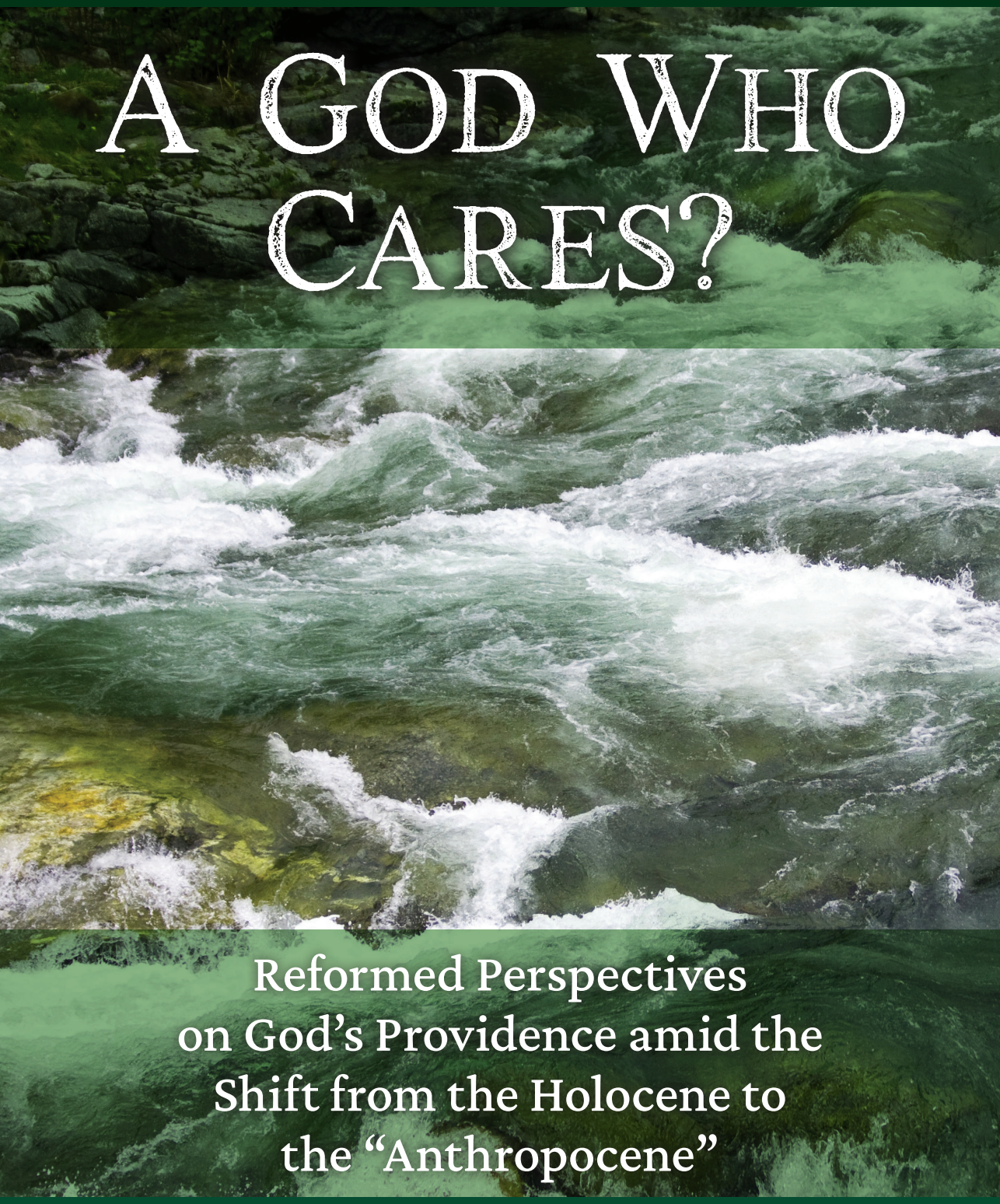
A God Who Cares?



Reformed Perspectives on God's Providence amid the Shift from the Holocene to the "Anthropocene"

Ernst M. Conradie

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AVARSITY

Peer-review declaration

The publisher (AOSIS) endorses the South African "National Scholarly Book Publishers Forum Best Practice for Peer-Review of Scholarly Books." The book proposal form was evaluated by our Theological and Religious Studies editorial board. The manuscript underwent an evaluation to compare the level of originality with other published works and was subjected to rigorous two-step peer-review before publication by two technical expert reviewers who did not include the volume editor and were independent of the volume editor, with the identities of the reviewers not revealed to the editor(s) or author(s). The reviewers were independent of the publisher, editor(s), and author(s). The publisher shared feedback on the similarity report and the reviewers' inputs with the manuscript's editor(s) or author(s) to improve the manuscript. Where the reviewers recommended revision and improvements, the editor(s) or author(s) responded adequately to such recommendations. The reviewers commented positively on the scholarly merits of the manuscript and recommended that the book be published.

Research Justification

This monograph may be read as a constructive supplement to volume 4 of the series entitled *An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the "Anthropocene."* Volume 4 of this series is on the Christian doctrine of providence and is entitled *Making Room for the Story to Continue?* In addition to an extended introduction (on the state of the debate in the field), this monograph includes three constructive essays on the doctrine of providence, employing the traditional Reformed distinction between *conservatio*, *gubernatio*, and *concursus* as aspects of God's providence, as well as a concluding essay provocatively entitled "Who Cares a Damn?" The argument of this contribution may be captured in the following way:

1. That God's providence is best understood in terms of the deeply held Christian conviction that God cares for every creature—and not in terms of Greek assumptions around a pervading rational world order

2. That *conservatio* and *gubernatio* have found rough secular equivalents in global debates on sustainability, mitigation, and adaptation in the context of climate change

3. That *conservatio* and *gubernatio* are typically in tension with each other when it comes to the question whether God maintains order in nature and society or whether God transforms unjust orders (the call for ecojustice)

4. That *concursus* is not only an implication of *conservatio* and *gubernatio* but also captures the heart of the problem posed by the advent of the "Anthropocene," namely that (some) humans have become a "geological force of nature," while God's agency has become sidelined or usurped by the Promethean quest to become divine.

In each of these essays, a highly constructive contribution is offered that takes the debate in ecotheology forward by placing providence in the context of the shift from the Holocene to the "Anthropocene." The method that is adopted is that of a constructive argument based on a critical review of the available literature.

There is a substantial overlap between the introduction in the monograph and the editorial introduction in volume 4 of the *An Earthed Faith Series*. In addition, one of the essays included in this monograph (on *conservatio*) overlaps almost completely with the author's contribution to volume 4 (in total an estimated 25,500 of 89,000 words). The manuscript has been checked thoroughly for similarity beyond the overlaps as stated above. Where the author used some material from his own writing, this is noted and it is explained how the argument is reframed.

This monograph is clearly of a scholarly nature and is addressed at other scholars in the fields of ecotheology, systematic theology, and Reformed theology.

Ernst M. Conradie, Department of Religion and Theology, University of the Western Cape, Cape Town, South Africa.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments

Particular paragraphs in this monograph are based on the following publications by the author:

- Conradie, E.M. 2011. "Abraham Kuyper's Legacy for Contemporary Ecotheology: Some Reflections from within the South African Context." In E.M. Conradie (ed.), *Creation and Salvation: Dialogue on Abraham Kuyper's Legacy for Contemporary Ecotheology*. Leiden: Brill Publishers.
- Conradie, E.M. & Lai, P.-C., 2021, "On Setting the Scene for the Story to Begin," in E.M. Conradie & P.-C. Lai (eds.), *Taking a Deep Breath for the Story to Begin … (An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the "Anthropocene,"* volume 1), pp. 15–47, AOSIS, Cape Town. https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2021.BK264.02
- Conradie, E.M., 2021, "On the Hope That the Christian Story May Transform the Universe Story: A South African Reformed Perspective," in E.M. Conradie & P.-C. Lai (eds.), *Taking a Deep Breath for the Story to Begin … (An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the "Anthropocene,"* volume 1), pp. 95–118, AOSIS, Cape Town. https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2021.BK264.05
- Conradie, E.M., 2019, "Is Christian Humanism What Is Needed in the Age of the Anthropocene?," *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 5(3), 13–58, http://dx.doi.org/10.17570/stj.2019.v5n3.a02.
- Conradie, E.M., 2023, 'Limits to Justice, Ecojustice and Climate Justice?' *Scriptura* 122 (2023:1), 1–12, http://dx.doi.org/10.7833/122-1-2136.
- Conradie, E.M., 2020. *Secular Discourse on Sin in the Anthropocene: What's Wrong with the World?* Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Conradie, E.M., 2023. 'What, Exactly, Needs to Be Sustained amidst a Changing Climate?' In M. Fuller et al. (eds), *Global Sustainability: Issues in Science and Religion*, 25–40. Cham: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41800-6_3

The following essays in this monograph are a republication of the author's published work:

- "'In God We Trust'? A Core Christian Conviction and its Multiple Challenges amid the 'Anthropocene'" represents a partial republication of:

  Conradie, EM & Vaai, UL 2024, "'In God We Trust"? A Core Christian Conviction and Its Multiple Challenges amid the "Anthropocene"', in EM Conradie & UL Vaai (eds.), *Making Room for the Story to Continue*?, An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the "Anthropocene", vol. 4, AOSIS Books, Cape Town, pp. 1–33. https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2024.BK415.01

- “Common Grace and Sustainability: Is God Ordering or Causing Chaos in the Aftermath of the Holocene?” represents a republication of:

  Conradie, EM 2024, ‘Common Grace and Sustainability: Some South African Reformed Perspectives’, in EM Conradie & UL Vaai (eds.), *Making Room for the Story to Continue*?, An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the “Anthropocene”, vol. 4, AOSIS Books, Cape Town, pp. 55–88. https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2024.BK415.03

Biographical Note

Ernst M. Conradie is senior professor in the Department of Religion and Theology at the University of the Western Cape in South Africa. He works in the intersection between Christian ecotheology, systematic theology, and ecumenical theology and comes from the Reformed tradition. He is the author of *The Earth in God's Economy: Creation, Salvation and Consummation in Ecological Perspective* (2015), *Redeeming Sin? Social Diagnostics amid Ecological Destruction* (2017) and *Secular Discourse on Sin in the Anthropocene: What's Wrong with the World?* (2020). He was the international convener of the Christian Faith and the Earth project (2007–2014) and co-editor with Hilda Koster of the *T&T Clark Handbook on Christian Theology and Climate Change* (2019).

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Preface

An Earthed Faith

This contribution has to be understood against the background of the series of edited volumes entitled "An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the 'Anthropocene'."[1] The aim of this series is to offer collaborative, constructive contributions to understanding the content and significance of central themes of the Christian faith from perspectives in Christian ecotheology, given the challenges associated with the so-called "Anthropocene." In short, once complete, the series will offer something like a "green" dogmatics (to use the traditional term) on the basis of global collaboration with colleagues working in the field of Christian ecotheology across geographical, confessional, and theological divides and patterns of domination in the name of differences of gender, race, class, caste, culture, language, and species.

The assumption is that the Christian faith has a narrative shape and structure. It does not offer an argument about God's existence, moral imperatives, or a description of inner religious experiences or overt Christian praxis in the first place. It tells a story of who God is and what God has done, is doing and might be doing in the world. It is expressed through a recital of events in history, as the second article of the Nicene Creed best illustrates. The question "Who is God?" is answered by telling a story (e.g. Deut 26:5–9).

Clearly, there are different versions of this story, multiple perspectives on the story, and conflicting images and understandings of who God is, what God's identity and character may be, how we could possibly know that, and indeed what being divine may mean. What God may be doing is likewise contested. There are also many strands of narrative theology. This should not be allowed to confuse the issue: it matters which God/god one is talking about. Somehow these stories and perspectives on Christian faith need to touch each other unless there are different gods altogether, or

1. Three volumes have been published in the series thus far. See Conradie and Lai, *Taking a Deep Breath for the Story to Begin …* (2021); Conradie and Moe-Lobeda, *How Would We Know What God is up to?* (2022); and Conradie and Jennings, *The Place of Story and the Story of Place* (2024). See also the list of other envisaged titles in the series below.

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unless God's actions are in conflict with each other, for example, by suggesting that redemption is necessary to overcome the inadequacies of God's work as Creator. The definite article in "telling the story" is clearly contested too. Nevertheless, to use the indefinite article ("a Christian story") or the plural ("Christian stories") without linking the various aspects of God's work to each other runs the danger of allowing the various aspects of God's work to become disentangled, God's Triune identity to disintegrate into an amorphous polytheism, and Christian witnesses to be relativized in advance.

The series is situated "amid the Anthropocene" with the recognition that a "business as usual" way of doing theology is no longer appropriate. There is no need here to offer introductory comments on the "Anthropocene," as the multidisciplinary literature in this regard is rapidly expanding.[2] Although the term "Anthropocene" is itself heavily contested,[3] it is at least clear that we live in a time where the balance between earth subsystems has become disturbed (better: "ruptured"), where there is a shift away from the relative stability that characterized the Holocene—and where (Western) Christianity stands accused by many to be one of the deepest causes of the underlying problem. How, then, should this story of who God is (the so-called immanent Trinity) and what God is doing (the so-called economic Trinity) be told? If we have no direct access to God's self-disclosure, then the key to God's identity and character can only be found in what this God has done. The same applies to the unnerving question of what this God may be up to in a time like this. Again, how is this story then to be told?

As envisaged, this series will eventually include twelve volumes on twelve selected themes that are at the heart of the Christian faith and that are pertinent in shaping an ecological praxis, ethos, and spirituality. The following titles are to be included in the series:

2. See my attempt to make theological sense of this debate in "Some Theological Reflections on Multi-Disciplinary Discourse on the 'Anthropocene'." See also the discussion in the essay on God's governance in history.

3. An increasing number of scholars in various disciplines raise questions about the use of this term because it obscures the particularity inherent in anthropogenic causation and in responsibility. By suggesting "humans" as the causal factor, the term may cloud over the reality that some humans are far more implicated than others in historic and contemporary greenhouse gas emissions, and that the lines of causation are highly racialized and class dependent. For the *An Earthed Faith* series, it was decided to use the term "Anthropocene" always in quotation marks to indicate the contestations over naming it as such. Doing ecotheology "amid" the "Anthropocene" is then not only a reference to a rupture in the Earth System but also to the dominant ways of interpreting it. Following the decision by the International Union of Geological Sciences on March 4, 2024 to *reject* the proposal from the Anthropocene Working Group to establish the "Anthropocene" as a formal epoch in the earth's geological timetable, it would be inappropriate to refer to the "Anthropocene Epoch." Nevertheless, the term will still be widely used in scientific studies, in the humanities and in popular debates to describe human-induced change to the Sun System.

1. Taking a Deep Breath for the Story to Begin … An Earthed Faith 1 (Prolegomena)
2. How Would We Know What God Is Up To? An Earthed Faith 2 (Method)
3. The Place of Story and the Story of Place. An Earthed Faith 3 (Creation)
4. Making Room for the Story to Continue? An Earthed Faith 4 (Providence)
5. The Saving Grace of the Story? An Earthed Faith 5 (Salvation)
6. The Keepers of the Story? An Earthed Faith 6 (Church)
7. Where the Story Ends and its Ends … An Earthed Faith 7 (Eschatology)
8. Being Blessed as the Inner Logic of the Story? An Earthed Faith 8 (Election)
9. The Spirit of the Story? An Earthed Faith 9 (Pneumatology)
10. The Letter of the Story? An Earthed Faith 10 (Christ)
11. In Communion with the Story Teller(s)? An Earthed Faith 11 (Trinity)
12. What, Then, Is the Moral of the Story? An Earthed Faith 12 (Ethics)

The first three of these volumes have been published thus far. The essays included in this monograph are closely related and partially overlap with contributions made to the fourth volume in the series on God's providence. The collaborative work done towards the fourth volume enabled me to focus on the theme of providence during 2023. I was also able to offer a postgraduate module on the theme of providence in the Department of Religion and Theology at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) in the first semester of 2023 and could focus much of my research on this theme. I was granted sabbatical leave in the second semester of 2023 which enabled me to develop this further.

Moreover, the sabbatical leave allowed for an extended series of research visits from August 27 to October 15, 2023 in order to meet with colleagues who are contributing to the series in the Pasifika region and with Professor Upolu Lumā Vaai (Pacific Theological College), the co-editor of the fourth volume, in particular. I was privileged to visit Malua Theological College (in Samoa), Pacific Theological College (Suva, Fiji), the Ekalesia Kelisiano Tuvalu (Congregational Christian Church of Tuvalu), the United Theological College (Charles Sturt University in North Parramatta), the University of Auckland, Trinity Theological College (Auckland, Aotearoa), St. John's Theological College (Auckland, Aotearoa), and the University of Otago in Wellington and in Dunedin (Aotearoa). Through such visits, I was able to gain firsthand experience of the many stark challenges posed by the advent of the "Anthropocene" in the Pasifika region. I became increasingly

convinced that such challenges imply theological challenges to understanding the Christian faith in general and the theme of providence in particular. I was also deeply impressed by the emerging Pasifika centers of excellence where such challenges are addressed in innovative ways appropriate to the region. A two-page set of impressions that was forwarded to colleagues whom I visited is inserted as an addendum, as this accounts for the core agenda that is explored in this volume.

In addition, the following background to this volume of essays may be noted. The first essay included in this volume, entitled "'In God We Trust'? A Core Christian Conviction and Its Multiple Challenges amid the 'Anthropocene'," served as the editorial introduction for the volume on providence, *Making Room for the Story to Continue?* It was written with minor input from the co-editor, Upolu Lumā Vaai, especially from the perspective of Indigenous theologies in the Pasifika region. I am grateful for his permission to include this essay in the present volume under my name. Wherever appropriate, I have credited insights that are derived from his inputs. Given the slightly different contexts, the first few sections and the last section of the editorial introduction are adapted for the essay included here.

The second essay included here, entitled "Common Grace and Sustainability: Is God Ordering or Causing Chaos in the Aftermath of the Holocene?," is the equivalent of my own contribution to the fourth volume in the series on *An Earthed Faith*. It is included here with the permission of the publisher. Only a few very minor changes were required where there are cross-references to the other essays in that volume. This essay focuses on one of the core aspects of the doctrine of God's providence as traditionally understood in the Reformed tradition, namely God's work of conservation.

The third and fourth essays as well as the concluding reflections have not been published before. The lengthy third essay, entitled "The Shift from the Holocene to the 'Anthropocene': God's Governance in History Revisited," focuses on God's governance in history as a second traditional aspect of the doctrine of providence.

The fourth essay explores the notion of *concursus*, i.e., the interplay between divine, human, and other forms of agency. As I argue in that essay, this is not so much a third aspect of God's providence but an underlying assumption of both *conservatio* and *gubernatio*. Some of the sections in this essay on *concursus* build upon my argument in *Secular Discourse on Sin in the Anthropocene* (2020), as is indicated with footnotes where appropriate. The brief concluding essay offers some perspectives on the current state of the debate on providence in the context of Christian ecotheology.

The three main essays therefore employ the traditional Reformed distinction between *conservatio*, *gubernatio*, and *concursus* as aspects of God's providence. As I will argue below, this distinction and each of the terms remain contested. This is especially the case in the context of the "Anthropocene" where the distinction between nature and (human) history has become blurred. Nature itself is historical, as the term natural history suggests, while humans not only form part of nature but have also become a much-debated "geological force of nature." As a result, the distinction between God's work of conservation (in nature) and God's governance in history is also blurred. Moreover, there is a real danger of an independent interest in providence that yields an arid deism that becomes isolated from the soteriological core of the Christian gospel and the Trinitarian pattern of the Christian faith. Nevertheless, the traditional categories do help to organize some of the material and, in my view, therefore still prove to be fruitful.

