

THE MYSTERY OF DIVINE PROVIDENCE

GEORGE H. TAVARD

[Catastrophic events, both personal and collective, raise the question of divine Providence. How can an infinitely good Creator allow the kind of evil that puts the divine goodness in doubt? The question has been faced since patristic times. Theories of predestination have been proposed. Spirituals have adored God in the mystery of divine Providence. There seems to be no other solution than hope in the midst of despair.]

UNDOUBTEDLY, and indeed for a long time, a conflict has existed between the spontaneous belief of religious persons in the sovereignty of God over all things, that is affirmed or implied in all monotheistic religions, and the experience of evil engineered by the human will. Whether there is such a conflict in God is of course another question. But the primary human question deals with what the human mind can grasp in its temporality. One may think of the Shoah, of the destruction of the World Trade Center on 9/11, of innumerable massacres that have taken place in the wars and conflicts of the planet, as also, at the individual level, of senseless murders and apparently senseless suffering. One thinks of Dostoevsky's Ivan Karamasov, and of the protest that the innocent suffering of one child offers sufficient ground to deny the existence of God. I think of a close friend, the Congolese Anglican priest Henry Basimaki, who was assassinated in September 2002, a victim of tribal warfare, as he was about to cross into Uganda on the way to a meeting of the Anglican Consultative Council in Hong Kong. Any one of us, I presume, can similarly associate particular names to singular experiences of physical or moral evil.

What intrigues me at this point is the fact that the doctrine of divine Providence has held a singular place in Christian doctrine, as also, I believe, in most of the monotheistic religions. Several portions of the Bible, notably the Book of Job and the Book of Jonas, can be read as reflections on the mystery of divine Providence. Indeed, in the Book of Genesis the central

GEORGE H. TAVARD received his doctorate in theology from the Facultés catholiques de Lyon in 1949. He is now professor emeritus of theology at the Methodist Theological School in Ohio. He has published numerous volumes on areas of his specialization which include Scripture and Tradition, medieval studies, St. Bonaventure, ecumenism, and Vatican II. He recently published *The Starting Point of Calvin's Theology* (Eerdmans, 2000). A new book: *The Contemplative Church: Joachim and His Adversaries* is about to be published.

moment of the life of Abraham, the father of believers, is that when he brings his son Isaac to Mount Moriah in order to offer him, in obedience to God, as a blood sacrifice. In light of the Christian faith this paradoxical tale has become prototypical of God's dealings with his people, on a path that reached its summit in the Crucifixion of Jesus on Golgotha. The comforting solution of Abraham's dilemma, however, has been singularly missing on so many occasions in the history of the chosen people. And in the Christian story of the passion and death of the Lord, Jesus fulfilled the destiny of the ram, the substitute victim, while that section of the people who could not recognize him as the Suffering Savior of Isaiah 53 continued to wait while still metaphorically walking toward Mount Moriah. Indeed, is it possible to find fault with Kierkegaard's judgment that in any case Abraham's faithful obedience does not erase the basic horror of the command attributed to God (*Fear and Trembling*)? And so, contemporary Judaism has had to face the question, "after Auschwitz." Is it still allowable in justice to believe in a special covenant of God with the chosen people? And those Americans who have gloried in the notion of their nation's "manifest destiny" may hesitate, after 9/11 and wars and rumors of war, to affirm its uniquely providential vocation, unless it be that, precisely, this "manifest destiny" is now pushing us to war.

The question is evidently not new. In his Sermon 21, Basil of Caesarea regarded as a miracle what had taken place the day before he preached.¹ This was, it seems, in July 373, in Satala, a town of Armenia Minor, near the Persian border, where Emperor Valens had asked him to appoint bishops for the area. Evil men, Basil said, tried to set fire to the church building. God sent a wind that reversed the course of the fire. The church was saved. But there was also what might be called collateral damage. The wind changed direction, and a number of good people, some of them quite poor, lost their homes to the flames. How then could Basil praise God's Providence so highly for protecting the church building, when the homes were not also protected? Basil wisely avoided a theological discussion of the plight of these people. He advised those who did not suffer from the fire to assist those who did, and thus, as he said, to ruin the works of Satan.

