall stay Thy hand?
9. Give to the winds thy fears;  
Hope and be undismayed;

God hears thy sighs and counts thy tears,  
God shall lift up thy head.

10. Through waves and clouds and storms  
He gently clears thy way;  
Wait thou His time; so shall this night  
Soon end in joyous day.

11. Still heavy is thy heart?  
Still sink thy spirits down?  
Cast off the weight, let fear depart,  
And every care be gone.

12. What though thou rulest not?  
Yet heaven and earth and hell  
Proclaim, God sitteth on the throne  
And ruleth all things well.

13. Leave to His sovereign sway  
To choose and to command;  
So shalt thou wondering own His way  
How wise, how strong, His hand.

14. Far, far above thy thought  
His counsel shall appear  
When fully He the work hath wrought  
That caused thy needless fear.

15. Thou seest our weakness, Lord;  
Our hearts are known to Thee:  
Oh, lift Thou up the sinking hand,  
Confirm the feeble knee!

16. Let us, in life, in death,  
Thy steadfast truth declare  
And publish with our latest breath  
Thy love and guardian care.