It may be helpful to state the argument of this volume upfront. I hope to show the following:

1. That God's providence is best understood in terms of the deeply held Christian conviction that God cares for every creature—and not in terms of Greek assumptions around a pervading rational world order.
2. That *conservatio* and *gubernatio* have found rough secular equivalents in global debates on sustainability, mitigation, and adaptation in the context of climate change.
3. That *conservatio* and *gubernatio* are typically in tension with each other when it comes to the question whether God maintains order in nature and society or whether God transforms unjust orders (the call for ecojustice).
4. That *concursus* is not only an implication of *conservatio* and *gubernatio* but also captures the heart of the problem posed by the advent of the "Anthropocene," namely that (some) humans have become a "geological force of nature," while God's agency has become sidelined or usurped by the Promethean quest to become divine.

The essays gathered here cannot and do not resolve the debate on God's providence. There are far more questions raised than answers provided. I do hope that they help to articulate the underlying theological problems and in this way may help to take the debate forward.

Finally, I wish to express a word of gratitude to my colleagues and students in the Department of Religion and Theology at UWC, to Upolu Vaai for his collegial support, and to the persons and institutions who hosted me during the extended research visit and gave me the opportunity

to test core elements of the argument through public lectures, seminars, village gatherings, and individual conversations.

Bibliography

Conradie, Ernst M. "Some Theological Reflections on Multi-Disciplinary Discourse on the 'Anthropocene'." *Scriptura* 121 (2022) 1–23. https://doi.org/10.7833/121-1-2076

Conradie, Ernst M., and Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, eds. *How Would We Know What God Is Up To?* Cape Town: AOSIS, 2022.

Conradie, Ernst M., and Pan-Chiu, Lai, eds. *Taking a Deep Breath for the Story to Begin ...*. Cape Town: AOSIS, 2021.

Conradie, Ernst M., and Willie James Jennings, eds. *The Place of Story and the Story of Place*. Cape Town: AOSIS, 2024.

Addendum: A Few Impressions on an Extended Academic Journey

Dear Colleagues,

I am coming to the end of a fifty-day journey in the Pasifika region, with visits to Malua, Suva, Funafuti, Sydney, Auckland, Wellington, a side-trip to South Island and finally Dunedin. I have met with co-researchers, colleagues, postgraduate students, and new friends.

May I share with you a few brief impressions—for your consideration and critical engagement? I will keep this very brief.

As you will be aware, the core question that I am grappling with is whether Christian notions of providence can help us to engage theologically with the shift to the "Anthropocene." This remains an open question for me, given contestations over the "Anthropocene," diverging views on providence, and also the focus on providence as the most appropriate theme (although one that is given for 2023 in terms of the series on *An Earthed Faith*).

I have been assuming all along that contemporary science is basically correct in understanding the "Anthropocene" as a rupture in the Earth System, that this implies an irreversible shift in the Earth System, and that this shift has already been with us for at least three generations but will increase in severity in decades and centuries to come. I found ample evidence of such a shift in each location, despite the scenic beauty that I also encountered—or perhaps it is the latter that evokes the shock of the former.

The image that comes to my mind is one of going down a series of rapids in a canoe where there is no going back. Accordingly, the shift to the "Anthropocene" is not like a sea with many shores, subject to tides, ocean currents, and sea level rise. It is more akin to a meandering river with sources, tributaries, courses, and estuaries, moving in a certain direction. Or perhaps this is a fast-flowing river over hilly terrain with many tributaries, diversions, and rejoinders where it matters which stream is selected (to adapt Māori views on "braided rivers" to rivers with some treacherous rapids).

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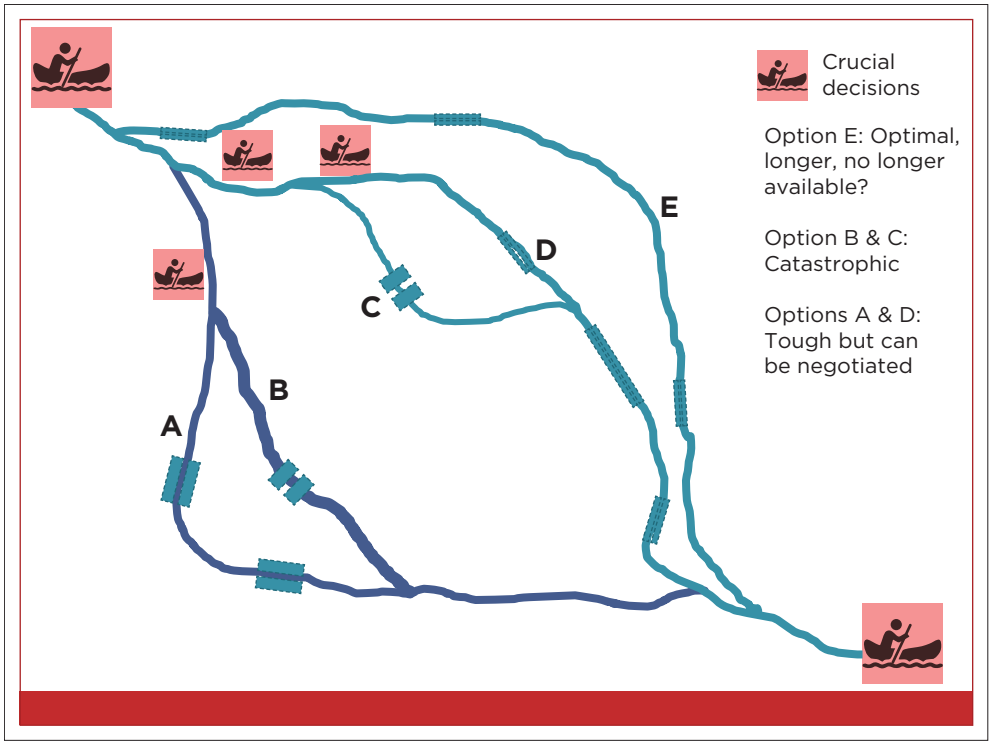
Some decisions have already been made and are irreversible; all further decisions matter; some may well prove catastrophic; turbulent waters are to be expected ahead. There is no going back, but the hope is to find calmer waters, perhaps a new equilibrium ahead, although the transition period may extend over several further generations.

Here is a graphic version of this metaphor:



The question, then, is what "coming to terms" may mean for different communities in different ways, as well as theologically. Here are a few impressions:

1. There is an obvious prophetic critique of the "Anthropocene" and over naming it as such. This is rightly framed in terms of the impact of imperialism, colonialism, modernity and neocolonialism (neoliberal capitalism). This critique has to focus on the failure to set and adhere to mitigation targets (as climate change is core to the advent of the "Anthropocene"). There remains difference of opinion among (Christian) activists whether the focus of this prophetic critique should be on the 1 percent of affluent decision-makers in positions of power and privilege (mostly in the West, especially those with stakes in fossil fuel industries) in promoting economic growth through the treadmill of production,

or on the roughly 25 percent of the human population in the "consumer class" (including minorities in otherwise poor countries but excluding those who are marginalized in otherwise affluent countries) whose lifestyles cannot be replicated by all other humans in a sustainable way. Christianity is complicit on both counts so that such prophetic critique at best includes a Christian self-critique, a confession of guilt and not only of faith.

2. There is, equally understandably, a strong sense of *resistance* against the advent of the "Anthropocene." This may take different forms, but what was for me especially striking is how this resistance is framed in the language of decoloniality. There is resentment over the long-term impact of colonization, and the "Anthropocene" is then recognized as a continuation of such impact. In some contexts, such resistance takes a political form (Aotearoa and Australia); in all contexts, it has an economic dimension, but it is the cultural resistance that was striking to me. There is a widespread recognition of the need to retrieve and cultivate Indigenous cultural resources in terms of adaptation strategies, practices, values, outlooks, horizons (*itulagi*), conceptual categories and vocabularies, proverbs, and the like. At a time when the emphasis is on retrieving, sustaining and protecting such traditional cultures, any notion of an irreversible shift that may undermine cultural identity is seen as an obvious threat. Such resistance is also expressed regarding the dominance of the scientific narrative (e.g., the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reports), not because the veracity of the findings is questioned but because the scientific narrative tends to exclude culture and religion—which for most in Pasifika are the forces that shape their lives. This means that purely science-based proposals for adaptation are bound to fail. At the same time, there is a recognition that there are cultural changes taking place and that not all such changes (or all technologies) are undesirable (e.g., communication technologies, awareness of patriarchy, inclusivity in terms of sexual orientation). I was surprised to see how vigorous the debates on identity are, despite the obvious dangers of identity politics and an emphasis on narrow group identities.
3. There are remarkable examples of *resilience* to cope with the impact of the symptoms of the "Anthropocene" that are already experienced and that are there for all to see. Although such forms of resilience are typically framed in terms of the category of adaptation, I have increasing doubts over whether the secular distinction between mitigation and adaptation suffices. The advent of the "Anthropocene" poses questions not only of sustainability (read mitigation) or adaptation but also over *habitability* (of landscapes and seascapes). Habitability is a better term

than survival, as the latter is not only often anthropocentric but is found also among the wealthy concerned about access to their proverbial "lifeboats." With habitability, the focus is on the flourishing of the habitat itself. It also allows for a sense of celebration even in the midst of stark challenges. For me, such celebration of the joys of life was especially evident in Tuvalu—in lots of dancing and singing (*fatele*) but also in riding around on motorcycles in the late afternoon, it seems for the sheer joy of doing so.

4. There is a widespread recognition of the importance of God's care as a deeply held Christian belief—even where the category of "providence" remains alien. An emphasis on God's care is indeed in many ways the religion of the laity, including the uneducated laity. Nevertheless, there is an embarrassment over what to do with providence, as categories such as conservation (law and order) and governance ("our manifest destiny") are so readily and widely abused. There may well be a *reluctance* to employ the language of providence to come to terms with the "Anthropocene." The underlying theological question is whether God is to be understood as on the side of (law and) order (thus sustaining things as they are) or of the disruption of such order. This is clearly a hard choice with obvious dangers on both sides.

5. The deeper philosophical and theological question remains one of coming to terms with irreversible change. The categories that are most readily employed do not address the problem. Consider the role of sustainability (keeping Holocene stability as far as possible); the prophetic urge for liberation and social transformation (fighting for change but not envisaging imposed irreversible change); the notion of cyclical time (the eternal return of the same); and the emphasis on the flow of time that allows for the movements of animate and inanimate things in processes of coming to life and being reabsorbed into the humus from which life emerged. There is a willingness to live within the bounds of temporal finitude. In such contexts, any notion of irreversible change is *disturbing*. The linearity of such notions of change is undeniably abrasive, while the flow of ongoing movements seems far more attractive. It is equally disturbing that the irreversible shift from the late Pleistocene to the Holocene (which in hindsight may be regarded as benign) evoked notions of a punitive God and of the exclusion of the many, symbolized by the Noah narrative. Again, the message of the advent of the "Anthropocene" is therefore unwelcome, to say the least.

6. The theological questions around the "Anthropocene" are *equally disturbing*. We are forced to ask the question: Is history going somewhere? Is a distinction between human history and planetary history possible? What is the meaning of history? Is there any meaning

to history, or is it a chaotic aggregate of events lacking all rhyme or reason? Can one still speak of history as such, or only of fragmented stories—his-stories and her-stories and othered stories? With fear-mongering (wars in the Ukraine and now in Palestine, threats of the use of nuclear weapons, and the rise of populism), such questions receive a certain unwelcome urgency. For example: Does the Jewish-Christian tradition (if compared with Indigenous and other religions) presuppose a notion of directionality in history? What should be done with the Christian expectation of Christ's parousia? Should we still expect Christ to come "back" as a singular event in history? If so, why only now, why now, and why now already? If not, what is the content and significance of Christian hope? Did the resurrection of Christ redirect (human) history? Is an ultimate divine judgment an object of fear or an expression of hope? How is the kingdom/reign of God to be understood, if not directionally? And what may we still do with Hebrew and/or Greek notions of "eternal" life? Again, the need to address such eschatological questions is unwelcome, as such a focus is more typically at home among fundamentalist climate denialists than in ecumenical theology, prophetic theology, or public theology.

It is clear to me that such questions remain far from answered but also that we are gaining some clarity on items on the theological agenda that will need to be addressed.

My thanks to each of you who made my journey so memorable in one way or another. I experienced truly amazing hospitality, a profound sense of spirituality, deep forms of theological and practical wisdom, and at times breathtaking scenery.

On my way back home,

Ernst Conradie
October 13, 2023

“In God We Trust”? A Core Christian Conviction and Its Multiple Challenges amid the “Anthropocene”[1]

A Set of Core Christian Convictions

There seems to be a tendency in contemporary Christian theology to avoid the notion of providence. It is often not treated as an aspect of God’s work in its own right. One reason may be that it is replaced by a discussion of the theodicy problem (see below)—which is itself often criticized as a fruitless endeavor. Another reason is that classic notions of providence seem to be trapped in categories derived from Greek philosophy that constrain further reflection and can hardly be related to Indigenous wisdom elsewhere in the world. The reason may well be that providence (Latin: *providere*) is understood as foresight and is then linked to God’s omniscience. If so, this

1. This essay represents a partial republication of Ernst M. Conradie and Upolu Lumā Vaai, “‘In God We Trust’? A Core Christian Conviction and its Multiple Challenges amid the ‘Anthropocene’.” In Ernst M. Conradie and Upolu Lumā Vaai (eds.), *Making Room for the Story to Continue? An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the “Anthropocene,”* volume 4, 1–34. (Cape Town: AOSIS, 2024). https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2024.BK415.

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leads to an emphasis on a rational world order, raises questions around divine determinism, and underplays human and other forms of agency.

Nevertheless, traditionally, the doctrine of providence refers to reflection on a core Christian conviction, namely that God cares for and provides for our human needs. This is assumed in the two connotations embedded in the word providence, namely foresight (again *providere*) and provision.[2] God cares not only for the righteous but for all people, even the wicked. Such care is also evident in the food provided for animals, for the birds in the air (Matt 6:26), for cedar trees, wildflowers, and all that lives (Ps 104). Indeed, even though five sparrows are sold for two pennies, not one of them is forgotten in God's sight (Luke 12:6). In the context of ecological destruction, now epitomized by the so-called "Anthropocene," such care is readily extended to the whole world, indeed to the whole of God's beloved creation (as per John 3:16a). A trust in God's care is exemplified by Psalm 23 ("The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want") and Psalm 121 ("My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth"), both of which recognize stark surrounding challenges.

This conviction that God cares shapes the daily life of the Christian laity. It is expressed in petitionary prayers for food; health and well-being; fertility; shelter from cold, heat, and wind; for rains on time and a good harvest; safety on a journey; or for protection from multiple dangers (e.g., the elements, tides and floods, darkness, predators, attackers, enemies). The trust in God's care thus expresses a recognition in prayer of what lies ultimately beyond the locus of control of an individual human agent, family, or community. Accordingly, Christians may find consolation in Romans 8:28: "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (NRSVUE). In short: if God is for us, who can be against us (Rom 8:31)? One may therefore say that providence is best understood in the context of a life of prayer and in doxology; it is otherwise easily misunderstood and then just does not make sense.[3] As Tim Gorringe admits, "Belief in providence is [...] both necessary and impossible, absurd, but deeply human. It is not a belief required of us formally by the creeds but, much more profoundly, by our daily prayer."[4]

It is perhaps especially in Indigenous communities where such a trust in God's care thrives because of a sense of vulnerability to destructive forces beyond their control. Such Indigenous communities are found around the world, but prime examples include Small Island States that are vulnerable

2. See Fergusson, *The Providence of God*, 298.

3. See Fergusson, *The Providence of God*, 322–30.

4. Gorringe, *God's Theatre*, 1.

to the effect of climate change. By contrast, in affluent communities, an expression of trust in God's care (e.g., for the food on the table) can easily revert into a legitimation of an upper-middle class lifestyle as "proof" of God's tender loving care. The danger here is one of deducing from prosperity that this is a sign of God's "many blessings." Adversity may then be identified with God's curse[5] and prosperity with salvation. The very same conviction may therefore serve the purpose of self-legitimation in times of privilege and power. This would underestimate the biblical critique of local fertility and prosperity cults (the Ba'alim) in the name of Yahweh, the God of Israel. The prosperity gospel thrives not only among the consumer class but also among the poor and lower-middle class who hope that their Christian adherence will yield some much-needed prosperity.[6]

Alongside such a need for sustenance, trust in God's care also lives in the hearts of believers who desire guidance in the education of their children, important life choices (marriage, career, moving house, migration), and wisdom in coping with the many demands of life. The same would apply to institutions and their leaders in need of wisdom for policy-making and decision-making, given that the full complexity of the present situation cannot be grasped, while what the future may hold always contains an element of uncertainty, at times radical uncertainty. Such guidance cannot be reduced to divine commands but may be expressed in convictions on God's presence in the life of individual believers, families, congregations, other institutions, nations, and even the world as such. Accordingly, God's word is a lamp for one's path in life (Ps 119:105).

Such guidance may be extended to the conviction that, ultimately, it is not our decisions that determine our lives but that we may leave the outcome in God's hands. This is radicalized in the trust that God is able to turn experiences of suffering and evil (which God did not cause) towards the good, thus using them as opportunities for grace. Prime biblical examples of such a *Gesetz der Umlenkung* include Joseph being sold into slavery by his own brothers, Emperor Cyrus of Persia being employed as God's servant, and the execution of Jesus Christ on a Roman cross that God inverts for the sake of the salvation of the whole world. From this conviction emerges the trust that God somehow governs our lives, families, communities, congregations, institutions, even nations. Accordingly, God has a purpose for us and every other creature—and will bring that to fulfillment despite many experiences that point to the contrary. One can therefore detect God's hand in the myriad of details in one's personal life.

5. See Berkouwer, *The Providence of God*, 179.

6. There is a significant corpus of literature on the prosperity gospel from around the world. For a University of the Western Cape–based discussion with students from such contexts, see Conradie, *Christianity and a Critique of Consumerism*.

This conviction may be extended towards (contemporary) history as such. Accordingly, God is steering history towards God's ultimate goal for the world, despite multiple deviations, distortions, and disruptions. One may discern a sense of direction in history towards the coming reign of God, whether at a personal, ecclesial, national, or global level. Ultimately, history is in God's hands. If so, the theological question is what God is up to at this moment in history, again in my life and in this community, in widening circles.[7] In ecotheology, a cosmic extension of any such notion of providence is needed: one has to affirm that God's faithfulness is not only to God's covenant (with Israel) but to the whole of creation, despite the fall of humanity.

On this basis, Christians are encouraged to seek and find traces of the victory of the resurrected Christ in contemporary events. As Hendrikus Berkhof puts it, "Faith does not depend on vision, but it does lead to vision. For faith, among other things, means the certainty that wherever Christ is glorified in this world and reigns over the world, his resurrection power is active in history and as such takes on form, i.e. it becomes visible."[8]

One may conclude that trust in God's providence yields the virtues of humility and gratitude, patience in adversity, and confidence amid worries about things that one cannot control. It need not foster Stoic resignation or moral paralysis but elicits protest and resistance on the borderline between what is and what is not within one's locus of control. If everything is in the powerful yet loving hands of God, then humans can face any external calamity and internal weakness with serenity, courage, and confidence.[9] If, by contrast, we live in a world governed by either fate or pure randomness, we are driven to unrelieved despair.[10] In response to the question of how believers are helped by faith in God's providence, the Heidelberg Catechism responds: "We can be patient when things go against us, thankful when things go well, and for the future we can have good confidence in our faithful God and Father that nothing in creation will separate us from

7. See Charles Wood's proposal that the doctrine of providence responds to the question what is going on from a theological perspective. See Wood, *The Question of Providence*, 12.