Theological reflection through the ages, however, has been puzzled by the question that is implicitly raised by such happenings. Is it possible to lift the blame from God in the case of bad events, if one is eager to thank God for good events? Divergent answers of course have been given.

The simplest answer is to affirm that the Creator has given humans the capacity freely to choose between good and evil, so that they are fully accountable for evil as well as for good. If this exempts God from respon-

¹ PG 31.539–64. See *Oeuvres de Basile de Césarée*, vol. 2 (Paris: Librairie de Gaume, 1839) Sermon XXI, n. 9, 238–39.

sibility for evil, however, it also seems to take away from God responsibility for the good. In addition it runs counter to the Christian understanding of original sin, according to which human evil is due ultimately to Adam, whether identified as the individual progenitor of the human race, in a literal reading of Genesis, or seen as a symbol of all men and women. The more common understanding of the consequences of original sin would hold that sinful Adam—let us say, every human person—has become fundamentally unable to produce good thoughts and good actions without a least an enabling grace from God. Admittedly, the assumption of total human responsibility for good as well as for evil has been entertained by some ever since the conflict between Augustine and the monk Pelagius. Similar conceptions may still be accepted today in some quarters of the religious landscape. The problem then is that objectively evil actions have been performed unfreely by persons who would be judged insane by contemporary medical standards. Are they also truly responsible for their insanity? In John 9:3, Jesus would seem to deny this.

A solution at the other extreme might affirm that evil does not really exist. Not only is it, as Augustine thought, a lesser good, it has no reality outside of the mind. It is simply an illusion, if at least we are to believe Mary Baker Eddy, who declared: “It is neither person, place, nor thing, but is simply belief, an illusion of material sense.”² The remedy, if this is the case, is to develop our spiritual sense, so that we will see disease as what it is, a misreading of the evidence. This does not mean that the illusion does not in fact exist. One still has to bear the cross. There are still obstacles. “Whatever obstructs the way—causing to stumble, fall, or faint, those mortals who are striving to enter the path—divine Love will remove; and uplift the fallen and strengthen the weak.”³ Those, however, who have experienced physical or moral evil in their worst forms can hardly believe that they have been deluded. I cannot truly believe that, during a bombardment of the city of Lyon by the American Air Force in late 1944, the block of houses that I saw being lifted up by exploding bombs and then fall down in a flash of fire and a cloud of smoke, were not really destroyed, with the people who were inside. The Hereros were truly massacred in Namibia, South-West Africa, in the first genocide of the 20th century. Jews and Gypsies did die at Treblinka and other extermination camps. Orthodox and Catholic priests, Protestant ministers, were killed in the Goulags. The killing fields of Pol Pot were real in Kampuchea. The very enormity of these crimes of the modern age makes it impossible to treat them as psychologi-

² Mary Baker Eddy, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* (Boston: Alison V. Stewart, 1912) 71.

³ Mary Baker Eddy, *Prose Works Other Than Science and Health* (Boston: First Church, 1925) 328.

cal illusions, or even as mere accumulations of single evils, each of which could be traceable to a specific cause and an individual perpetrator. There are corporate evils that involve more than single persons, and that trace a pattern of society. The intriguing observation that one cannot ascribe the Shoah directly to a specific command of the Führer is itself a symbol of the collective dimension of guilt.