8. See Berkhof, *Christ the Meaning of History*, 133.

9. See Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 177, drawing on John Calvin.

10. See Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 178–79: "In a world governed by the former [fate and chance] all happens blindly, with no meaning at all; here there is promise of neither liberation nor salvation. Since we are in such a world subjected to utterly senseless forces, all the miseries that these forces bestow on us, i.e. of failure, disease, bereavement, death, have no meaning vis-à-vis our own hopes and thus insofar as they are victorious—and they frequently are—they represent an unrelieved despair. Here, therefore, there is the possibility of neither serenity nor consolation and no ground for courage in facing life's inevitable trials. At best we can depend only on our own transient and fragile powers to elude the forces that menace us—and thus do we face the inner risk, if we succeed, of callous pride, and, if we fail, of utter despair."

his love. For all creatures are so completely in God's hand that without his will they can neither move nor be moved."[11]

Providence thus requires contentment with what one cannot change in life. In the famous, widely cited prayer for serenity attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr, knowing the difference between what lies within one's locus of control and what does not is what matters: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

Note that in a Christian context, providence is not to be equated with destiny or fatalism, nor with a sense of karma that suggests that one inevitably reaps what one sows, that one gets what one deserves. That can only encourage passivity. A belief in providence is in fact a protest statement against vulnerability to the whims of luck or the fatalities of fate. The inverse of determinism, namely a belief in luck or chance (and the many superstitions associated with that), also cannot be attributed to God's providence. Likewise, providence cannot be reduced to what has been allotted to us in life in terms of length and strength, intelligence, good looks, musical ability, or physical agility. This is how "Providence" (with a capital) is sometimes understood in a secular context and thus becomes a nickname for God (also used by Adolf Hitler!). Another distortion of God's care (due to Greek influence) is that providence (the Latin *providere* means seeing ahead in the sense of foresight) may be equated with divine foreknowledge or with divine predetermination so that providence and fate become merged with each other.[12]

In response to secular notions of "Providence" that tend to become deist, contemporary Christian treatments of God's providence seek to hold together God's work of creation, providence, and salvation more closely. There is a recognition of the need for a more Trinitarian understanding of God's care based on the recognition that the Father who cares is none other than the Father of Jesus the Messiah—raising the question why the Father did not intervene when the Son was crucified. Moreover, the Spirit is a dynamic power of life (the Hebrew *ruach*), a motherly comforter, who proceeds from the Father and upon whom all of life is dependent, so that God's care precedes, indwells, and enables human care. God's care is then best associated with the Spirit as Advocate and Comforter.[13] This allows for a less deterministic (Stoic) and a more interactive notion of providence. Put differently, providence is less about God's lordship over all things (God's

11. Question and Answer 28. For this translation of the Heidelberg Catechism, see https://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/confessions/heidelberg-catechism#toc-god-the-father [last accessed October 14, 2024].

12. See Wood, *The Question of Providence*, 24.

13. See, e.g., Fergusson, *Creation*, 50–61, also his *The Providence of God*.

foreknowledge, sovereignty, and thus power)[14] being in control of all that happens and more about God's vulnerable love.

Challenges Posed by Suffering and Evil

Such a trust in God's care emerges precisely from experiences of its apparent absence. When one has sufficient food, health, rain, harvests, shelter, and safety, one may well take such things for granted. It is from concerns, uncertainties, and anxieties, when these things are threatened, that a trust in God's care becomes meaningful. It is during times of political uncertainty and upheaval that God's care provides assurance.[15] Counter-experiences of suffering do not falsify but may actually elicit such trust. Likewise, providence is not contradicted by the impact of human sin but is precisely made necessary as a result of sin.[16] In fact, an affirmation of God's providence emerges from and is tested by being confronted with "principalities and powers"; with distortive ideologies; with economic, political, and legal corruption; and with forms of tyranny and state capture. As a result, God's providence typically remains hidden in the contrast between what is and what should be (God's purposes). The "Hallelujah!" that reverberates in singing God's glory in any doxology all too easily turns into a triumphalist theology of glory to justify power and privilege, unless it is expressed as a protest against oppressive powers.[17] The triumphant chorus "For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen" in the Lord's Prayer follows upon "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil" (Matt 6:13, KJV).

However, when suffering becomes too much to bear, believers are left to wonder whether God really cares. Does God actually care? Can God care? Does it even make sense to say that God cares? Does this conviction not die the death of a thousand qualifications, by every experience of unjustifiable suffering? Moreover, is trusting in God's care not dangerous and open to abuse and ideological distortion? As David Fergusson observes, it was an intuitive assumption of nineteenth-century imperial rhetoric that empires were providentially ordained to transmit the benefits of Western civilization to other parts of the world.[18] "In God We Trust" is the official

14. See Gorringe, *God's Theatre*, 5.

15. David Fergusson, following insights from Heiko Oberman, refers to John Calvin's status as a refugee in Geneva to account for the profound role (with lurking dangers) that providence plays in a Reformed spirituality. See *The Providence of God*, 77–81.

16. See Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 161.

17. See Berkouwer, *The Providence of God*, 267.

18. See Fergusson, *The Providence of God*, 3.

motto of the United States of America, adapted from Psalm 91:2 and adopted by the U.S. Congress in 1956. It appears on all American currency so that trust in God's care is easily conflated with trust in the undoubted power of the U.S. dollar.

Given the destructive ecological impact of industrialized capitalism, now evident in the "Anthropocene" (or, as some insist, the "Capitalocene"),[19] this may well constitute a heretical betrayal of a God who cares for those escaping slavery, oppressed peoples, and those marginalized by society, as well as by religious authorities. Those who have become the victims of modernization, globalization, and American hegemony (and that includes multiple other forms of life) can hardly be asked to affirm "In God We Trust" as their own motto. Notions of God's sovereignty, where affirmed by the powerful, can only be regarded as a legitimation of power by others. Functionally replacing a trust in God's care with trust in the American dollar is nothing but a heretical distortion of a core Christian conviction. What some regard as a Day of Thanksgiving for God's providential care, others dismiss as colonial conquest. The problem remains that Christianity is so closely related to colonialism and capitalism (three C's) that no notion of God's governance in history can escape from this legacy.

Moreover, does a sense of the tragic not pervade our lives? Is God still somehow in control of where things are going towards, or are we (some of us humans) now in control? Or is our world determined by something else, astral fate or luck, fortune or chance, perhaps? Is it not easier and more consoling to attribute suffering to accidents, misfortunes, negligence, or errors that could be rectified by a sacrifice, a gift, or even a bribe? More pertinently: does God's professed care make any difference to human and animal suffering? Or is this nothing more than a decorative way of talking about finite human capabilities, perhaps pious and humble, perhaps self-deceptive, even operating as the opium *of* the people (Marx) or *for* the

19. See, e.g., Joerg Rieger's *Theology in the Capitalocene*, following Jason Moore's *Anthropocene or Capitalocene.* Rieger insists that this is an age in which a small, privileged group's economic interests and emphasis on maximizing profits rule both people and planet (2–3). While the quip that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism rings true, the alternatives of socialism or communism (as responses to industrialized capitalism) focus on the distribution of wealth but still assume the need for sustained economic growth and maintain a similar carbon footprint—and in that sense remain part of the problem. The geological impact of humans is intertwined with the history of capital but will also be evident long after capitalism has gone or morphed into something else. The history of capitalism is therefore not by itself sufficient to understand the human predicament (see Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, 4, 35). It is unlikely that something as complex as the "Anthropocene" can be attributed to a single cause, even if its impact is as pervasive as that of capitalism. The question is also how to understand the anticolonial quest for modernization in so-called developing countries and why those who do not form part of the small, privileged group (the "global 99 percent") are lured by the consumerist dream of prosperity. For Rieger, the answer lies in the capitalist "treadmill of production" based on endless accumulation and requiring an advertising industry to maintain. Sin is understood as capitalist exploitation of people and earth by the few (188), rather than the consumerist greed of the many.

people (Lenin)? Such doubts about God's care are often expressed in the biblical witnesses themselves, notably in the Psalms, in the Book of Job, in the Lamentations, and also by Jesus the Christ on the cross: "My God, why have you abandoned me?" (Matt 27:46).

Typically, believers would distinguish between natural causes of suffering (earthquakes, volcanoes, bad weather, accidents, droughts, famine, sickness, pests, aging) and social causes of such suffering in the form of injustices, oppression, even genocide—where suffering is the result of what some humans and their institutions do to others, including other forms of life. Here, a further distinction may be made between the impact on oneself of what one may do wrong (sinning), the impact of the sins of other individuals or groups (being sinned against), and more indirect forms of suffering as a result of tyranny, oppression, and the ideological legitimation of unjust social orders (structural violence).[20] Both natural and social sources of suffering raise disturbing questions regarding God's care, but often in different ways. Accordingly, it seems that natural causes of suffering can only be attributed to God's punishment, while social causes of suffering would prompt protesting to God in God's name, given God's failure to care, allowing such suffering to endure. The delay of divine justice may be according to some vast eternal plan, but for the victims of history, that does not offer consolation. Again, such responses are amply attested to in the biblical witnesses, for example, in the frequent mentioning of "enemies" in the psalms.

It must be noted that the sources of suffering also include vicarious suffering—which is core to the Christian symbol of the cross. This raises soteriological questions of its own (e.g., regarding penal substitution)—which will be addressed elsewhere in this series.[21] This does not resolve questions around natural suffering, though: is the vicarious role of the Savior necessary in order to patch up a "botched job" of the Creator?

However, a clear distinction between natural and social causes of suffering is not always possible, as is the case with psychosomatic diseases, the exacerbated impact of earthquakes, and pandemics such as the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) or coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). The deeper reason for blurring the distinction between natural and social causes of suffering may well be the tendency to root evil in nature, for example, in the bodily passions, finiteness, materiality, temporality, primordial chaos, or, more typically, in anxiety over finitude. Evil then

20. Such distinctions are widely discussed in the literature following Leibniz's classic distinction between moral, natural, and metaphysical evil. Among contributors to this series, see, e.g., Conradie, *Redeeming Sin?*; also Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil*; Pearson, "Unwrapping Theodicy."

21. See volume 5 of the series on *An Earthed Faith*, to be entitled "The Saving Grace of the Story?"

becomes a necessary function of finite existence (i.e., "metaphysical evil"). If so, it becomes possible to provide a rational explanation for the emergence of evil and therefore suffering. Ultimately, it is the Creator who is to be blamed! This prompts a tension between faith in God as Creator and as Savior. Often a deist notion of God is assumed in a critique of the Creator, while some form of supernatural theism is assumed in a critique of the failure of God as Savior to rescue the victims of human history.

Nevertheless, the problem of natural sources of suffering remains, given that all suffering (e.g., animals inflicting pain on each other) cannot be attributed to a primeval human fall. Moreover, it seems that the very same evolutionary processes (at least partly through natural selection) that gave rise to beauty, diversity, and complexity in nature also gave rise to suffering and extinction (or non-selection). Likewise, the very same natural processes that wreak havoc in human communities, including earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, and hurricanes, are necessary to maintain the immense fecundity of life on Earth.[22]

Either way, believers are confronted with questions around God's loving presence and care amid multiple forms of suffering. In theological reflection, this has long prompted discourse on the intractable theodicy problem. All responses to the theodicy problem seem to remain deeply unsatisfying: "All grandiose theological systems that purport to have an answer to every question are exposed as illusory by the monstrous presence of evil and suffering in the world."[23] Some would conclude that any attempt to provide a rational explanation for God's presence amid suffering in history remains trapped in Hellenistic categories (such as λόγος, Εἱμαρμένη, πρόνοια), given their influence on early Christian notions of reason, the orderly succession of cause and effect, forethought, and determination. This suggests that evil things happen, as it were, not merely "under God's watch" but also "according to God's plan."

In response, others would insist that any human endeavor to find an explanation for (human) suffering, and a justification for God's failure to do something about that, will remain empty given God's response of forgiveness and the justification of the unjust.[24] Rational explanations for suffering typically amount to self-exoneration of human complicity. Yet others, like the character Ivan in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, would prefer to return their ticket for entry into God's kingdom if any unjust suffering is justified. This suggests that what is ultimately being questioned is God's character as loving and caring.

22. See Southgate, *Theology in a Suffering World*, 2.

23. See Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 121.

24. See Berkouwer, *The Providence of God*, 260.

The blurring of distinctions between natural and social causes of suffering is epitomized by the "Anthropocene." This becomes evident in the distinction between ongoing changes in the Earth's atmosphere and anthropogenic climate change. The same applies to the distinction between the concentration of sulfur in the Earth's atmosphere associated with volcanic eruptions and anthropogenic ocean acidification, or between the previous five mass extinctions and the current rapid loss of biodiversity resulting from a "sixth extinction." As the debates on naming the "Anthropocene" as such indicate, such anthropogenic sources of suffering at a planetary level are not homogenous but coincide with multiple social divides in terms of race, class, caste, and gender, and ideological divides in terms of economic systems, religious traditions, and worldviews.

Theological Reflection on Providence

In theological reflection on (human) suffering, it is necessary to clarify how God's providence relates to God's work of creation, ongoing creation, election, salvation, the formation of the church, God's mission, and the expected consummation of God's work.[25] There are at least four dangers here.

One is to separate God's care from, for example, God's work of salvation. That can only lead to theological speculation that becomes removed from the Christian gospel (a tendency that plagues intellectual attempts to resolve the theodicy problem) and the Christological hinge around which the Christian faith turns. Instead, some would insist that it is God's patience (μακροθυμίαν) to provide an opportunity for redemption that makes room for the story to continue (2 Pet 3:15). God's providence also cannot be reduced to the story of God's work of election (to be discussed in volume 8 of the series) and salvation (to be discussed in volume 5 of the series). This raises the thorny problem of how salvation history (a selection of events in the particular) and world history (in general) are related to each other. Clearly, neither fusion nor separation will do. Salvation history cannot be separated from the broad plane of (human) history, but it cannot be equated with that either. History is one.[26]

The second danger is to subsume all these aspects of God's work under a single rubric. This leads to sterility, for example, where God's work becomes equated with the ministries and missions of the church. To subsume all of God's work under creation would lead to an arid deism or an amorphous pantheism. Instead, providence expresses the conviction that

25. These themes will each be addressed in volumes 3 to 8 of the *An Earthed Faith* series.

26. See Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 65.

God, after creating the world, preserves and directs it to fulfill God's purposes.[27] To subsume providence (common grace) under salvation (salvific grace) runs the risk of understanding salvation as redemption from nature. To subsume providence under God's election of a covenant partner (Israel and the church) is to narrow down the scope of God's care for the whole of creation. Something similar would apply in other cases.[28] Clearly, providence by itself is not enough. More than providence is needed to respond to the "Anthropocene." But without providence as one dimension of God's work, all the others seem to unravel.

The third danger is to reduce reflection on God's providence to a discussion of the theodicy problem. The task may indeed be to expose flawed theodicies.[29] This may fill philosophical volumes but all too often tends to become arid and intellectualist and hardly ever suffices for a pastoral response to suffering.[30] In response, many contemporary theologians are drawn to the notion of tragedy to fathom the shadow side of God's good creation.[31] This prompts a related fourth danger, namely to shy away from the Jewish roots of the Christian notion of providence by adopting a Greek or even a Manichean notion of tragedy. This may either allow for a destructive force that is co-original with the Creator or for a shadow side to God's benevolent character.

How, then, should God's work of providence be understood and approached? There is simply no consensus in wider theological discourse in this regard. Often the doctrine of providence is itself sidelined as too complex and contested, even if this lies at the heart of a life of faith on a daily basis. For some, any notion of providence (e.g., through order in society) is far too much associated with the emphasis on development and progress in nineteenth-century liberal theologies or to the conservatism of a more orthodox theology that inhibits the possibility of a radically open future that would disrupt unjust structures in society. One may even say

27. See Fergusson, *The Providence of God*, 1.

28. See Langdon Gilkey's critique that, for liberal theologies, providence provided the sole clue to the meaning of history; for dialectical theology it was Christology, while for political theologies it was eschatology. Clearly, these need to be juggled with each other in one or another storyline. See Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 238.

29. So Fergusson, *The Providence of God*, 303.

30. In a recent essay entitled "From Lisbon to Auschwitz and from Wuhan to Cape Town: COVID-19 as a Test Case for the Theodicy Problem," I discussed a six-fold typology that I employ in teaching in this regard, under the following rubrics: (1) "suffering is incomprehensible"; (2) "we need to offer protest before God about human suffering"; (3) "human suffering is the product of human sin and may be regarded as God's punishment or chastisement for sin"; (4) "God is teaching us a lesson through suffering"; (5) "God's power is a function of persuasive love"; (6) "what is required is not passive acquiescence in suffering but courageous human participation in God's struggle against evil."

31. See, e.g., Gandolfo, *The Power and Vulnerability of Love*.

that there is little room for any doctrine of providence in several of the main theological trajectories of the twentieth century, including the early dialectical theology of the 1920s, the existential theologies of the 1950s, the political theologies of the 1960s and 1970s, or the subsequent emergence of a range of Black, decolonial, feminist, Indigenous, queer, and especially liberation theologies, including Dalit, Minjung, Pasifika, and other theologies.

In Protestant theology, a distinction is often made between three aspects of God's providence, namely *conservatio* (protection, sustenance), *gubernatio* (God's governance in history), and *concursus* (the interplay between divine, human, and other forms of agency, suggesting convivence and accompanying but not control, determinism, or domination).[32] A fourth aspect, namely *creatio continua* (ongoing creation), may be added, again with the danger of conflating creation and providence by subsuming both under ongoing creation, for example, under the rubric of "creativity."[33]

These distinctions do provide some rubrics that may be employed, but these are not necessarily adopted in other confessional traditions. In the context of the "Anthropocene," the distinction between nature and (human) history has become blurred. Nature itself is historical, as the term natural history suggests, while humans not only form part of nature but have become a "geological force of nature." As a result, the distinction between God's work of conservation (in nature) and God's governance in history is also blurred.

To complicate matters further, the narrative account of planetary history in "history" as a human way of engaging with the past, as well as in "history" as an (academic) discipline, has become contested (note the triple meaning of the word "history").[34] The question is whether it is even possible to speak of history as such and whether any attempt to reconstruct such history does not fall into the trap of hegemonic grand narratives. There may be histories (his-stories and her-stories) in the plural, but any narrative account of such histories is already problematic, not to mention divine governance in history.

32. Here is the influential definition proposed by the Lutheran theologian Johann Andreas Quenstedt (1617–1688): "Providence is the external action of the entire Trinity whereby (1) God most efficaciously upholds the things created, both as an entirety and singly, both in species and in individuals; (2) Concurs in their actions and results; and (3) Freely and wisely governs all things to his own glory and the welfare and safety of the universe, and especially of the godly." Quoted in Wood, *The Question of Providence,* 78, note 10.

33. See Gorringe, *God's Theatre*, 15–18.

34. William Walsh identifies a double meaning of the ambiguous term "history," namely "the totality of human actions" and "the narrative or account we construct of them now." Note the anthropocentric focus on *human* history and the distinction between narrative accounts of history and academic reflections on such narrative accounts. See Walsh, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, 16.

One may argue that conservation (maintaining order in nature) may well conflict with notions of governance in human history where social change is demanded instead of maintaining "law and order." Secular notions of governance and sovereignty are easily ascribed to God but then become contested given a critique of modern nation states. A notion of *concursus* is required to avoid a deist, pantheist, or deterministic notion of *conservatio* and *gubernatio*, but it does not by itself express God's providence.[35] *Concursus* suggests that God does not act directly in history as an external cause but always through secondary causes, including human and other forms of agency. In the "Anthropocene," God's work of conservation in natural history can precisely no longer be separated from God's governance in human history.

Providence in Christian Ecotheology

In Christian ecotheology, such themes are widely addressed but not necessarily framed in terms of the doctrine of providence. At times, such themes become disconnected from a trust in God's care and are then reduced to a form of ethics, that is, in terms of human responsibility (which still assumes a position on *concursus*). Oddly, such ethics are often based (implicitly) on natural law or God's creation ordinances (which played a notorious role in Nazi Germany and apartheid South Africa), or they amount to a theological appropriation of secular goals.

It may suffice here to list a number of discourses in Christian ecotheology (or touching on that) where such themes are indeed explored. Again, such themes are not necessarily framed in terms of providence, and any adequate treatment of such themes would need to do so not only in terms of providence. Nevertheless, they clearly do touch on an understanding of providence as well.

These discourses are placed here in a deliberately randomized order to illustrate how widely diverging and quite bewildering they are. References can be multiplied easily but are restricted here to a minimum.

Sustenance and Food Security

An expression of gratitude for sustenance and/or a cry for food amid hunger pangs are characteristic of daily piety, even though any prayer of

35. The danger is that such cooperation between God and creatures can be reduced to either God using instruments in a way that would undermine their freedom, or God's work being regarded as a legitimation of human activity. While such cooperation is Christologically excluded (salvation for us), it is Pneumatologically necessary (salvation in and through us). See the famous essay by Arnold van Ruler on "Structural Differences between Christology and Pneumatology" in this regard.

gratitude for the food that we are about to receive is deeply troubled by unequal food distribution. Such piety emerges from the conviction that God cares. In ecotheology, there is by now a significant corpus of literature on food, food security, food sovereignty, eating, diets, Eucharistic practices, farming practices, concerns over the plight of farm animals, toxins, monocultures, the use of biotechnology (genetically modified organisms), overfishing, and so forth. Such literature is typically found in the fields of Christian ethics, practical theology, and (Christian) spirituality but assumes some notion of God's providence. At the same time, the anthropocentrism that characterizes traditional discourse on God's providence (providing in human needs only) is being challenged.

Health and Healing

Alongside such an emphasis on food, there is an equally extensive theological discourse on health and healing, not least in the wake of the HIV and COVID-19 pandemics. The gendered nature of health is widely recognized, also but not only with reference to reproductive health, malnutrition, infant mortality, stunting in children, and debates around population and consumption. Especially in countries of the Global South, there is considerable debate regarding public health care systems, the role of pharmaceutical companies and inequalities in access to primary health care. Notions of health are readily extended to planetary well-being, as good health is impossible in a toxic environment.[36] This may be further extended to concerns over animal health, given the destruction of habitat, the plight of domesticated animals on commercial farms, and cruelty to animals. Again, such literature on health is found mainly in the fields of Christian ethics or pastoral care but assumes some notion of God's providence in giving us good health and strength, physically, psychologically, and socially.

Indigenous Wisdom

In Indigenous forms of ecotheology, the theme of God's providence may not feature as such, but the critique of imperialism, colonialism, and new forms of colonizing is required precisely because sustainable livelihoods are threatened. In response, Indigenous theologies retrieve ecological wisdom embedded in traditional forms of life, culture, and religion in order to survive amid forces of death and destruction.[37] At times, God's care is questioned,

36. See Clinebell, *Ecotherapy*.

37. Among many examples worldwide, see, e.g., Vaai, "The Ecorelational Story of the Cosmic Aiga." See also Vaai, "A Dirtified God." I wish to acknowledge the bibliographic references provided by Upolu Vaai for this paragraph in particular.

for example, by asking whether God is no longer adhering to the covenant with Noah not to destroy the world through water. Or to question, with Job, the sources of the suffering of the innocent. Or to find hospitable neighbors in cases of displacement (Luke 10).[38] In Indigenous communities, there is a growing interest in questioning and unsettling conventional views on God's providence as they struggle with colonial and neocolonial influences and the impact of anthropogenic climate change.[39] Indigenous communities are therefore not passively trusting that God's care will resolve such challenges but seeking to reconstruct notions of providence. The resilience and courage of youth in Pacific islands is expressed in slogans such as "we are not drowning, we are fighting."[40] They are not passive, hopeless victims of climate change. Nevertheless, there is a sense of wonder and reverence for the fecundity of life that seems to become undermined in urbanized and industrialized contexts. It is precisely such reverence that is the source of moral courage to resist domination and exploitation.[41] On this basis, there is an interplay between divine and human agency (*concursus*).

Ecofeminist Critiques of Patriarchal Care

Any notion of God's providence is plagued by problems related to patriarchy, as God's care is traditionally associated with naming God as the Father of Jesus Christ. Accordingly, it is the task of the father in a patriarchal household to provide for the needs of all its members. Such problems are addressed in multiple forms of ecofeminist theology from around the world, as well as in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and other (LGBTQIA+) discourse. The challenge is aggravated by using the adjective "almighty." In a patriarchal context, an almighty father is downright scary! If God is male, then the male is God![42] This impression is reinforced through patriarchal church leadership. If God's care is expressed through priests and pastors as God's instruments ("pastoral care"), then sexual offenses by priests and abusive charismatic leadership[43] (e.g., in demanding sexual favors, securing financial benefits, or occupying positions that carry social status) can only undermine any notion of God's providence. How, then, does one avoid a toxic masculinity in exploring the theme of God's providence? Can this be overcome merely by employing female images for God?

38. See Talia, "Am I Not Your Tuakoi?"

39. See Woodley, *Indigenous Theology and the Western Worldview*.

40. See Lusama, *Vaa Fesokotaki*.

41. See Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, 202.

42. See Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*.

43. See Herbert, "A Conceptual Analysis of Abusive Charismatic Leadership."

The Universe Story

The legacy of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Thomas Berry has become associated with reflections on the "universe story," especially the "journey of the universe."[44] A sense of direction is discerned in cosmic, biological, and cultural evolution, arguably towards increasing diversity, complexity, autonomy, symbiotic networks, and beauty.[45] An ecological moral is discerned in this story by simultaneously upholding insights from contemporary science and retrieving wisdom from Indigenous communities and/or world religions.[46] Theological notions of God's governance in history may be deliberately eschewed, but the underlying question about the meaning of this moment in history (the "sixth extinction") remains obvious. Such an emphasis on the directionality of history is also employed to respond to a sense of cosmic meaninglessness (Stephen Weinberg),[47] given the laws of thermodynamics that may suggest that entropy will have the last word in the history of the universe. In response, a teleological understanding of the direction of history is affirmed by some, for example, in the process theology of John Haught.[48] God is not found primarily behind us in the Alpha as the First Cause but especially before us in the Omega, not in the beginning but at the end of the evolutionary process.[49]

Theologies of Becoming

There is a tendency to eschew the notion of providence and to subsume God's work of original creation and ongoing care under ongoing creation in theologies of becoming, for example, in the context of process theology.[50] Nevertheless, a strong emphasis on *concursus* (a classic theme discussed under the doctrine of providence) is found. There is often a stress on humans being created co-creators (Philip Hefner)[51] while recognizing some

44. See Swimme and Tucker, *Journey of the Universe*.

45. See also Rolston, *Genes, Genesis, and God; Three Big Bangs*.

46. See the critique of the assumptions on such ethics by Lisa Sideris in her *Consecrating Science*.

47. See the (in)famous quotation by Stephen Weinberg: "It is very hard to realize that this all is just a tiny part of an overwhelmingly hostile universe. It is even harder to realize that this present universe has evolved from unspeakably unfamiliar condition, and faces a future extinction of endless cold or intolerable heat. The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless." Weinberg, *The First Three Minutes*, 154–55.

48. Such views are expressed throughout Haught's oeuvre. In the context of ecotheology, see already his *The Promise of Nature.*

49. See, e.g., Ted Peters, *God—The World's Future*, following insights from Wolfhart Pannenberg.

50. See, especially, Keller, *Face of the Deep*.

51. See Hefner, *The Human Factor*.

form of agency in each creature (Michael Welker).[52] Accordingly, God created things to create themselves. Not surprisingly, such an emphasis on ongoing creation can easily degenerate into either deism or pantheism. If some form of theism is maintained, this raises the question of how God's care makes a difference in the world. Can God, for example, influence weather patterns to bring rain amid drought? Is merely praying for rain an appropriate response to climate change in the African context?[53]

Common Grace

Neo-Calvinist discourse on "common grace" is squarely located in the doctrine of providence, as the classic exposition by Abraham Kuyper also indicates.[54] The notion of common grace suggests that, in response to human sin, God decided not to destroy the work of God's hands. In order to implement God's plan for the salvation of the world (special grace) through divine election, God prevents the world from self-destruction in the interim through God's work of conservation and governance. Accordingly, God is "making room for the story to continue," keeping things from falling apart (W.B. Yeats, Chinua Achebe).[55] The emphasis on *common* grace is clearly inclusive and confirms God's benevolence to all people, indeed to the whole of creation. This is strengthened by the critique of imperial conquest (symbolized by the Tower of Babel)—the prime biblical reference used to support a notion of common grace. However, the very distinction between common and special grace tends to undermine such inclusivity. How common, then, is common grace? Moreover, the reference to creation ordinances as God's main tool for maintenance proved disastrous in Nazi Germany and apartheid South Africa (where such categories were explicitly adopted and adapted). Is "law and order" really what is required, or should we expect something radically new to move away from an oppressive past? But what, then, about the need for some continuity and an affirmation of the goodness of God's creation? Can one do away completely with some form of such ordinances or "mandates" (Dietrich Bonhoeffer)?[56]

52. See Welker, *Creation and Reality*.

53. See Chitando and Conradie, "Praying for Rain?"

54. See my essay on God's work of conservation elsewhere in this volume for more detail.

55. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*.

56. See Bonhoeffer's essay on the "The Concrete Commandment and the Divine Mandates," in his *Ethics*, 388–407.

Nature Conservation

Our human responsibility to engage in nature conservation and nature preservation is recognized especially among some groups of evangelicals but also in the Catholic and Orthodox monastic traditions. This may be in response to concerns over ecological destruction, soil erosion, the loss of biodiversity, species extinction, deforestation, and the like. This is typically captured through an emphasis on responsible stewardship and/or (in Orthodox theologies) an extension of human priesthood to address environmental concerns. The notion of stewardship is much criticized in some ecumenical circles, but the emphasis on responsibility is widely welcomed. There is ample literature on stewardship, and this can be quite nuanced even if the metaphor as such is highly contested.[57] Here, the link between nature conservation and God's work of conservation and sustenance (as addressed under the rubric of God's providence) is obvious, if not always highlighted.

Sustainability[58]

There is, of course, a huge corpus of secular literature on sustainability, sustainable development, a sustainable society, and sustainable livelihoods. The term sustainability first gained global prominence, also in secular debates, at a conference on "The Future of Man and Society in a World of Science-Based Technology" hosted by the World Council of Churches (WCC) subunit on "Church and Society" in Bucharest (1974). The conference report acknowledges many impediments to hope but nevertheless expresses faith in God's providence that opens up new possibilities, even where these seem to be closed off by inequality, injustice, war, and environmental degradation.[59] Since that time, there have been many shifts and turns in secular discourse on sustainability, for example, moving from extending the use of nonrenewable resources ("limits to growth")[60] to the sustainable use of renewable resources (the Brundtland report),[61] to the carrying capacity of the land, to the absorption capacity of the atmosphere, to discourse on planetary boundaries. Theological discourse on sustainability is hardly ever framed in terms of the doctrine of providence, but it has

57. There is a huge corpus of ecumenical literature in this regard. For one critical overview, see Conradie, *Christianity and Earthkeeping*.

58. The discussion in this section draws on my recent essay, "What, Exactly, Needs to Be Sustained amidst a Changing Climate?"

59. See the WCC's report on "Science and Technology for Human Development."

60. See Meadows et al., *Limits to Growth*.

61. See the Brundtland report entitled *Our Common Future*.

obvious resonance with notions of *conservatio* understood as sustenance. Not surprisingly, the emphasis thus shifts from God's care to the human responsibility to ensure a sustainable future (see the notion of *concursus*). Yet, ultimately, one may say with Psalm 136 that it is God's mercy that sustains us forever.[62]

Natural "Evil"

Alongside discourse on structural evil in its many forms in conversation with the social sciences (see below), there is also considerable interest in natural sources of suffering in conversations between theology and the natural sciences, for example, in terms of natural catastrophes (often exacerbated by human factors), natural nonselection in biological evolution, sickness, fragility, degeneration, the role of predation and aggression among mammals, and so forth. Sometimes such natural sources of suffering are offered as an explanation for the emergence of human sin (through anxiety over finitude) and subsequently evil. As a result, the distinction between natural and social sources of suffering has become blurred. This, of course, raises the theodicy problem, namely to justify God's presence, sovereignty, and benevolence amid such overwhelming creaturely suffering.[63] Again, this is not necessarily linked with the theme of God's providence, but an affirmation of trust in God's care remains a response to the same underlying problem. In the "Anthropocene," as Clive Pearson observes, "[a]ll of a sudden, a change in the way the Earth System is understood lifts theodicy out of abstraction and places it within the hard realism of climate justice and possible endings."[64]

Structural Violence

In the wake of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, the focus of discussions of the theodicy problem shifted from natural causes of suffering (symbolized by the Lisbon earthquake)[65] to structural forms of evil and the ideologies that legitimize that.[66] Why does God allow evil to become so widespread? Can God not do something to overcome evil, to liberate the oppressed, to heal

62. See Conradie, "Is It Not God's Mercy That Nourishes and Sustains Us … Forever?"

63. In the context of ecotheology, see especially Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation; Theology in a Suffering World*.

64. Pearson, "Unwrapping Theodicy," 183. Pearson adds that, "For all the familiarity of the elements that make up this problem the term theodicy is seldom used in Oceania" (188).

65. For an extended comparison of Lisbon and Auschwitz as symbols of natural and social evil respectively, see Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*.

66. See especially Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil*.

the wounds of the inflicted? Arguably, after 1945, at least in the West, symbolized by Jürgen Moltmann,[67] but also in the East, symbolized by Kazoh Kitamori,[68] theological discourse became dominated by the theodicy problem. In the Global South, the focus is typically on forms of structural evil (colonialism and neocolonialism) but not necessarily on the theodicy problem. Instead, the focus is on social justice and perhaps questions on the relationship between God's justice and human struggles for liberation (*concursus*). Discourse on structural violence is readily extended to demands for ecojustice, given apocalyptic scenarios related to anthropogenic climate change, ocean acidification, and a rapid loss of biodiversity. Why does God not intervene to stop such catastrophes? Most theologians may wish to shy away from addressing this question, but it is not one that can be consistently avoided. There may be a wide range of responses, from prophetic resistance (in various liberation theologies) to apophatic unknowing, or (perhaps better) an interplay between these.[69]

Progression and Progress in History

In some secular debates, the nineteenth-century Western ideals of progress, based on the Enlightenment aspiration for rational control over "primitive chaos" and the presumed cultural sophistication (if not superiority) of Western civilization, remain prevalent if no longer as self-assured as they used to be. Such notions of progress emerged either in a naturalistic sense as the result of evolutionary forces in nature or in an idealistic sense as the unfolding of the Absolute Spirit (Hegel). Humans therefore play a decisive role in such evolutionary progress. Such notions of progress served as a functional replacement of Christian views of salvation so that Christianity itself could be readily replaced by demonstrable progress and increasing prosperity through the production of wealth and, given the role of labor unions, the distribution of such wealth. Following the social gospel paradigm, such progress could be associated with the coming of God's reign, bringing heaven down to earth. Alternatively, the nineteenth-century missionary zeal to proclaim the gospel to all nations to hasten in the kingdom served as an ecclesial version of such "progress." One finds this logic still embedded in linear notions of sustained economic growth, socio-economic development, the United Nations' sustainable development goals, the advance of modern science, technological innovation, advances in food production and medicine, and, more recently, the Fourth

67. This is marked by Jürgen Moltmann's *The Crucified God*.

68. See Kitamori, *The Theology of the Pain of God*.

69. For one recent example of such an apophatic theology, see Catherine Keller's *Political Theology of the Earth*.

Industrial Revolution. In ecumenical discourse, the growth paradigm is widely criticized, while notions of sustainability are questioned insofar as that assumes economic growth.[70] Nevertheless, there is a need to come to terms with advances in science and technological innovation, also in terms of artificial intelligence and ever more sophisticated military weapons.

Marxist and Other Utopias

Marxist critiques recognize the capitalist underbelly of such economic notions of progress but maintain an emphasis on the directionality of history, namely in the form of dialectic materialism towards the utopia of a classless society. Notions of the need, if not the necessity, for social transformation may be found in many other social movements, for example, towards emancipation from slavery and serfdom (against feudalism), women's emancipation (against patriarchal oppression), socio-economic liberation, decolonization, an inclusive democracy (against divisions of class and caste), an end to human trafficking, ending poverty and malnutrition, freedom of sexual expression (against heteronormativity), freedom of religious affiliation, and freedom from religious tutelage. In each case, such social transformation assumes that history moves or should move in a certain direction. Again, notions of God's providence are not necessarily referenced, but such movements also cannot be separated from God's governance in history.

Ecomodernist Optimism

One may also mention ecomodernist forms of optimism maintaining that the world is becoming a better place, if not for all humans and other animals, then at least on average, given the availability of food, disease control, a reduction of infant mortality, household technology, communication, longevity, and so forth. Some argue that there is a slow but still remarkable overall tendency to reduce violence through participatory decision-making, not only within countries but also globally (e.g., Steven Pinker).[71] There is also the contested thesis of Francis Fukuyama that history has reached its "end," given that no attractive and viable alternatives have emerged beyond a (capitalist?) market economy and a participatory (liberal?) democracy.[72] If there are indeed such alternatives (e.g., in the form of a "new economics"), then the burden of proof is on proponents to demonstrate their viability.

70. See, e.g., Béguin-Austin, *Sustainable Growth—Contradiction in Terms?* And for a recent overview, Conradie, "What, Exactly, Needs to be Sustained amidst a Changing Climate?"

71. See Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*.

72. See Fukuyama, *The End of History*.

At the same time, there are diverging models of a market economy and democracy so that further clarification is required. Ecumenical discourse on democracy and human rights, as well as on human and planetary well-being (intertwined as such themes are with notions of providence), cannot but be influenced by such secular debates, also where such optimism is subject to critiques from the perspective of the Global South.

Heading Towards a Catastrophe?

By contrast, there are also many prophets of doom that agree on the directionality of history but believe that industrialized civilizations are heading towards a catastrophe that can no longer be avoided.[73] If we are really doomed, what now?[74] Yet others place their hope in extraterrestrial explorations and astrobiology. Such varied secular assumptions are not necessarily legitimized in Christian theology, but insofar as these are not resisted, they may well become tacitly assumed. Christian eschatology can hardly be aligned with either an optimist or a pessimist teleology, but it does tend to envisage antinomies, contradictions, and tragic conflicts, without, however, succumbing to despair.[75] This should temper any feverish expectation for an ultimate triumph over evil. The question then remains how Christian eschatology relates to God's governance in history and therefore providence.