Classical Christian theology on divine Providence can be read in its Catholic and its Protestant typical formulations. In the *Summa theologiae* 1, q. 22, Thomas Aquinas discussed it in the context of the attributes of God, just after observing that mercy and justice, each at its highest level, are both necessarily present in all of God's actions (q. 21). Divine Providence corresponds, in God, to what the moral virtue of prudence is among humans. And prudence, in Thomist ethics, is the queen of the moral virtues because it rules the way all of them ought to function in harmony. Seen on the model of prudence, Providence rules the organization of creaturely life, both as a whole and in its details. It is responsible for the manner in which each creature, great or small, is oriented by the Creator toward its ultimate end and purpose. Nothing then escapes God's Providence, whether it is good or evil, whether it happens necessarily given the laws of nature, or contingently as a result of human choice. Granted that there must be an infinity of attributes or qualities of God, most of which are unknown to us, Providence is the one that touches us the most immediately in all details of our life.

In his version of the same theme, John Calvin elucidated the doctrine of Providence in *Institutio Christiana* (1559), part I, chap. 16. After introducing the purpose of theology, the knowledge of God and of self (chap. 1) and then describing the knowledge of God (chap. 2), which reaches its high point in knowledge of the Three Persons (chap. 13), Calvin approached divine Providence as manifested in God's creation of the universe and all that it contains. Rather than an attribute of the divine essence, Providence is seen as a dimension of the creating act. God is "the first cause" of all things, not only at the beginning, but also at every moment of the life of each creature. Providence is not a "foreknowledge" of things to come. It is actual divine activity, not only in the generic form of a life-giving power and influence, but as a detailed and distinctive ordering of the movements of each and all creatures at every moment, humans included. Calvin can then affirm: "All prosperity is God's benediction, adversity God's malediction . . ." (n. 8). Indeed, if a merchant going through a forest falls in the hands of bandits and is killed, two points are certain, in Calvin's eyes. Firstly, such a happening is by nature accidental (*fortuitus*); secondly, "This death was not only foreseen by God, but it was decreed in his will" (n. 9).

It seems disconcerting that at this point Calvin does not dwell on the bandits' responsibility, which of course he does not deny. The bandits were

not passive tools in the hands of a tyrant god. As I understand it, however, Calvin's central point is that, "what seems to us to be some accident, faith recognizes as a secret design of God" (*secretum Dei impulsus fuisse agnoscit fides*). In this case, does the secret design of God exempt me from responsibility for my own life and actions? By no means! God punishes evildoers and cannot do wrong in this. In an evil action there are actually three actors, God, Satan, and the human person. They act at three levels of the same deed. Each actor differs from the others in both the "intention" pursued and the "means" used (Book II, chap. 4, n. 2). God always acts by virtue of the "irreprehensible justice" that is a divine attribute; Satan with the purpose of inserting glitches in the created world; the human actor acts in ignorance or stupidity, or in order to gain an illusory good through the evil that is taking place. The conviction of this complex structure of evil ought to inspire trust in God and serenity in the sufferings and difficulties that one may experience when falling victim to evil.

Aquinas and Calvin, it seems to me, confronted the same problem. The attribution to God of responsibility for human sufferings—whether as the creator or as the organizer of the world, and even allowing for the additional responsibility of guilty humans—is hardly comforting for me, if I cannot escape a dreadful present or a catastrophic future in which God is directly involved, whether by authorizing it (Aquinas) or by decreeing it (Calvin). If it implies a decision not to stop evil from happening a permission is indistinguishable from a decree. In both theologies the only issue is resignation to or personal acceptance of the will of God, whatever human hesitations there must be to admit the sanity of a system that allows evil to happen. The theologies of Aquinas and of Calvin thus inevitably lead to doctrines of predestination, and to the embarrassment of trying to find a way through the ensuing dilemmas.

In Aquinas the doctrine of predestination occupies the eight articles of *Summa theologiae* 1, q. 23. Predestination is defined as "the passage (*transmissio*) of a rational creature to its end in eternal life" (a. 1). It is as such "a part of Providence" (*pars providentiae*). That is, it resides in God who predestines, not in the person who is predestined (a. 2). The elect are so loved by God that they are predestined to glory (a. 4), God being the only cause of their predestination (a. 5), in such a way, however, that while "the order of Providence is infallible" and "the certainty of predestination absolute . . . , the freedom of the will (*libertas arbitrii*), from which the effect of predestination derives accidentally (*contingenter*)," is not taken away (a. 6). In parallel, yet also in opposition to predestination, there is a *reprobatio*, that Aquinas described as God's permission that some "will fall into sin and receive the pain of damnation for their guilt" (a. 3). But then the naïve reader would like to ask if the reprobate also are loved by God, who did not predestine them to glory.