Discerning God's Finger in (Human) History

If such secular debates are necessarily reflected in theological discourses in one way or another, few are bold enough to discern God's finger in human and planetary history. In previous centuries, notions of a "Holy Roman Empire," crusades *in hoc signo*, or the civilizing influence of the British Empire could be taken almost for granted in some contexts. An earlier generation was still able to reflect on the kingdom of God in America,[76] even on "*our* manifest destiny" or "God in South Africa,"[77] but most would refrain from any overt nationalist interests. There may be consensus that the Triune God is a God of history, but how God acts in history and whether God is steering history in some direction is regarded as riddled with so many controversies that only apophatic responses

73. See the earlier examples of Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* and Arnold Toynbee's *A Study of History*, each with multiple editions.

74. See Scranton, *We're Doomed. Now What?*

75. See already Reinhold Niebuhr, *Faith and History*, 32.

76. See H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*.

77. See Nolan, *God in South Africa*.

seem viable. Indeed, God's ways are not our ways (Isa 55:8) and cannot be easily traced (Rom 11:33–34). Clearly the presence of God's finger in history cannot be discerned merely from arbitrarily selected events, nor from extraordinary events only. Any event, including the exodus and the execution of Jesus, does not provide proof of God's providence by itself.[78] It is only the Lamb that was slain who is able to open the book of history to discern evidence of God's reign (Rev 5:9).

The temptation to refrain from discerning God's presence in history leads almost inevitably to secularism or atheism. Other options include gnostic individualism or apocalyptic otherworldliness, but in both cases, God's care is no longer to be found in worldly affairs, in the flow of history.[79] With some Jewish scholars, there is a need to affirm that the God of Israel cannot be the God of past or future unless this God is still God of the present.[80] What, then, is this God up to amid the "Anthropocene"?[81]

A Theology of History

While there were ample contributions on God and world history in Western theologies up to the 1970s (e.g., Hendrikus Berkhof, Oscar Cullmann, Langdon Gilkey, Kornelis Miskotte, Jürgen Moltmann, Reinhold Niebuhr, Richard Niebuhr, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Paul Tillich, Arnold van Ruler, see also Rubem Alves), few nowadays seem to dare to speak of the meaning of history. Some Western theologians prefer to avoid a theological interpretation of history altogether.[82] The question of the meaning of history is deemed meaningless. Accordingly, history as such has no meaning, although we can *give* it meaning; we impose a meaning upon our constructions of history. Instead of considering the general direction of history, the focus shifts to the meaning of this moment (*kairos*) in history for me, perhaps for us, today (Tillich, Bonhoeffer). For others, the coming kingdom of God no longer arrives through a process of development on the basis of maintaining given orders in society but suddenly, through a disruption of unjust orders. The reign of God does not emerge through the steady influence of the past on the present but through the radical negation of the present by the promised future. With Rubem Alves, however, history is the medium through which God creates a future that is not yet there,

78. See Berkouwer, *The Providence of God*, 161–87.

79. Fackenheim, *God's Presence in History*, 25.

80. Rephrased from Fackenheim, *God's Presence in History*, 31.

81. See again volume 2 of the *An Earthed Faith* series, entitled *How Would We Know What God Is Up To?*

82. For a discussion, see Hodgson, *God in History*.

breaking the present open towards the future.[83] In one way or another, therefore, Black, feminist/womanist, Indigenous, liberation, queer, postcolonial, and decolonial theologies further undermine universalist Western assumptions on history/his-story.

There nevertheless appears to be a market for popularized one-volume histories—of human evolution (Jared Diamond and many others), of humanity (Yuval Harari), of nearly everything (Bill Bryson), even of time itself (Stephen Hawking).[84] Either way, given the shift from the Holocene to the "Anthropocene," this task of interpreting the meaning and direction of history is one that cannot be avoided.

Providence and the Critique of Ideology

There is an obvious danger that the doctrine of creation may serve to legitimize the interests of the ruling class. As Vitor Westhelle has it, where landlords see the beauty of God's creation in looking over their estate, serfs and the landless only see gates and fences designed to keep them out.[85] The same applies to providence—as conservation tends to be understood in terms of God maintaining order in nature and society against the forces of chaos so that any oppressive "law and order" is easily legitimized as God's will. Likewise, God's governance in history is perceived by the victors of history, telling the story in ways that reinforce constellations of power and privilege. Another example is the way in which "nature" is understood in the wake of the Enlightenment as an "object" to be scientifically dissected and objectively researched for the sake of human knowledge and using "natural resources" for the sake of economic growth. This remains a colonial and colonizing way of perceiving God's creation, where the one digests (the colon in *colon*ization) the available resources at the expense of others.[86] Indeed, belief in God's providence may well serve the purpose of acquiescence: "Providence is a tool invented by the rich to lull those whom they oppress into silent endurance. The rich have no need of virtue or faith for their desires are met without them. [...] Providence is either a tool invented for oppression or itself an instrument of injustice."[87] Should we,

83. See Alves, *A Theology of Human Hope*.

84. See Diamond, *The Third Chimpanzee*; Harari, *Sapiens*; Bryson, *A Short History of Nearly Everything*; Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*.

85. See Westhelle, "Creation Motifs in the Search for a Vital Space."

86. For a discussion of this etymological link between colon and colonization, see, e.g., Vaai, "A Dirtified God." Again, I wish to acknowledge Upolu Vaai's input here.

87. Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, 182.

then, renounce the "god-trick" of a generalized, placeless, and disembodied vision of God's providence altogether?[88]

Kenosis or Theosis?

Finally, two apparently contrasting views on the direction of history may be mentioned. The one finds a kenotic tendency in the history of the universe[89] that is exemplified in the incarnation, ministry, and death of Jesus Christ. This kenotic "principle" may also be read into "deep incarnation" (Niels Henrik Gregersen),[90] showing how suffering is built into and becomes fruitful in the history of biological evolution. The other expresses the typically Orthodox hope for divinization (*theosis*), for either becoming divine or for partaking in the life of the Triune communion. While the notion of kenosis perhaps has a rough secular equivalent in Stoicism, the hope for divinization is epitomized by the European Enlightenment and the subsequent critique of religion: God not only became human in Jesus Christ, but the death of god has to be proclaimed so that humans may become divine instead. This reading of history is exemplified in secular hopes for artificial, silicon-based forms of intelligence, for an Internet of all things, and indeed the hope to become divine as *Homo excelsior* or even *Homo deus*.[91] As Pope Francis astutely observes, "Artificial intelligence and the latest technological innovations start with the notion of a human being with no limits, whose abilities and possibilities can be infinitely expanded thanks to technology. In this way, the technocratic paradigm monstrously feeds upon itself."[92]

Challenges Posed by the "Anthropocene"

There is no need to resolve the obvious tensions between these notions of providence that are found not only but certainly also in Christian ecotheology. It may suffice to recognize these diverging notions of providence in order to add other possibilities and to ensure some form of ecumenical conversation across the many divides that characterize contemporary ecotheologies globally.[93]

88. See Clark and Szerszynski, *Planetary Social Thought*, 173.

89. See Ellis and Murphy, *On the Moral Nature of the Universe*; also Rolston, "Kenosis and Nature."

90. See Gregersen, *Incarnation*.

91. See Harari, *Homo Deus*, Lynas, *The God Species*.

92. Pope Francis, *Laudate Deum*, §21.

93. In the context of contributions to this series, see, e.g., Mendoza and Zachariah, eds. *Decolonizing Ecotheology*.

What is at least clear is that the recognition of a shift from the Holocene to the "Anthropocene" has again raised questions about the linearity of history. Such linearity does not necessarily imply any progression or teleology, but things clearly do not always remain the same. Does *conservatio* mean that God will keep the earth in the Holocene epoch forever? Or should the focus be on God's governance, on a God of history who brings about an end to unjust social orders? What is it that has to end, and what may one hope could be sustained beyond the shift to the "Anthropocene"? How does one avoid imperialist and universalist claims in speaking of God's *gubernatio*? An apophatic response seems more appropriate, given the abuse of any notion of providence to legitimize the rise of industrialized capitalism, colonial conquest, and a consumerist society. There are moments when we ought not to speak. But then, of course, there are also times when we must speak.

Yet the challenges posed by the "Anthropocene" to Christian (eco) theology remain. Ever since the rise of Greek philosophy, there has been an attempt to demythologize history, to clear it from Homeric gods. Contemporary Jewish and Christian theologians seem to follow suit. Just as God needs to be expelled from nature by modern scientists, it seems that God also needs to be expelled from history.[94] But in the "Anthropocene," a clear distinction between nature (God's *conservatio*) and (human) history (God's *gubernatio*) can no longer be maintained, as the impact of some human cultures is now inscribed in the atmosphere for hundreds of thousands of years to come and in the Earth's rock layers for millions of years to come.

How could any retrieval of God's providence respond to that? There seem to be relatively few options available. One is to (plead for a) return to a pre-Jewish cyclical view of history by retrieving Indigenous notions of wisdom. If divine providence and the evils of history prove incompatible, is it not best to disconnect God from history altogether? Or perhaps history follows a completely random path in which no pattern or divine presence can be discerned? Another is to boldly adopt some form of teleology, finding something like the kingdom of God at the "end" of history. Any such notion of progression towards a final goal always comes at the risk of underplaying the impact of human sin, to which God's providence is supposedly a response. A third is a gnostic escape from history in order to find what abides despite historical fluctuations. There is also an apophatic option to live with current contradictions, finding God *sub contrario*. Is this an escape mechanism as well? What, then, about the hope for the consummation of God's work? From the perspective of faith in God's providence, the least one may say, following Rowan Williams, is that "God's

94. See Fackenheim, *God's Presence in History*, 4–5.

faithfulness stands, assuring us that even in the most appalling disaster, love will not let go."[95] In the essay on God's governance in history included in this volume, such options will be explored in more detail.

Perhaps the core intuition of the Christian notion of providence is to linger a bit longer in God's work of *conservatio*, *gubernatio*, and *concursus*, before bringing God's work of salvation, the church and its ministries and missions, and God's work of consummation into play too quickly. Admittedly, each of these themes cannot be addressed adequately in terms of the doctrine of providence alone. God's governance, for example, is best discussed with reference to the reign of God, Christ's sitting "at the right hand of the Father,"[96] and the role of the Paraclete in the rule of law. Likewise, any adequate theology of history cannot be reduced to God's governance in terms of the doctrine of providence but would require reflection on the Christological dialectic between cross and resurrection and on the Pneumatological relatedness of proton, history, and eschatological consummation.

Nevertheless, providence cannot be subsumed under such other categories either. It has a place of its own, as contested as that may be. In other words, there may be a need to make a bit of room for the story to continue ...[97]

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95. Rowan Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 190.

96. This Christological emphasis on Christ sitting at the right hand of the Father (in the present tense) is, as may be expected, a core affirmation in Karl Barth's treatment of the *Christian* doctrine of providence. He also points to Colossians 1:17, where it is said that in Christ all things hold together (συνέστηκεν) and to Hebrews 1:3 affirming that all things are upheld (φέρων) by the powerful word of the Son sitting at the right hand of the Majesty on high. See Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.3*, 35. For Barth, God as Father is not a stranger, alien, or an enemy of the creature, or the subject of a father-complex, but the Father of Jesus Christ and therefore *our* beloved Father (146).

97. This is a reference to the title of the companion volume on God's providence, edited by Ernst Conradie and Upolu Luma Vaai.

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Common Grace and Sustainability: Is God Ordering or Causing Chaos in the Aftermath of the Holocene?[1]

Telling the Story Still Hinges on the Noah Story

"How could the suffering of God's creatures in the 'Anthropocene' be reconciled with trust in God's loving care?" In the Reformed tradition, such a question would typically be addressed in terms of reflection on God's providence. Accordingly, it is precisely through God's providence that God is making room for the story to continue. This story hinges on Genesis 6:5–8:

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> 5 The Lord saw that the wickedness of humans was great in the earth and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. 6 And the Lord was sorry that he had made humans on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. 7 So the Lord said, "I will blot out from the earth the humans I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air—for I am sorry that I have made them." 8 But Noah found favor in the sight of the Lord [...] (NRSVUE).

In short, following the spread of evil in the world, God decided (as per Gen 6:7) to destroy[2] humans and with them all other living creatures. Although Noah's flood is portrayed as a primeval happening and clearly not as a historical event, it is well situated amid the melting ice that flooded Mesopotamia at the advent of the Holocene. In the aftermath of the destruction of the flood, as the story goes, God started anew through a covenant with Noah, his family, and indeed all living creatures who exited from the ark (Gen 9:10) that would allow the descendants of Noah to "be fruitful and multiply" and to "abound on the earth" (Gen 9:7).

As the subsequent chapters of Genesis indicate, God's covenant with Noah did not quite go according to plan. Following the rise of imperialism symbolized by Babel (Gen 11), God made yet another plan, namely through the election of Abram. Then follows the history of salvation from Abraham to Moses and the exodus from Egypt, from David to the Babylonian exile, from the failures of reconstruction and of becoming a light for all nations to the coming of the Messiah, and from the formation of the church to God's mission to reach the ends of the earth. In hindsight we know that this story of Israel, of the church, and of God's mission did not quite go according to plan either (to put this mildly), because evil continued to spread despite (and often because of) the advent of Christianity. The impact of such evil is now evident in the so-called "Anthropocene" and will be embedded in the Earth's rock layers for millions of years to come.

Arguably, the story of Noah continues to form the backdrop of the history of salvation. The ark itself may be a symbol of rescue and therefore redemption, but by itself this does not provide a long-term solution. This is why the covenant with Noah is crucial. Without the covenant with Noah, the rest of the story would not be possible. Clearly, this covenant is not to be equated with salvation, but it made room for the story to continue. Despite the change in food regulations (Gen 9:1–6) it provided parameters to minimize violence so that all living creatures could flourish (the דָּמָו, i.e., "blood" in Gen 9:4 being the symbol of life). It also serves as God's way of self-restraining so that God would not again destroy the world that God created. It puts a self-check

2. The Hebrew word הַחֲמֵא in Genesis 6:7 can be translated as destroy or blot out, as in blot out from God's memory (see Ex 17:14). Karl Barth understands this as abandoning creation to chaos, to annihilation or self-annihilation. See his *Church Dogmatics III.3*, 78, and the critique of Barth's position by Van Ruler below.

on God.[3] There is also the enigmatic figure of the "restrainer" (κατέχων, often understood as the state) who holds back the spread of evil (2 Thess 2:7) in anticipation of Christ's παρουσία.[4]

To add "arguably" here is to acknowledge that not all Christians follow this storyline. In Christian ecotheology, several different storylines are adopted. Much of this hinges on the question whether the main problem is regarded as the spread of human sin resulting in structural violence, or whether natural suffering is emphasized or the interplay between them. In short, is the problem sin as guilt, sin as power, or the tragic dimension of creaturely existence? What is it that we need to be saved from? These are contrasting visions,[5] where deep confessional divides on nature and grace are still at play.[6] I will return to this, but I need to acknowledge my Reformed roots in this regard.[7]

A formative expression of a Reformed confession of God's providence is found in article 13 of the Belgic Confession (1561). It is worth quoting here in full:

> We believe that this good God, after creating all things, did not abandon them to chance or fortune but leads and governs them according to his holy will, in such a way that nothing happens in this world without God's orderly arrangement. Yet God is not the author of, and cannot be charged with, the sin that occurs. For God's power and goodness are so great and incomprehensible that God arranges and does his works very well and justly even when the devils and the wicked act unjustly. We do not wish to inquire with undue curiosity into what God does that surpasses human understanding and is beyond our ability to comprehend. But in all humility and reverence we adore the just judgments of God, which are hidden from us, being content to be Christ's disciples, so as to learn only what God shows us in the Word, without going beyond those limits. This doctrine gives us unspeakable comfort since it teaches us that nothing can happen to us by chance but only by the arrangement of our gracious heavenly Father, who watches over us with fatherly care, sustaining all creatures under his

3. See Havea, "Covenant," 54.

4. For a discussion, see Moltmann, *Ethics of Hope*, 13–15.

5. Arnold van Ruler maintains that these visions are contradictory: "Here there is a contradiction between the Greek (and generally pagan) and the Christian analysis of being human. The one excludes the other: tragedy and guilt." See *This Earthly Life Matters*, 168.

6. Compare, e.g., discourse on common grace with the positions adopted by Matthew Fox and Joseph Sittler. In his *Essays on Nature and Grace*, Joseph Sittler explores the significance of (saving) grace for transforming nature but does not employ the notion of common grace. By contrast, in *Original Blessing* Matthew Fox seeks to understand God's work of creation as the primary form of grace so that creation and salvation tend to become fused. One may say that there is simply no ecumenical consensus on the relation between nature and grace, also not in the field of Christian ecotheology.

7. I have discussed these contrasting visions at some length in a project on "Redeeming Sin?" See the monograph with that title and my reflections on the project in "The Project and Prospects of 'Redeeming Sin?'"

> lordship, so that not one of the hairs on our heads (for they are all numbered) nor even a little bird can fall to the ground without the will of our Father. In this thought we rest, knowing that God holds in check the devils and all our enemies, who cannot hurt us without divine permission and will. For that reason we reject the damnable error of the Epicureans, who say that God does not get involved in anything and leaves everything to chance.[8]

In the subsequent Reformed tradition, such provision, redescribed as God's providence, is traditionally unpacked with reference to the three dimensions of God's work of conservation (*conservatio*), God's governance in history (*gubernatio*), and the synergy between divine, human, and other forms of agency (*concursus*).[9]

In this essay, I will focus on God's work of conservation and will address the other two themes in the other essays included in this volume. More specifically, I will explore the notion of "common grace" that is employed in one branch of the Reformed tradition. The question that I will pose here is whether the notion of common grace needs to be discarded together with any reference to the orders of creation, or whether this remains a necessary precondition for any retrieval of the notion of God's providence. Moreover, can common grace be employed to capture the theological significance of contemporary secular discourse on sustainability, or should it be completely discarded? I will even entertain the question whether discourse on sustainability itself may need to be discarded given the shift from the Holocene to the "Anthropocene." If Holocene stability is no more, what then? Is the danger not that discourse on sustainable development seeks to sustain an unjust global economic order as long as possible? Is it not necessary to disrupt such order? Is discourse on ecojustice (from the Global South) compatible with discourse on sustainability (from the Global North), or do these represent contrasting visions? Put bluntly: is God always creating order from chaos, or is God perhaps causing chaos to allow for a new dispensation to emerge "from the edges of chaos"?[10]

Neo-Calvinism and Its Legacy

The notion of common grace is associated especially with the names of Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) and Herman Bavinck (1854–1921). This Dutch

8. For this translation of the Belgic Confession, see https://www.crcna.org/sites/default/files/BelgicConfession.pdf [last accessed October 14, 2024].

9. For a thorough recent discussion of the doctrine of providence in the Reformed tradition, see Fergusson, *The Providence of God*, 77–109. My contribution here is constructive more than historical.

10. The allusion is to chaos theory (employed in thermodynamics but also in evolutionary biology) that allows for the possibility of new forms of order to emerge (through self-organization) "from the edge of chaos," i.e., in states far from equilibrium. I will not explore the fertile science-and-theology debates on chaos and complexity here.

school of "neo-Calvinism" may be understood as an attempt to break out of the rigid scholasticism of Reformed orthodoxy by returning afresh to the theology of John Calvin. If theology is a matter of faith seeking understanding, then faith cannot be fixated on its cognitive content, or on propositional truth claims, but has to be rooted in a relationship based on trust in God's sustained loyalty not only to God's covenant partner but to the whole of creation despite the continuing impact of human sin. Faith is a matter of personal knowledge emerging from an ongoing, dynamic relationship built upon reading the Bible and prayer, exegesis, and proclamation. The content of faith therefore cannot be captured in fixed doctrinal truths (as per orthodoxy or the subsequent Princeton fundamentalism) but requires listening to God's Word, always anew, and reflecting on its meaning, for us, today.