When Calvin faced the same dilemma he also affirmed that God's choice of the predestined is absolute: "Some are predestined to salvation, some to death" (*alios ad salutem alios ad interitum praedestinari*) [*Institutio* Book III, chap. 21, 1]. This doctrine, he went on to say, "is not only useful, but also sweet and enjoyable in the fruit that comes from it." It is sweet and enjoyable because it urges all, in ignorance of their ultimate destiny, to be totally abandoned in God's hands and, paradoxically, to find in this trustful reliance on God a likely sign of predestination to salvation. To those who are excessively curious about it, however, the doctrine of predestination is a labyrinth from which one can find no issue (Book III, chap. 21, 1). Meanwhile, those who fully trust God realize that divine Providence does not "annihilate human responsibility" (Book I, chap. 17, 3).

The labyrinth is precisely the impossible attempt to figure out how human contingency, resulting from human choice, is not constrained by predestination, which is God's necessarily previous and sovereign choice. Neither Calvin nor Aquinas entered this maze. Not so discrete were some of the Thomists of the 17th century, when the Dominican Domingo Bañez and the Jesuit Luis Molina proposed opposite theories. Their successors argued against one another in the controversy "*de auxiliis*," until Pope Paul V, in 1607, ordered their Superiors General to stop the polemics, and Pope Urban VIII, in 1625 and again in 1641, pronounced an automatic excommunication on whoever would disregard the decision of Paul V. In a somewhat similar way it was left to some of Calvin's followers, especially at the Synod of Dort (1617), to harden his positions concerning "the horrible decree" and to make the profession of double predestination a test of Calvinist orthodoxy.

As the Christian theologians of the Middle Ages, the Reformation, and the Counter-Reformation struggled with these problems, Jewish reflection, prompted by the mystery of the Diaspora and the misery of the people of God at the hands of Christian overlords, tried to make room for evil in creation while maintaining the absolute sovereignty of God over the divine works. The theology of *hester panim*, "the hiding of the face," posited an effective withdrawal of God in times of disaster and of collective sin.⁴ There are moments when God, for reasons that we cannot fathom, hides as it were the divine face. Then the world does not see God, and God seems not to see the world, as though the divine guidance of creation were suspended for a time. The result is chaos on earth. Martin Buber called it the "eclipse of God." It is related to the idea of the "exile of the Shekhinah," as also to *tsimtsum*, originally understood, as explained by Gershom Scholem, as a contraction of the divine presence that becomes, for a time,

⁴ David Birnbaum, *God and Evil. A Jewish Perspective* (Hoboken, N.J.: Ktav, 1988) 127 ff.

concentrated at one invisible point,—as though hiding in the Holy of Holies. Further, in the school of Isaac Luria (1534–1572), *tsimtsum* came to mean God’s “retreat away from a point,”⁵ this point being, as a result, abandoned to chaos, to the *tohu vabohu* before the Spirit of God flew over the waters (Genesis 1:1). As was said in Isaiah 54:8–9, “In a little wrath I hid my face from you for a moment.” The hiding of the face, however, implies a promise of redemption, for the prophet added: “But with everlasting kindness I will have compassion on you.”