Such rootedness of the Christian faith in personal piety did not preclude but precisely enabled the this-worldly orientation of neo-Calvinism (the mystic enabling the prophetic). Kuyper's widely cited comment is that "[t]here is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!"[11] In its origins, neo-Calvinism was an anti-elitist movement, expressing a somewhat populist concern for the "*kleine luyden*" ("little people") in the Netherlands. This still allowed for a wide range of political sentiments, from the far right (including some of Kuyper's followers while he became the Dutch Prime Minister as leader of the Anti-Revolutionary Party) to the far left (a sustained concern for social justice).[12] Wherever neo-Calvinism reverts to a rigid Reformed orthodoxy, it seems to play in the hands of the political right, not least in South Africa, as such orthodoxy becomes a handy tool to maintain authority and therefore the status quo.

This branch of the Reformed tradition of Dutch origin had a decisive influence on my own theological education. Many of my teachers studied at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam when the influence of Kuyper and Bavinck was still tangible. The role of supervisors such as Gerrit Berkouwer and the missiologist J.H. Bavinck on a generation of South African Reformed theologians such as Jaap Durand, Johan Heyns, Willie Jonker, Bethel Müller, Hennie Rossouw, Flip Theron, Wentzel van Huyssteen, and Conrad Wethmar cannot be underestimated. Although Berkouwer's theology remained rooted in that of Bavinck, he also read Karl Barth with considerable

11. This famous comment from his inaugural speech at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (1880) was formulated Christologically. See Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper*, 488.

12. This concern for social justice could be symbolized by Nicholas Wolterstorff's *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*.

appreciation,[13] over and against some of his more rigidly Reformed colleagues such as Valentijn Hepp. This, too, had a significant influence on Reformed theology in South Africa.

Nevertheless, neo-Calvinism had a disastrous impact in the South African context. Most of the apartheid theologians were also attracted to neo-Calvinism, especially to Kuyper and the philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd. Remarkably, apartheid theology understood itself as theologically orthodox (returning to "the old paths"), in reaction to late nineteenth-century theological and political "liberalism," which was also evident in the then Cape Colony. At the very core of apartheid theology was a particular retrieval of the notion of common grace, understood in terms of the so-called orders of creation that restrain the spread of evil in the world so that God's work of salvation (special grace) has the necessary room to proceed. These orders included in the South African context an emphasis on the categories of race, ethnicity, *volk* (people), and culture. This emphasis on the orders of creation was vehemently critiqued by a number of South African Reformed theologians, precisely by drawing on Barth's theology. In addition to the names mentioned above, one may add those of David Bosch (who studied under Oscar Cullmann in Basel) and John de Gruchy (who was deeply influenced by Dietrich Bonhoeffer).

At a personal level, after my basic training, I refrained from engaging with any Dutch theology, did my doctoral research on the Catholic theologian David Tracy, and then started working on ecotheology. It was only when I started with long-term projects on "Hope for the Earth?"[14] and especially on creation and salvation[15] that I rediscovered the work of Herman Bavinck and, especially, Arnold van Ruler.[16]

On Common Grace

The concept of common grace is derived from John Calvin, building on insights from Augustine.[17] Even though Calvin did not use the phrase

13. See Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace*.

14. See Conradie, *Hope for the Earth*.

15. See, especially, Conradie, *Saving the Earth?*

16. See the volume of essays by Van Ruler, *This Earthly Life Matters*, that Douglas Lawrie translated and that I edited.

17. See this quotation from Augustine in Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory*, 12: "The power, omnipotence, and all-sustaining strength of the Creator is the cause of the subsistence of every creature. And if this power were ever to cease ruling created things, their species would at once cease to be and all of nature would collapse [...] For if God were to withdraw his rule from it, the world could not stand, even for the blink of an eye." The reference is to Augustine, *De Genesis ad Literam*, IV.12.32. One may say that belief in God's providence is therefore the inverse of an affirmation of the contingency of creation.

frequently, this was core to his understanding of God's providence. As a humanist scholar, Calvin shared in a positive appraisal of nature that was typically of the Renaissance – as the expression "theater of his glory" suggests. However, Calvin sensed that the cosmic and societal foundations of the late medieval world had crumbled. In the face of the horrors of overwhelming chaos, Calvin, the refugee, could not put his trust in the inherent stability of cosmic or social order but only in the Word of God. After the fall of humanity, any continuing cosmic or social order depends on God's providence, "on the constant sustaining and restraining providence of God which prevents them from falling into chaos."[18] Common grace is the source of all human virtue and accomplishment, even among unbelievers and despite humanity's radical depravity. Such goodness is therefore ascribed not to humans but to the benevolence of God toward sinful humanity.[19] The order does become embedded in the material world itself and allows for its continuity in time, but without God holding the world in God's hands, moment by moment, such order would collapse.[20] This is the ultimate source of the stability, regularity, and continuity in all of creation.[21]

Likewise, ongoing wars, injustices, tyranny, and revolutions provide ample evidence of the moral disorder in society. God nevertheless reins in (Calvin employs the image of a bridle) such disorder, restraining the wicked and the work of the devil by governing all events in order to establish a just social order. God hinders the spread of evil and permits it only in order to ultimately overcome evil, as is epitomized by the cross. As Schreiner puts

18. Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory*, 3.

19. See Van Leeuwen, "Herman Bavinck's 'Common Grace'," 36.

20. Put graphically, Calvin (following Basil) sensed that the earth is spheric and not flat. But if so, why does the earth (which is heavier than water or air) not fall? Even if it is flat, how does it float on water? What does it rest upon? For Calvin, that could only be because God prevents it from falling: "Nothing in the world is stable except as it is sustained by the hand of God." See Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory*, 26–27. The quotation is from Calvin's commentary on Psalm 104:5. Protestant astronomers such as Kepler arguably turned their telescopes to the heavens to find God's hand in the movement of the stars. Newton would later explain this in terms of gravity but still saw gravity as God's instrument. The need for a continuous act of God to preserve each creature became increasingly superfluous given the principle of inertia. As Wolfhart Pannenberg observes, the doctrine of providence as *conservatio* never recovered from this blow and is rarely addressed. Note that the need for such preservation is thus separated from the spread of evil. See Pannenberg, "Providence, God, and Eschatology" in *The Historicity of Nature*, 59.

21. See Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory*, 22. She adds: "To Calvin, the inherent character of creation was not conducive to order; only a great divine power could preserve the grand orderliness we perceive in the universe. The stability of nature depends upon 'the continual rejoicing of God in his works'. If God ceased to rejoice therein, if he ceased to give vigor to the earth or if he looked upon creation with wrath, the sphere of nature would collapse into disorder. Therefore, Calvin believed that behind the beauty of nature lay its fragility, dependence, and precarious nature which required the continual preservation of God, for without his providence the stars would collide, the earth would fall down, and water would gush forth and engulf the earth" (28). It is through the "bridle of providence" that God "restrained the wicked and held nature in check" (36).

it, God the Father is no "watchtower divinity" who merely "permits" nature or history to run its course but exercises God's sovereign will in all events.[22] In addition to general providence (common grace), for Calvin there is also special providence in that God controls every distinct movement and particular event, even if our experience may point to the contrary (again as epitomized by the cross). If so, God may use our adversity to bring us closer to God.[23]

This notion of common grace was retrieved by Abraham Kuyper, the formidable Dutch pastor, journalist, theologian, and politician.[24] In the massive three volumes of meditations collected in *De Gemeene Gratie* he sketched how such common grace was still at work amid the rapid social change of the late nineteenth century, to restrain evil, to maintain some stability and to make room for God's special grace (on which he also wrote extensively). He employed the term re-creation (*herschepping*) following God's compassionate decision after the fall of humanity not to destroy creation, neither to replace creation with a completely new creation, but to restrain the spread of demonic powers and catastrophic destruction in a creation still beloved by God.[25]

Such a notion of common grace was further developed by Kuyper's erudite colleague Herman Bavinck, especially in two essays translated as "Common Grace" and "Calvin and Common Grace." Following Calvin, Bavinck describes common grace in the following way: "God did not leave sin alone to do its destructive work. He had and, after the fall, continued to have a purpose for his creation; he interposed common grace between sin and the creation—a grace that, while it does not inwardly renew, nevertheless restrains and compels. All that is good and true has its origin in this grace, including the good we see in fallen man. The light still does shine in the darkness. The spirit of God makes its home and works in all the creation."[26]

On this basis he introduces a distinction between common grace and special grace:

> Even so, sin is a power, a principle, that has penetrated deeply into all forms of created life. The organism of the world itself has been affected. Left to itself, sin would have made desolate and destroyed all things. But God has interposed his grace and his covenant between sin and the world. By his common grace

22. Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory*, 30.

23. See Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 179, 183.

24. I have discussed Kuyper's notion of common grace at some length in an extensive essay entitled "Abraham Kuyper's Legacy for Contemporary Ecotheology: Some Reflections from within the South African Context," 3–146. The discussion in this section partially draws on that essay.

25. Kuyper, *De Gemeene Gratie I*, 243–50.

26. Bavinck, "Common Grace," 51.

> he restrains sin with its power to dissolve and destroy. Yet common grace is not enough. It compels but it does not change; it restrains but does not conquer. Unrighteousness breaks through its fences again and again. To save the world, nothing less was needed than the immeasurable greatness of the divine power, the working of his great might which he accomplished in Christ when he raised him from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places (Eph. 1:19, 20). To save the world required nothing less than the fullness of his grace and the omnipotence of his love.[27]

What is at stake in this distinction between special grace and common grace is an understanding of the relationship between nature and grace and related distinctions between gospel and culture, general revelation and special revelation, general providence and special providence,[28] revelation and experience, faith and reason, science and theology, being human and being Christian, church and society, the Sabbath and the workday, and so forth.[29]

Bavinck develops this notion of common grace polemically over and against Roman Catholic, Anabaptist, and Socinian positions that were in his view still dominant by the late nineteenth century.[30] For him, the gospel assumes a fundamental distinction between sin and grace, not nature and grace. Grace is not opposed to nature but is in a sense itself natural (and thus common). Nature is reborn by grace: "Grace does not remain outside or above or beside nature but rather permeates and wholly renews it."[31] Likewise, God's work of salvation is not opposed to creation but is best understood as re-creation. This is contrasted with the Roman Catholic distinction between natural and supernatural religion where grace (*donum superadditum*) supplements nature so that natural knowledge of God is supplemented by revealed knowledge. Through the sacraments working *ex opere operato*, the church enables grace to infuse a human being, making him or her capable of good works flowing forth from the supernatural fountain of love.[32]

27. Bavinck, "Common Grace," 61.

28. It may be noted that, in Reformed orthodoxy, the distinction between general (*providentia generalis*) and special providence (*providentia specialis*) refers to God's governance in the whole world order as such, as opposed to in the church and among the faithful. A further distinction was made between ordinary and extraordinary providence, namely God's governance through the laws embedded in nature and history vis-à-vis in the form of miracles. See Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.3*, 184–85. I concur with David Fergusson that such distinctions need to be blurred somewhat as God's care is more polyphonic (but not cacophonic) than such distinctions suggest. See his *The Providence of God*, 26, 342.

29. Bavinck, "Common Grace," 56.

30. See Bavinck, "Common Grace," 55: "At the end of our century, the divinization and vilification of man and the adoration and denigration of nature are strangely mixed together."

31. Bavinck, "Common Grace," 59.

32. See Bavinck, "Common Grace," 47.

According to Bavinck, both the Socinians and the Anabaptists rejected the Roman Catholic harmony between the natural and the supernatural (grace), albeit in opposite ways. The Anabaptist tradition rejects nature for an otherworldly supernatural grace while the Socinians (proto-modernists) reject the supernatural and consequently deify nature and culture. Bavinck explains: "The Socinians denigrate the *ordo supernaturalis* [supernatural order] while the Anabaptists do the same to the *ordo naturalis* [natural order]. The former criticize the central mysteries of the faith—the trinity, the incarnation, and the atonement; the latter set themselves in opposition to the natural order of affairs in family, state, and society as these are recognized by Rome. The Socinians misconstrued the *gratia specialis* and retained nothing besides nature; the Anabaptists scorn the *gratia communis* and acknowledge nothing besides grace. [...] Thus the one group was conformed to the world, while the other practiced world-flight."[33]

By contrast, Bavinck argues, Calvinism entails the reformation of the natural.[34] Special grace is not absolutely but only accidentally necessary. It became necessary only because of sin, which is itself accidental in the sense that nature is not in itself sinful so that sin does not belong to the essence of things.[35] On this basis, Bavinck explains the Reformed notion of re-creation, that grace restores nature and allows it to flourish again. Christ did come to destroy the works of the devil but also to restore the works of the Father. Separatism and world-flight (escapism) are nothing but a repudiation of the first article of the Creed.[36] Bavinck explains: "The Christian religion does not, therefore, have the task of creating a new supernatural order of things. It does not intend to institute a totally new, heavenly kingdom such as Rome intends in the church and the Anabaptists undertook at Munster. Christianity does not introduce a single substantial foreign element into the creation. It creates no new cosmos but rather makes the cosmos new. It restores what was corrupted by sin. It atones the guilty and cures what is sick; the wounded it heals."[37]

What, then, is the role of common grace? Let me allow Bavinck again to explain at some length:

> While it is true that the world has been corrupted by sin, it nevertheless remains the work of the Father, the Creator of heaven and earth. Of his own will he maintains it by his covenant, and by his *gratia communis* he powerfully opposes the destructive might of sin. He fills the hearts of men with nourishment and joy

33. Bavinck, "Common Grace," 53.

34. See Bavinck, "Common Grace," 63.

35. Bavinck, "Common Grace," 59.

36. See Bavinck, "Common Grace," 60.

37. Bavinck, "Common Grace," 61.

> and does not leave himself without a witness among them. He pours out upon them numberless gifts and benefits. Families [*gezinnen*], races [*geslachten*],[38] and peoples [*volken*] he binds together with natural love and affection. He allows societies and states to spring up that the citizens might live in peace and security. Wealth and well-being he grants them that the arts and sciences can prosper. And by his revelation in nature and history he ties their hearts and consciences to the invisible, suprasensible world and awakens in them a sense of worship and virtue. The entirety of the rich life of nature and society exists thanks to God's common grace.[39]

Note how Bavinck in this way attributes a legitimate power and authority not only to the state, civil society, and family but also to culture, science, and the arts. Likewise, Kuyper treats each of these aspects at some length in volume 3 of *De Gemeene Gratie* and in his famous *Lectures on Calvinism*. Both Kuyper and Bavinck endorsed a pluriform society with a division of powers that are each sovereign in its own right. Subjugation of the church by the state or of the state by the church are thus both condemned. The law, the media, and universities (Kuyper established the *Vrije* Universiteit in Amsterdam) are not to be controlled by the state or the church. Bavinck does mention the role of nations and peoples (*volke*), because the order extends from the nuclear family in widening circles. He does *not*, however, include the role of race (or racial purity) in such a list of structures used by God to restrain the spread of evil in the world. For Bavinck, such order remains an abundant gift from God. It becomes embedded in the world, but it cannot be taken for granted, as any continuing cosmic or social order remains dependent upon God's providence.

However, once it is suggested that common grace becomes effective through these ordinances, that this helps to restrain evil in society, that this preserves what is good and creates room for the very possibility of God's particular grace, then the attention shifts to the ordinances themselves. The question is how they are uncovered and formulated. The core of the problem lies with the way in which such ordinances are based on a notion of general revelation in a way that fails to recognize the emergence and evolution of variable social structures in history and the impact of human sin on such structures. For Kuyper and Bavinck, one may say that these ordinances are not so much embedded in the created order (*ordo*) itself but follow from the ordering (*ordinatio*) of common grace, that is, from the divine response to human sin.[40]

38. Van Leeuwen's translation of the Dutch "*geslachten*" as "races" is in my view an obvious and unfortunate error. It is better translated as generations in the sense of extended families, extended over several generations beyond the nuclear family (*gezin*).

39. Bavinck, "Common Grace," 59.

40. This paragraph is based on formulations found in my essay "Abraham Kuyper's Legacy," 74.

Common Grace and the Orders of Creation

There is no need here to offer a detailed discussion of the unsavory debates on German *Ordungstheologie*. These "orders" are typically understood as providential orders through and within which God accomplishes God's work of conservation. These typically include various social relationships such as marriage, the family, civil society, the state, and so on. In the German context, such orders were extended to categories of people ("*volk*") and race. At a later stage, soil (fatherland) was also added. Gradually, nation and state, race, and blood and soil became decisive. This allowed the so-called German Christians, on the basis of such an *Ordungstheologie*, to link being German and being Christian inextricably together. The logic of such a theology of creation ordinances is well captured by the late South African theologian Jaap Durand:

> According to Werner Elert, who together with Emanuel Hirsch, Friedrich Gogarten and even Paul Althaus was one of the more famous ordinance theologians, two important elements can be distinguished in the idea of creation ordinances: a dispositional element and an ethical element. Both these two elements are part of God's providential order through which God continues God's work of conservation. The element of disposition points to the destiny of each person with regard to the place and position he [or she] occupies in life. The Creator places a person within a particular people, state and society. They form part of a specific race and inhabits a specific homeland. In regard to these things they do not really have a choice. This is divine providence. But at the same time it also entails an ethical obligation. Because God has decreed these things for me, I must honor and obey them. With the exception of, among others, Paul Althaus, the ordination theologians maintained that the creation ordinances were unaffected by sin. Therefore, according to them, humans can derive God's will for their lives from these ordinances, outside and apart from the message of Christ.[41]

The opposition to such *Ordungstheologie* within the confessing church movement, in which Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer played leading roles, is well-known and need not be discussed here.[42] At the first meeting

41. Durand, *Skepping, Mens, Voorsienigheid*, 194–95 (my gender-inclusive translation). In this section I am drawing on Durand's excellent discussion (only available in Afrikaans) of debates on providence and the orders of creation in Germany and South Africa (194–97). Durand was one of my predecessors in teaching systematic theology at the University of the Western Cape.