Should one wonder why not even the most radical kenotic Christian theologies have ever looked into a similar perspective, the reason, I believe, lies in the doctrine of the Incarnation. Following Paul in Philippians 2:7 (“[Christ] emptied himself”), one may speak of a kenosis of the Logos, whose self-emptying hides the divinity in the flesh. But Jesus Christ, the Eternal Son, is never invisible to the Father, even at the worst moments of agony and Crucifixion, even when Jesus exclaimed, whether in praise with Psalm 22:2, or in complaint, or both, *Eloi, eloi, lema sabachthani?* (Mark 15:34). Because of their understanding of the Passion of Jesus, Christians cannot truly entertain a notion of God’s own kenosis. When the Russian Orthodox theologian Sergei Bulgakov explored what he saw as the previous kenosis of the Creator, who indwells the creation in such a way that the divine Essence within us is hidden to our own eyes and can only be reached by faith alone, this, rather than hide the Face of God, opened the whole of human life as a way of access to the unseen divinity.⁶

Many authors in the Catholic Church have turned to spirituality to overcome the problems that plague theology as soon as it attempts to find rationality in the coexistence of good and evil. Whatever the necessity of being rational and reasonable, systematic theological reflection on the mysterious ways of God is one path. Trust in divine Providence is another, and no less intriguing path that accounts for the spiritual experience of many in all churches. I am especially interested in this because in 1774 a priest (who is my second cousin five times removed), Jean-Martin Moye (1730–1793), published in Nancy a book entitled *Le Dogme de la grâce* in which he recommended devotion to divine Providence. As this book was being published, Moye was on his way to China as a missionary, having abandoned a community of Sisters that he had founded to the loving care of divine Providence. I quote:

Since predestination depends principally on God and God’s special care of the elect, another mark of predestination is found in the signs that God has a special

⁵ Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995) 260.

⁶ Sergei Bulgakov, *Du Verbe Incarné: Agnus Dei* (Paris: Aubier, 1943) 48–49.

providence for the souls. God calls them to the faith, justifies them, and finally glorifies them. . . . These are the three favors God gives the elect: Vocation—the choice made of them, preferring them to many others; Justification—the particular graces accorded to them, through which they are drawn to God on this earth by conserving their innocence if they are just, or by converting them if they are sinners; Predestination—the eternal glory which is given them in heaven.⁷

Along similar lines, devotion to divine Providence, which flourished in the Catholic Church in the 17th and 18th centuries, may be considered typical of Catholic spirituality during the Counter-Reformation.

The Jesuit Jean-Baptiste de Saint-Jure (1588–1657) was the author of a long study of theology and spirituality, *De la Connaissance et de l'amour de Notre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ* (1634). Chapters VIII to X of Book III explain the doctrine of divine Providence. “The will of God has made and governs all things.” This title of chapter VIII is to be taken literally, since “God rules all events, both good and bad.” Or, as Saint-Jure explicitly states, “No, nothing happens in the universe without God’s will, without God’s permission.” Discouraging speculation on the extent of this permission he adds: “And this must be understood of all things, sin excepted.” Saint-Jure of course must have been aware of the monstrous massacres that commonly took place in European and other wars in which believing Christians were themselves directly involved (as in the Crusades, including the Crusade against the Cathars). Surely these horrors could not have happened without objective sin.

Saint-Jure, however, after appealing to some biblical passages, concludes: “We must believe, by virtue of God’s word, that in such events as in all others, nothing happens except by his order or with his permission.” The permission is precisely the question especially when one also affirms: “God creates all things with supreme wisdom.” Jean-Baptiste de Saint-Jure answers indirectly in chapters IX and X, where biblical instances show spiritual gains that come from entirely relying on the will of God.

The doctrine that was explained theoretically by de Saint-Jure was the basis of the advice given to the Sisters of the Visitation in Nancy by their spiritual director, the Jesuit Jean-Pierre de Caussade (1675–1751). The small book that carries his name, *L'Abandon à la Providence divine*, was printed only in 1861. Composed by one of the sisters, Anne-Marie Thérèse de Rosen, at the request of her aunt, Abbess Marie-Anne Sophie de Rottembourg, it consists of excerpts from his sermons and letters. De Caussade was primarily interested in the interior life. He advocated a simple and radical attitude before all events and happenings, good or bad, exterior or interior: One should receive them all as gifts coming directly from the hand of God. He regarded this as a return to the spirituality of the early Church:

⁷ *Dogma of Grace* (Melbourne, Ky.: Sisters of Divine Providence, 1995) part 1, chap. 5, 39–40.

God still speaks today as he spoke to our fathers formerly, when there were neither director nor method. The moment of God's command constituted the whole of spirituality... One knew that every moment brings a duty that should be done with fidelity. This was sufficient for the spirituals of the time.⁸

Caussade distinguished between a "time when the soul lives in God" and is directed externally by the laws of God and of the Church, and a "time when God lives in the soul" and directs it through interior inspirations. At no moment are the faithful left without a divine guidance that is felt internally in conjunction with the external horizon of one's life. There are therefore no rules of behavior besides "the present moment,"⁹ and no initiative beyond a "passive abandonment"¹⁰ in which one simply lets God act, while remaining "without reflection, without model, without method." This de Caussade identified as "pure faith" and, equivalently, "pure love." He indeed was aware of the paradoxical dimension of his teaching. And he at times came close to a sort of "death of God" language: "The life of faith is no more than a continual pursuit of God through what disguises God, disfigures and, so to say, destroys and annihilates him."¹¹ Such a formulation, again, comes close to Martin Luther's *Deus absconditus*, who is loved or at least should be loved, though remaining fundamentally unknown. Those who totally trust God live in mystery. For indeed, "the written word of God is full of mysteries; the performed word of God in the events of the world is no less full of mysteries. These two books are truly sealed. The letter of both of them kills . . ." ¹² Here "the book of the soul" and "the book of nature" of a medieval author like Bonaventure have merged to form the divine book of the world's events as reflected in the totally abandoned soul.

De Caussade speaks boldly. He envisions that God writes two kinds of Scriptures, one in letters, the other in the events of life. Besides the Scripture written on paper, revealed through the prophets and the apostles, there is another Scripture, "the complete history of the divine action," that he also calls "*la suite du Nouveau Testament*":

The follow-up on the New Testament is being written at this time through actions and sufferings. Holy souls have succeeded the prophets and apostles, not in order to write canonical Scriptures, but to continue the history of the divine action with their life, the instants of which are as many syllables and sentences through which this action expresses itself in a living way. The books that the Holy Spirit dictates are living books; each holy soul is one volume; and the heavenly Writer gives an

⁸ Jean-Pierre de Caussade, S.J., *L'Abandon à la Providence divine* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1966) 25 (my translation).

⁹ Ibid. 47.

¹⁰ Ibid. 70.

¹¹ Ibid. 98.

¹² Ibid. 99.

authentic revelation of the interior operation that explains itself in all hearts and develops itself at all moments.¹³

This teaching on the sovereignty of God in all human life came to be embodied in the lives of many. Because he acted on such a conviction, a prominent ecclesiastic of Normandy, Henri-Marie Boudon (1624–1702), who succeeded François de Laval as archdeacon of Evreux when de Laval went to Québec where he became the first bishop of the see, refused to receive a regular salary. When he was accused of improper sexual behavior, he went into exile, rather than, by defending himself, appear to question the hand of divine Providence. He became a notable author on self-abandonment to God.

My second cousin five times removed shared this spiritual conviction in *Le Dogme de la grâce*: “The graces most necessary for salvation are vocation, justification, and predestination The grace of predestination is a preparing of the means by which all those who are saved will be saved. It is an article of faith that there is a predestination. Nothing is more clearly stated in Scripture, but nothing is more uncertain and obscure than the way in which this is accomplished.”¹⁴

Whether seen in the perspective of Aquinas, of Calvin, or of the spiritual authors of the 17th and 18th centuries, divine Providence is an attribute of God that accounts for the relation of God to the movements of all creatures. As they generally acknowledge this, the Christian churches and theologies affirm that the human creatures are also destined to be judged by divine justice. This of course assumes that under the hand of God they are responsible for their actions and therefore, in one sense of the term, free, even when acting in the confines of their sinful and therefore unfree will. Thus Augustine distinguished between *liberum arbitrium* and *libertas*, between choice (which is my own) and liberty (which is God’s gift). Accepting all the happenings of life as so many gifts (Calvin liked to say, decrees) of divine Providence frees the sinful will to have access to the liberty of the children of God. But one cannot choose God unless one is, at that very moment, chosen by God. Just as there is, as Calvin pointed out, a secret operation of the Holy Spirit in the person who reads the word of God with faith, there has to be a secret operation of the Spirit in those who read their life as the ongoing work of God, Creator and Providence. Such a reading presupposes belief in the immanent presence of the transcendent God.