42. For Barth's own discussion of God's preserving, upholding, and sustaining of creatures, see his *Church Dogmatics III.3*, 58–90. For Barth, as for Calvin before him, the continuity of any creature is dependent upon God's work of preservation. It can have continuity only as God gives it (75). However, Barth then explains that the threat to such continuity is not only posed by nonbeing as opposed to being, but also to what was not willed and elected by God the Creator, what was excluded and rejected (76). For Barth that is the meaning of chaos. Preservation is then preservation against the chaos of nothingness (*das Nichtige*). It therefore includes a salvific element, captured by Barth with the Latin *servare* and not only *conservare* (75). Barth offers a Christological rationale for this, namely that God preserved the creature (and then almost necessarily so) for the sake of the Son by becoming a creature (79). Barth's most detailed discussion

of the Confessing Church at the Synod of Barmen (1934), an unequivocal position was taken against an *Ordungstheologie*. The famous first article of the Barmen Declaration reads: "Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in holy scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death. We reject the false doctrine, as though the church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and besides this one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God's revelation."[43]

Nevertheless, such opposition to German *Ordungstheologie* did not lead to the rejection of every notion of the orders of creation or providential orders. Emil Brunner, for example, defended the role of the natural order and the social order (especially marriage and family) as part of God's sustaining activity to allow people alienated from each other by sin to live together again. Since the basic structure of the orders remains constant, it can be used as a principle for a social ethic. However, because a particular social order could express human wickedness, any such creation ordinances must be subordinated to the commandment of Christ.[44] Likewise, Dietrich Bonhoeffer defended the role of four "divine mandates" (or commissions), namely church, marriage and family, culture and government (thus excluding any reference to *volk*, race, or soil). Yet Bonhoeffer's approach is radically different from that of the German *Ordungstheologie* insofar as he brings the four mandates into closer connection with Jesus Christ. Only in Christ, Bonhoeffer emphasizes, do all things stand and only to Christ are all things directed.[45] Subsequent German Reformed theologians such as Jürgen Moltmann and Michael Welker seem to avoid any discussion of the orders of creation in their contributions to creation theology.[46]

In the South African context, apartheid theology may be understood as a particularly crude expression of the way in which God's providence is associated with the orders of creation and a particular social order. Apartheid theology, drawing on Dutch and German sources, emerged in

of *das Nichtige* (the problem of nothingness) is found in the same volume of the *Church Dogmatics* on the doctrine of providence (299–368). See the very different take on chaos by Arnold van Ruler in the discussion below, developed precisely in opposition to Barth's position.

43. See https://www.ekd.de/en/The-Barmen-Declaration-303.htm [last accessed October 14, 2024].

44. See the German title of Brunner's *Das Gebot und die Ordnungen: Entwurf einer Protestantisch-theologischen Ethik* (Zwingli Verlag, 1939), translated as *The Divine Imperative: A Study in Christian Ethics* (Lutterworth, 1958). The controversy between Brunner and Barth on nature and grace, and the legitimacy of some form of natural theology is obviously relevant here. See Brunner, "Nature and Grace" and Barth, "'No!' Reply to Emil Brunner's 'Nature and Grace'." See also my discussion of this debate in "Abraham Kuyper's Legacy."

45. See Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 388–408.

46. See Moltmann, *God in Creation*; Welker, *Creation and Reality*.

the 1930s as a biblical and theological legitimation of apartheid, a policy that the Dutch Reformed Church (especially) vehemently proposed to address the "poor white" question in the wake of the South African War (1899–1902) and the Great Depression. Ironically, this was meant as a critique of the impact of British imperialism but adopted and radicalized the British policy of racial segregation implemented in many of its colonies. Indeed, one may say that apartheid theology was a form of liberation theology (from British hegemony) gone wrong.

The story of the rise and fall of apartheid theology has often been told and does not need to be treated here in any further depth.[47] The categories employed to offer a legitimation of apartheid were derived mainly from neo-Calvinist sources with specific reference to Abraham Kuyper's notion of sphere sovereignty and Herman Dooyeweerd's idea of law (*wetsidee*). The intellectual foundations of apartheid theology were laid by the philosopher Henk Stoker with his notion of the idea of creation (*skeppingsidee*) and by *volksvaders* such as Totius (Jacob Daniël du Toit). Essentially, apartheid theology expanded the notion of the orders of creation to include race, ethnicity, people (*volk*), and nationality, tied with issues of language and land ownership. For Dooyeweerd, social institutions were the product of a process of differentiation in history. For Stoker, these institutions are embedded in the very structures of creation itself; they are therefore more rigid and they receive ultimate legitimacy.[48] Either way, these orders were regarded as part of God's providential order to curb the spread of evil, including conflict between ethnic groups.

The use of such categories centered around a reading of the Babel narrative (read together with Acts 17:26). Accordingly, God prevented the rise of imperialism not only through a confusion of languages but also through maintaining racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity. People have to be kept apart (through law and order) and, if necessary, even be forced apart, or else one group will begin to dominate the other. A failure to maintain such separation can only breed conflict. On the basis of laws on race classification that were proposed and implemented, this eventually led to a prohibition against racially mixed marriages, separate amenities, and segregated housing in "group areas" (prompting forced removals and influx control) and to an envisaged constellation of independent South African states ("Bantustans"). Such policies of separation on the basis of race were already implemented in the church itself through separate

47. In my assessment, the best analyses are written from within and then in Afrikaans. See especially Kinghorn, *Die NG Kerk en Apartheid*, and Coetzee, *Die "Kritiese Stem."*

48. See Conradie, "Abraham Kuyper's Legacy," 74, footnote 52.

communion cups, separate worship services, separate congregations and eventually (by 1881) separate churches.

Ethnic groups therefore needed to be kept apart, if necessary by imposing "law and order," since this was enshrined not only in historical developments (God's providence) but in the very orders of creation. In separation, later separate development, lay nothing short of "our" salvation—so that apartheid also operated as a quasi-soteriology.[49] Ironically, God's work of providence, which was aimed at preventing things from falling apart, was inverted to ensure that things were kept apart! The social order that was supposed to curb the spread of evil only exacerbated such evil—in the name of God's providence.

Apartheid theology culminated in a document entitled *Ras, Volk en Nasie en Volkereverhoudinge in die Lig van die Skrif* (1974),[50] which was accepted by the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church as guiding the problem of racial relations. According to this report, ethnic diversity was already embedded in God's intentions for creation and was to be appreciated as God's blessing.[51] The unity of the human race was emphasized (on the basis of the Genesis 10—because the whole human population "descended from Noah"!),[52] while any "humanistic" effort to enforce uniformity was criticized as typical of the hubris of empire building. Such a process of differentiating "gained momentum" with the confusion of tongues after Babel, eventually "deepening" to a diversity of races, ethnic groups, peoples and nations.[53] This formed part of God's providential order to prevent one group from dominating another. Diversity was therefore to be welcomed while it was sin that caused alienation and conflict between people. On the basis of this argument, the document offered a qualified "yes!" to the question whether a policy of separate (*eiesoortige*) development could be based on Genesis 11:1–9.[54] Ironically again, this document (written with an aura of erudite scholarship) was accepted at a time just before apartheid as the dominant political ideology was about to be replaced by an emphasis on state security following the Soweto uprisings in 1976. As a policy document, it was to be replaced by *Kerk en Samelewing*

49. See Coetzee and Conradie, "Apartheid as Quasi-soteriology."

50. The document was translated into English as *Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture*, but the "human relations" in the title hides the use of the categories of race and *volk* and underplays the emphasis on ethnicity and nationhood.

51. Ned Geref Kerk, *Ras, Volk en Nasie*, 13.

52. Ned Geref Kerk, *Ras, Volk en Nasie*, 11. The document adopts a rather literalist reading of the Genesis narratives.

53. Ned Geref Kerk, *Ras, Volk en Nasie*, 15, 19.

54. Ned Geref Kerk, *Ras, Volk en Nasie*, 16, 72.

(*Church and Society*, 1986) where the category of *volk* was toned down and where separate development (a euphemism for apartheid) was no longer legitimized.[55]

The inclusion of the categories of race, ethnicity, and soil as part of the orders of creation that God presumably employed to curb the spread of evil is easy to critique given the ideologies associated with Nazism and apartheid. However, one may also pose similar questions regarding the other proposed orders of creation, given current debates on marriage (heteronormativity), the family (patriarchy), work (in a capitalist global economy), government (the dangers of tyranny), and the state (given the dangers of "state theology,"[56] the ideology of state security and state capture). The same could apply to organizations in civil society (including churches), although the church can hardly be regarded under the rubric of God's providence. Moreover, each of these human institutions emerged during the course of human history so that such orders cannot be embedded in God's work of creation. They are situated within particular cultural contexts that are subject to change so that any rigid sense of divine order can hardly do justice to a God of history (hence *gubernatio* more than *conservatio*).

An almost deterministic emphasis on God's sovereign will, that everything is ordained by the will of God, cannot do justice to the biblical narratives that more typically suggest that the world is not the way God wants it to be. This should incite complaint and protest, engagement in social transformation, not a resignation to injustice or a placid acceptance that all suffering comes from the hand of God.[57]

This is also the avenue followed by Jürgen Moltmann in *Ethics of Hope*. He affirms the Protestant sense of responsibility for the world. At times the affirmation of the world implies the need to change unjust structures—so that swords are turned into ploughshares. Moltmann does not recognize social and political structures as God's ordinances but as human constructions for which humans have to take responsibility.[58]

A God of Order in Nature and Society or a God Transforming Society and Nature?

This emphasis on the orders of creation and divine ordinances raises the question whether it may not be best to discard all attempts to defend such

55. See https://kerkargief.co.za/doks/bely/GD_KerkSamelewing.pdf [last accessed October 14, 2024].

56. See the critique of state theology in the *Kairos Document* (1986).

57. See Fergusson, *The Providence of God*, 7.

58. See Moltmann, *Ethics of Hope*, 206.

orders of creation as a sign of God's providence. Since such orders form a crucial part of "common grace," should such a theological construct not be discarded as well? Many may be inclined to suggest that any notion of God's providence needs to be abandoned as hopelessly entangled in the legitimation of power. In the words of Susan Neiman, "Providence is a tool invented by the rich to lull those whom they oppress into silent endurance. The rich have no need of virtue or faith for their desires are met without them. [...] Providence is either a tool invented for oppression or itself an instrument of injustice."[59] Is it not safer, instead, to focus on the gospel of liberation from evil, forgiveness of sins for the sake of reconciliation with God, and the transformation of society? Or is it even better to cut God out of the picture altogether?!

It is important to recognize the full extent of what is at stake here. Under the influence of Greek assumptions on stable forms in nature and equally stable social structures in history, God's providence was typically understood in terms of preserving order in nature and law and order in history, therefore as *conservatio*. Accordingly, providence is equated with the preservation of creatures over time.[60] Religion thus served the purpose of sacralizing power and divinely ordained structures—and not as instigating social change. God's work can be understood as maintenance and restoration, perhaps as reform but not as revolution.[61] If anything, the city of God remained suprahistorical.

One may say that Joachim of Fiore's notion of distinct epochs in history, a Lutheran sense of vocation, and a Calvinist emphasis on sanctification[62] each recognized the significance of social transformation, but it was with the advent of modernity that the emphasis shifted not only from *conservatio* to *gubernatio*, but also from maintaining order to social transformation in history, to the dream of building a better society, even a classless utopia. With the emergence of a historical consciousness, social structures could no longer be regarded as divinely ordained forever, but as contingent, culturally relative, and subject to change. However, the vision was no longer based on divine intervention in history but on scientific progress and technological innovation, on market incentives, on corporate risk-taking, and on the internal democratic impulse for freedom, equality, and solidarity.

59. Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, 182.

60. See Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 250.

61. See Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 192.

62. There is, for Calvin as for Augustine, a transcendent, suprahistorical, eschatological goal, understood as being with God, on earth as it is in heaven. But, unlike Augustine, Calvin also emphasized the regenerative impact of grace on life and therefore on history. Sanctification is not based on justification, but the aim of justification is sanctification. The process of sanctification therefore represents the transformation of the lives of believers in the world and through them of the character of the world. See Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 184.

This led to a desacralization of history and an increasingly radical critique of God's providence as the enemy of any social transformation.[63]

In response to such modernist views on progress, the kingdom of God was reconceptualized as a vision for the future instead of something suprahistorical.[64] God is then not the God of the present who has created and upholds the present order of things.[65] God, the God of becoming and not being, becomes the lure of the future that draws us towards an attractive vision for society in an evolutionary way towards a divinely ordained end (as assumed in nineteenth-century liberal theologies). If anything, conservative notions of providence as conservation are expelled and replaced with providence as development and progress.[66] However, if and when that vision fails, when progress itself is equated with ecological gloom and doom, then God is portrayed as standing in radical opposition to the evil present, calling for social transformation, promising a new dispensation in opposition to the old (as assumed in political and liberation theologies since the 1960s).[67] God is not the God of the present who is above us, behind us, with us, and in us as the sovereign Lord.[68] Such a God would ordain the evils of history and would be the enemy of human freedom. Instead, God becomes the ultimate power of the future, impinging on the present to negate it and transform it.[69] The eschatological vision is not

63. See Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 199.

64. See the following comment by Jaap Durand: "While in the preceding liberal theology the developing history in nature and human society was seen as the place of God's saving actions and the future completion of human history as God's eschatological end goal, in the new crisis theology nature and history become detached from God's saving presence. As a result, the eschatological end goal of God and the future of the human community are also disconnected. The theological effect of this on the doctrine of providence was inevitable. As a doctrine within theology it has lost its relevance" (my translation). See Durand, *Skepping, Mens, Voorsienigheid*, 199.

65. See Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 229.

66. See Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 210.

67. Gilkey explains the significance of such a historicizing of eschatology in a lucid way, worth quoting at some length: "The final eschatological purposes of God, [...] are no longer transhistorical, intending a salvation for individuals beyond history in eternity [as with Augustine and Calvin]. On the contrary, these eschatological purposes now concern the historical itself, the end of history in the literal sense, since that end is now conceived to be the perfection of the humanum, a concrete historical community of justice, peace, freedom and communion. The symbol of the kingdom becomes a symbol for the character of future social history; and the divine activity in history—and so the major task of the church—is seen as an activity which prepares that culmination by working, not simply in the church and on individual souls, but in the social process itself in the development of democratic rights, economic justice, social equality and international peace. As the eschatological goal was thus moved into historical process itself, so God's work in the world, and a Christian obligation toward the world, was likewise moved into 'secular' historical process to transform that process creatively." See Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 202–3.

68. See Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 231.

69. On such a "transformative eschatology," see Moltmann, *Ethics of Hope*, 37–41.

developmental or progressivist but revolutionary through a radical negation of the present.[70] The vision is for a new creation that would overcome both social evil and natural evil.

It then comes as no surprise that any notion of God's providence, not only of maintaining order in nature and in society but also of governing history, becomes increasingly side-lined (if not vanishing completely)[71] and subsumed under an emphasis on God's work of salvation (better: liberation) and consummation. Moreover, liberation and consummation may then be regarded as immanent forces so that God might as well be left out of the picture altogether. This heightened the problem of *concursus*, but the question was no longer one of making room for human freedom over against divine determinism but to explain God's activity in social processes if history as a whole is understood in terms of immanent material and social forces.[72] The vision of God's kingdom thus becomes perverted into the kingdom of the political activist who usurps God's place, while evil is attributed exclusively to the political opponent.[73]

Sustainability and Holocene Stability

There is some irony here, namely that secular society can hardly abandon a secularized form of providence understood as *conservatio*. This becomes evident from the role played by the natural order and the social order in contemporary discourse on sustainability.

In recent contributions, I noted that diverse terms are employed in contestation with each other in order to speak of a sustainable society, sustainable growth, sustainable development, sustainable communities and sustainable livelihoods.[74] I reviewed the shifts and turns in such secular discourse on sustainability. In short, these shifts include an initial focus on nature conservation and wilderness preservation, the emerging concern over limits to the use of non-renewable resources given issues of population and consumption (the report on *Limits to Growth*), a focus on the sustained use of renewable resources (the report on *Our Common Future*), a concern over the destructive social impact of environmental degradation (e.g., environmental racism, at least since the Rio Earth Summit), a recognition of

70. See Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 229–30.

71. See Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 231, arguing that God's providence in history became even more problematic in the eschatological theologies of the 1960s than in the neo-orthodox theologies of the 1920s.

72. See Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 199.

73. See Pannenberg, *The Historicity of Nature*, 53.

74. See my *Secular Discourse on Sin in the Anthropocene*; also "What, Exactly, Needs to be Sustained amidst a Changing Climate?"

the limits to biophysical throughput measured in terms of an environmental footprint (carrying capacity), an increasing awareness of biospheric limits to absorb the waste products of an industrialized economy (absorption capacity), most notably greenhouse gases, and finally discourse on planetary boundaries and thresholds. In such debates, some focus on the question *whether* the industrialized global economy can be sustained (or will it collapse), some on *how* it can be sustained (through appropriate technologies) and for *how long* it can be sustained (scenario planning taking into account the unequal use of resources, causing unequal environmental impact and with an unequal distribution of costs).

The deeper question, though, revolves around *what* it is that is to be sustained. The current use of resources? The unequal use of resources, perhaps? Economic growth in terms of biophysical throughput? Socio-economic development based on such growth? Or, to be more honest, a consumer-driven middle-class lifestyle? Or Western notions of civilization? Or being brutally honest: industrialized neoliberal capitalism? Or more soberly: what is to be sustained are treasured institutions and events despite their environmental footprint (e.g., universities, mega-sports events, tourism), which would require sacrifices to be made elsewhere in the system. With discourse on planetary boundaries, it may be best to answer this question with reference to Holocene stability. The various planetary thresholds need to be guarded in order to protect the relative stability that characterized the Holocene epoch within which agriculture became possible, within which all the major civilizations emerged, and within which family life, culture, religion, the arts, and sciences could flourish. This is, I would suggest, the bottom line in discourse on sustainability.

It is remarkable to note how the social (or economic) order is related to the natural order in such discourse on sustainability. Some may emphasize what is needed in terms of the social order (science, innovative technologies, increasing prosperity, development) and ask how this is possible within planetary boundaries. Others take the balance within the Earth System (in the singular but with various subsystems) as the point of departure in order to argue that the global economy needs to stay within such planetary boundaries, bringing deleterious socio-economic development under control (which may well be wishful thinking). But in one way or another, there is a recognition that the social order and the natural order need to be compatible with each other—for the sake of Holocene stability. To be more precise, there is a need to understand the interplay between the Earth's slow-moving lithic strata and the faster-flowing thin envelope of water, air, and life (and social orders within that) around the Earth's surface.[75]

75. See Clark and Szerszynski, *Planetary Social Thought*, 64.

But what if the Holocene is already no more? The proposed date for the advent of the so-called "Anthropocene" (to be marked by a "golden spike") is by the mid-twentieth century.[76] If so, we have already been living within the "Anthropocene" for three generations. Then it makes no sense to preserve Holocene stability, although it would be possible to slow down the process or at least to manage the transition and the tumultuous changes associated with that. The question is whether the concept of sustainability (and adaptability to cope with any deviations) is appropriate to serve such purposes. Or should it be discarded together with nineteenth-century notions of progress, twentieth-century assumptions about sustained economic growth, and twenty-first-century discourse on sustainable development goals (SDGs)? Or is the problem that not only sustainability but also adaptability is being degraded, not only the adaptability of human societies but the Earth's own capacity for self-differentiation, allowing for the generation of novelty?[77]

Ecojustice and the Need to Disrupt an Unjust Global Order[78]

The theme of justice has long been on ecumenical agendas. It is captured in the motto "Towards a Just, Participatory and Sustainable Society" from the World Council of Churches' (WCC's) Nairobi Assembly (1975). It is again expressed in the "conciliar process" towards "Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation" initiated at the Vancouver Assembly (1983) and in the conference theme "God of Life, Lead Us to Justice and Peace" of the Busan Assembly (2013). Justice is understood in a comprehensive way with the connotations of social justice (e.g., the Program to Combat Racism), economic justice (e.g., the Accra Confession of 2004 and the document on *Alternative Globalization for People and Environment—AGAPE*, 2005), gendered justice (e.g., the Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women and the Decade to Overcome Violence), and then also environmental justice, and more specifically climate justice.

The term "ecojustice" is often used in ecumenical discourse to capture the need for a comprehensive sense of justice that can respond to economic injustice, ecological degradation, *and* the interplay between them.

76. See the homepage of the Anthropocene Working Group at http://quaternary.stratigraphy.org/working-groups/anthropocene/ [last accessed October 14, 2024]. For a discussion, see also my "Some Theological Reflections on Multi-disciplinary Discourse on the 'Anthropocene'."