Whether at the time of Augustine, or Aquinas, or Calvin, or the Counter-Reformation, whether in Hitler’s concentration camps, in the gulags of Stalin, in the killing fields of Pol Pot, or in the destroyed monas-

¹³ Ibid. 109.

¹⁴ *Dogma of Grace* 34.

teries of Tibet, divine Providence remains the same profound mystery. It is ultimately the mystery of God, before whom we confess our incapacity to understand. In one of her writings before she was arrested in the Netherlands and sent to the gas chambers of Birkenau, Edith Stein (1891–1942) wrote:

Wisdom is said to build herself a house wherein she sets out solid food, cups, and a mixing bowl, so that it will be clear to anyone properly pondering godly things how for all things she is the perfect Originator (*Urheber*) of their being and welfare, goes forth to all, unfolds in the all, and encloses all things. . . . She, abiding in herself, accomplishes the entire, perfect work of Providence, at once going forth to all yet abiding in herself, at once ever standing and moved yet not standing nor moved. Rather, so to speak, does she possess, at once in nature and above nature, the effect of her Providence in abiding and her abiding in her Providence.¹⁵

Thus in the blindness of our intellect we can make ours the words of the Book of Job: “I know that you are all-powerful . . . , I have been holding forth on matters I do not understand, on marvels beyond me and my knowledge . . . I retract all I have said, and in dust and ashes I repent” (Job 42:1, 3, 6). Some would regard my reflections as idle speculation on insoluble questions, but I prefer to see them as a testimony to the mystery of God.

I wrote these pages before the week of March 20, 2003, when the U. S. armed forces were ordered by President George W. Bush to invade Iraq. It is not only individuals who are caught in the dilemmas of power. Nations and peoples and tribes and families, not to speak of businesses, multinational corporations, and also, last but not least, institutions of religions, monastic orders, and sects, often run into a similar impasse. What is the responsible use of power, whether it is political, military, psychological, or spiritual? When does the use of power encroach on the legitimate liberties of relatively powerless human persons? Is there, can there be, a legitimate use of material power, when one bomb can possibly destroy an entire army in the field or an entire city? How can believers—whether Christian, or Jew, or Muslim, or believers of any other religions—entertain the notion of a divine will or permissiveness, and experience the provident love of God, in the situation of powerlessness in which civilians are thrown by the contemporary art and the latest technique of war?

On one side, the leaders of nations are tempted to apply the political wisdom of Julius Caesar (“*Si vis pacem, para bellum*”), and prepare for war, on the hypothesis that they have enemies who would like to destroy them. And those who cannot afford the cost of modern warfare or its preparation can always look around and find the wealthiest and the strong-

¹⁵ Edith Stein, *Knowledge and Faith*, The Collected Works of Edith Stein, vol. 8 (Washington: ICS Publications, 2000) 92.

est, whose allies they can, more or less reluctantly, become. On the other side, the prayer of Psalm 68:31, *Dissipa gentes quae bella volunt*, “Scatter the peoples who delight in war” (RSV), resonates in one form or other in the heart of those who dream of the peace that they themselves cannot ensure.

One should ask, however, “Where is divine Providence in a time of war?” The only possible answer, I believe, is that divine Providence is not on any one side. At the level of society and neighborliness, local, national, and international, war can only be the mother of disasters. At the level of spirit, hope in God’s loving Providence, hope in the midst of despair, remains the sole recourse of the powerless.