77. See Clark and Szerszynski, *Planetary Social Thought*, 174.

78. This section partly builds upon my recent article, "The Limits of Ecological Justice?"

This term was popularized by William Gibson and Dieter Hessel.[79] It builds upon the recognition that the English words ecology, economy, and ecumenical share the same etymological root in the Greek *oikos* (household). Accordingly, ecology describes the underlying logic (*logos*) of the household, economy circumscribes the rules (*nomoi*) for the management of the household, while the "whole inhabited world" (*oikoumene*) refers to the (human) inhabitation of the household.[80] This implies that "nature" cannot be regarded as a dimension of the economy (as "resources" or "externalities," as assumed in environmental economics); the economy is situated within and forms part of the natural world (as assumed in ecological economics). Ecojustice therefore encompasses more than environmental justice while certainly including that.

Given the above, the need to extend notions of justice to climate justice became self-evident in ecumenical discourse on climate change. One may observe that the principle of climate justice is widely understood and affirmed, namely that those nations that will be most adversely affected by the impact of climate change contributed relatively little to historical carbon emissions. The focus is on those countries that are particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of the climate change given rising sea-levels, droughts, floods, and other disasters. This is epitomized by Small Island States such as Tuvalu and Kiribati, but most African countries would be adversely affected by climate change in a way that is inversely proportioned to historical carbon emissions. South Africa's position is somewhat different in that it is still thirteenth on the list of carbon emissions by country (despite load shedding!),[81] even though the South African government is posturing to ensure access to such climate funds in order to meet its mitigation targets.[82] An energy transition is clearly needed, but, as Pope Francis also notes, this would need to meet three conditions: that measures be efficient, obligatory, and readily monitored.[83]

79. See Dieter Hessel, *After Nature's Revolt*.

80. See, e.g., Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*. The whole household of God has been widely discussed in countries such as South Africa and South Korea and throughout Pasifika. The Pacific Conference of Churches reconceptualized ecumenism as a "household" in 2018. See Vaai and Casimira, *reSTORYing the Pasifika Household*. Nevertheless, the *oikoumene* then has to be interpreted without an imperial or kyriarchal homogeneity.

81. There are several such lists available on the Internet. For one example, see https://www.worldeconomics.com/Indicator-Data/ESG/Environment/Carbon-Emissions/ [last accessed 29 January 2023].

82. In *A Framework for a Just Transition in South Africa*, the Presidential Climate Commission reports that "Achieving a just transition in South Africa will require significant capital mobilisation, from both public and private sources, both domestically and internationally. It is estimated that South Africa will require at least US$250 billion over the next three decades to transform the energy system 2022." (24).

83. Pope Francis, *Laudate Deum*, §59.

However, the call for ecojustice should not be domesticated, as if this is merely an addendum to discourse on sustainability and more specifically sustainable development. If so, climate mitigation has precedence in the Global North, while climate adaptation is on the agenda especially of the Global South, that is, of the victims of climate change. Technology transfer and a climate loss and damage fund are then added to this agenda for the sake of a degree of justice. What is at stake here is a more fundamental critique of the current global economic order. The debate is not so much on the role of a free market, the regulation of the market or a state-controlled economy. It is the core assumption of the need for sustained economic growth as expressed in the form of globalized neoliberal capitalism that is questioned.

There is a wealth of ecumenical literature where such a critique is expressed. It may suffice to quote several sections from the Accra Confession (2004) in this regard:

> 8. The policy of unlimited growth among industrialized countries and the drive for profit of transnational corporations have plundered the earth and severely damaged the environment. In 1989, one species disappeared each day and by 2000 it was one every hour. Climate change, the depletion of fish stocks, deforestation, soil erosion, and threats to fresh water are among the devastating consequences. Communities are disrupted, livelihoods are lost, coastal regions and Pacific islands are threatened with inundation, and storms increase. High levels of radioactivity threaten health and ecology. Life forms and cultural knowledge are being patented for financial gain.
>
> 9. This crisis is directly related to the development of neoliberal economic globalization, which is based on the following beliefs:
>
> - unrestrained competition, consumerism and the unlimited economic growth and accumulation of wealth are the best for the whole world;
> - the ownership of private property has no social obligation;
> - capital speculation, liberalization and deregulation of the market, privatization of public utilities and national resources, unrestricted access for foreign investments and imports, lower taxes and the unrestricted movement of capital will achieve wealth for all;
> - social obligations, protection of the poor and the weak, trade unions, and relationships between people, are subordinate to the processes of economic growth and capital accumulation.
>
> 10. This is an ideology that claims to be without alternative, demanding an endless flow of sacrifices from the poor and creation. It makes the false promise that it can save the world through the creation of wealth and prosperity, claiming sovereignty over life and demanding total allegiance which amounts to idolatry.

And:

> 17. We believe in God, Creator and Sustainer of all life, who calls us as partners in the creation and redemption of the world. We live under the promise that Jesus

> Christ came so that all might have life in fullness (Jn 10.10). Guided and upheld by the Holy Spirit we open ourselves to the reality of our world.
>
> 18. We believe that God is sovereign over all creation. "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof" (Ps 24.1).
>
> 19. Therefore, we reject the current world economic order imposed by global neoliberal capitalism and any other economic system, including absolute planned economies, which defy God's covenant by excluding the poor, the vulnerable and the whole of creation from the fullness of life. We reject any claim of economic, political and military empire which subverts God's sovereignty over life and acts contrary to God's just rule.
>
> 20. We believe that God has made a covenant with all of creation (Gen 9.8–12). God has brought into being an earth community based on the vision of justice and peace. The covenant is a gift of grace that is not for sale in the market place (Is 55.1). It is an economy of grace for the household of all of creation. Jesus shows that this is an inclusive covenant in which the poor and marginalized are preferential partners and calls us to put justice for the "least of these" (Mt 25.40) at the centre of the community of life. All creation is blessed and included in this covenant (Hos 2.18ff).
>
> 21. Therefore we reject the culture of rampant consumerism and the competitive greed and selfishness of the neoliberal global market system or any other system which claims there is no alternative.
>
> 22. We believe that any economy of the household of life given to us by God's covenant to sustain life is accountable to God. We believe the economy exists to serve the dignity and wellbeing of people in community, within the bounds of the sustainability of creation. We believe that human beings are called to choose God over Mammon and that confessing our faith is an act of obedience.
>
> 23. Therefore we reject the unregulated accumulation of wealth and limitless growth that has already cost the lives of millions and destroyed much of God's creation.
>
> 24. We believe that God is a God of justice. In a world of corruption, exploitation and greed, God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor, the exploited, the wronged and the abused (Ps 146.7–9). God calls for just relationships with all creation.
>
> 25. Therefore we reject any ideology or economic regime that puts profits before people, does not care for all creation and privatizes those gifts of God meant for all. We reject any teaching which justifies those who support, or fail to resist, such an ideology in the name of the gospel.

One may therefore say, if pushed to the extreme, that an emphasis on sustainability (especially in the form of sustainable development) and on ecojustice represents two contrasting social visions. The one seeks to make the current global economic order more sustainable while the other rejects that order and calls for a transformation of that order. There may be at times a need to establish order amid reigning chaos, but (as the South African experience demonstrates) there may also come a time when it is necessary to disrupt an unjust social order in order to construct (or reconstruct)

a new social order where justice and peace can reign. Ironically, at times, the need for "development" is recognized especially in the Global South while a critique of the global economic order is also voiced in the Global North.

Van Ruler on God and Chaos

How, then, should one steer between Holocene stability and "Anthropocene" volatility, between the inequalities of a neoliberal order and the chaos of collapsing markets? How should one think theologically about that? Is God's providence always to be understood in terms of a natural and a social order that can restrain and contain evil? Is chaos a sign of evil that needs to be curbed (as Calvin took for granted)? How does one prevent a social order from becoming hegemonic and from legitimizing structural violence? Where does the energy come from to disrupt and transform an oppressive social order? Is there not a need for any form to be reabsorbed into the formless (the void, chaos, orgy, water, the subliminal) to recover its vigor?[84] Or does the modernist triumph of *nous* prevailing over chaos lie at the very root of ecological destruction?

Remarkably, some assistance in this regard may come from a follower of Herman Bavinck, namely Arnold van Ruler. As far as I could establish, Van Ruler did not use the term common grace in his mature work,[85] although he wrote extensively on nature and on grace.[86] He did affirm Bavinck's position that the fundamental distinction is between sin and grace but avoided the term grace in relation to nature (understood as creation) itself. God's grace is aimed at overcoming the problem of human sin, understood primarily as guilt. For Van Ruler, salvation is not an aim in itself; it is not about the experience of salvation, or about being saved, or even about the Savior, but about the being that is saved. Salvation is necessary in order to allow God's creation to be, to exist before God's face.[87] Put differently, grace is there for the sake of nature, the gospel for the sake of culture, Christianity for the sake of the world, the church for

84. See Eliade, *Cosmos and History*, 88.

85. Van Ruler did discuss common grace in an early work on Abraham Kuyper's idea of a Christian culture (*Kuyper's Idee eener christelijke cultuur*). His argument there is that Christianizing culture (Niebuhr would say "Christ transforming culture") is necessary because of sin but that the point is not that culture should become Christian but that Christianity will enable culture to flourish. Accordingly, Kuyper was not radical enough in his vision.

86. The term common grace is not used in any form in volume 3 of Van Ruler's *Verzameld Werk* that collects his writings on God's providence.

87. For a discussion, see my essay, "Van Ruler as an Early Exponent of Christian Ecotheology?"

the sake of society. For Van Ruler, paying taxes, insofar as its aim is to redistribute wealth, is holier than the Holy Communion.

In a famous, hotly debated essay on God's providence entitled "God and Chaos," Van Ruler argues that chaos forms part of God's good creation. He resists any Manichean notion that chaos could be co-original with God but also any Barthian notion that chaos emerged from the suction power of nothingness (*das Nichtige*).[88] Instead, he suggests that *God* created chaos to play with it. Leviathan, the prime symbol of chaos was created by God to play with it (as per Ps 104:26). Van Ruler adds that, "God does not fear chaos. God does not want to be rid of it as soon as possible. God *plays* with it. All who play become engrossed in the play. There is something of eternity in play. Could it be that from eternity to eternity, God plays *with* and becomes engrossed *in* the chaos?"[89]

What does it mean that chaos is the work of God? Van Ruler explains:

> But the earth was waste and void in the beginning. There, then, chaos was the creative work of God. It is even the first thing that emerges. The Lord God does not shy away from it. Nor is it so that God remains caught in it. God goes to work immediately. To transform chaos into cosmos? That I don't believe. It would be better to say: to provide some fixed points within the chaos here, there and everywhere, and so to bring about a degree of order. The order can perhaps be called the midpoint between chaos and cosmos. The creative God is permanently engaged in ordering. That is, on the one hand, forming, sculpting, giving profile [*gestalte*]; on the other hand, it is, however, also casting out, separating, sifting and judging. We could also say: all divine ordering is both restraining of the chaos and breaking up of the cosmos.[90]

Moreover, it is not as if God merely allows chaos or is somehow threatened by it. It is precisely Godself who chaotifies things from time to time. God is therefore the source of chaos. Van Ruler explains this by inverting the Babel narrative:

> We see that in the Bible as well. When human beings organize life too rigidly, the living God proceeds to chaotify it. Surely that is what happened with the tower building and the confusion of tongues at Babel. There the organizing activity emanates from human beings and the chaotifying from God. In this I would even find the point of the narrative. They build the tower not to penetrate into heaven, but to keep the people together in a strict unity. The organization, the *state*, is superimposed like a copper dome over variegated human life in its multiplicity

88. See also Moltmann's controversial use of the notion of a divine self-withdrawal (*zimsum*) whereby God makes room for creation but also for an annihilating Nothingness to emerge. For Moltmann creation out of nothing therefore needs to be supplemented by the "creation of salvation" (to overcome disaster) and an eschatological new creation. Nothingness therefore remains a looming threat to creation. See Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 86–93.

89. Van Ruler, *This Earthly Life Matters*, 133.

90. Van Ruler, *This Earthly Life Matters*, 132.

> and variety. No room is left—at least no playroom. Therefore God intervenes. God confuses speech and thereby all co-existence and cooperation. God brings into being the chaos of a multiplicity of peoples [*volken*].[91]

On this basis, Van Ruler challenges traditional views that associate God with order (cosmos) rather than chaos:

> The living God we know from the Bible clearly does not desire true cosmos. That would be the contrary of chaos: the fully finished figure [*gestalte*], the pleasingly completed whole, the perfect balance, the pure harmony, the closed unity that is sufficient unto itself. All this the God of the Bible does not desire. As soon as people try to attain this cosmos, God acts in person or God generates God's instruments to pass through it in a chaotifying manner. Politically speaking, that holds off all strivings towards the absolute state of wholeness. Therefore, we should, on God's authority, give preference to democracy with its typical chaos elements rather than to the cosmos of communism or any other dictatorship.[92]

Van Ruler links the presence of chaos with the multiplicity of creatures. He says: "But in creation there is multiplicity. God does not create a *God*, a new unity. To think that would in itself be nonsense. In that God creates, God creates a creation. Multiplicity is inherent in that. Each creature is finite and limited. It is a fragment and a fracture. Therefore, it calls out for other creatures: they need one another in their fragmentary existence."[93]

He adds: "Who, however, would regret that? Then we would have to regret creation itself and then we step outside the Christian faith. The Bible teaches us to consistently affirm creation, joyfully and whole-heartedly—and thereby also the multiplicity of creatures and the individuation and loneliness that comes with that. The loneliness is even the fertile ground for all [sorts of] creativity. The element of chaos, or at least the possibility of chaos, that inheres in creation we can also but affirm or at least accept in a positive spirit."[94]

Ultimately, then, God allows for an interplay between chaos and order. This is arguably also found in Godself:

> God is one. In that there is no chaos. Still, there we have to be careful as well. We can, for instance, say that God is "the unity" and not at all that God is "the oneness." God is also Triune. God is one only in this mode. Thus there is also life, community, movement, in a sense multiplicity or at least threeness in God. Nevertheless, God is not chaos and there is nothing chaotic in God. God is, however, not the cosmos either. God is the order itself, the *community* of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.[95]

91. Van Ruler, *This Earthly Life Matters*, 131.

92. Van Ruler, *This Earthly Life Matters*, 131.

93. Van Ruler, *This Earthly Life Matters*, 134.

94. Van Ruler, *This Earthly Life Matters*, 135.

95. Van Ruler, *This Earthly Life Matters*, 134.

Let me leave Van Ruler's provocations aside at this point. He continues to discuss the interplay between chaos and sin (the assumption that it is humanity that chaotifies). He concludes that it is love that keeps us tied to chaos but that chaos does not paralyze love. In the context of love, order need not impose rigidity but precisely elicits creativity. Van Ruler proposes participation in a perichoretic dance. He says:

> [W]e are chaos. We are Being. We are God's play. It all depends on not only the courage to be, but far more on the willingness to be in the game. "May I dance with you?," God asks us, and the core of our being depends on the question whether we are prepared to accede. But Being as divine play, as play of divine love, is an illumination of Being, also of the chaos in Being, which would be able to satisfy and gladden even reason and the heart. That, however, demands an extensive maturity and a vast silence before the face of God.[96]

That aside, the question remains how God's work of providence, in the form of *conservatio*, could be understood in the context of the shift from Holocene stability to "Anthropocene" volatility?

Is It God Who Is Stirring the Soup?

The metaphor of God stirring the soup is derived from Bram van de Beek, another Dutch Reformed scholar and a one-time student sitting in Van Ruler's classes in Utrecht. In an article entitled "*Rust is Ver te Zoeken*" ("Rest is hard to come by"), partly building on Van Ruler, Van de Beek comments that "God is continuously stirring the soup. Otherwise everything will come to a standstill. And then the whole lot will be burnt. The movement, the flow has to be maintained."[97] Tectonic plate movement, as well as evolutionary movement, with all the pain and suffering it implies, is necessary for the survival of ecosystems. Earth is a restless, dissipative planet, held far from thermal and geochemical equilibrium by its own hot interior and energy from the Sun, allowing for "irruptions of novelty" but also "cascades of irrevocable loss."[98] The monological tone of the geological

96. Van Ruler, *This Earthly Life Matters*, 144. From a Pasifika perspective, Upolu Vaai recommends a cosmic extension of the metaphor of dance: "It allows us to rediscover God already dancing with us to the rhythms of life, expressed in little practices such as fishing, planting, oral stories, feasting, and birthing to name a few. A theological dance informed by the silent whispers of the *vanua* (land) and the graceful movements of *vaitafe* (flowing rivers), transformed by the fluidity and unpredictability of the *moana* (ocean), animated by the *mānava ola* (breath of life) of the *vaomatua* (the elder forest), and dirtified by the rising dust from the malae, the ceremonial grounds of the Pacific dirt communities. A dance fused with oral stories, theologies, music, laughter, art and poetry from the village fields, and replenished by the waters and smoke of earth rituals." See Vaai, "From Atutasi to Atulasi," 236–37. Van Ruler would surely approve.

97. Van de Beek, "Rust is Ver te Zoeken" (my translation), 47.

98. Clark and Szerszynski introduce the notion of "planetary multiplicity" to capture this process of self-differentiation on all temporal and spatial scales. For these formulations, see their *Planetary Social Thought*, 172, 173.

timescale cannot do justice to the Earth's dynamic self-differentiating processes. Such processes do not exist in time but in a way "make" or "yield" time.[99] While the stasis of a sterile order may be appropriate from a deist perspective, the presence of the Spirit suggests movement and dynamism. As Langdon Gilkey observes:

> Historical change, moreover, reveals and exacerbates evils long present yet possibly hidden. By shifting the balance of power and so uncovering the oppression and injustice hidden by that stability, change brings to the surface both the decay of life and the injustice laying back of that decay. [...] From the point of view of faith, it is the strange face of the hidden God constituting, upsetting, destroying, challenging, judging, re-creating and calling.[100]

Is this how the shift from the Holocene to "Anthropocene" is to be understood? Indeed, what on earth may God be up to given disruptions at such a scale? As with earthquakes, volcanoes, and tsunamis, this would be turbulent, going together with massive suffering and death, possibly mass extinctions, perhaps human extinction, at least with widespread disruptions in the habitat of species and the structure of human societies. The mere possibility evokes anxiety, indignation, and anticipatory grief, not least among young people.[101]

To see God's presence in our times in this way may attest to God's power and judgment but hardly to God's mercy. Indeed, the image of a God who is stirring the soup is a horrible and horrifying one, especially for the weak and vulnerable. This image is more at home in Manicheism than in a Christian understanding of God. In response, others see God, not as causing chaos but as grieving profoundly at the suffering that comes with such turbulence. But does such an understanding of God do justice to the God of the Bible who also judges and condemns?[102] And is this compatible with the need to disrupt unjust social orders? What about God's work of liberation? How is mercy related to justice?[103] Who, then, is this God and what is this God doing at this moment in history?

99. See Clark and Szerszynski, *Planetary Social Thought*, 173.

100. See Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 33, 34.

101. See Clark and Szerszynski, *Planetary Social Thought*, 174.

102. Van de Beek comments: "Is this not more typical of what we experience from God? We experience chaos. We experience things that he cannot resist. We experience the brokenness of human lives. We experience illness. We experience those who are exploited. Does God have nothing to do with that? Is God always only compassionate or helpful?" (my translation). See "Rust is Ver te Zoeken," 44–45.

103. In literature from within the Reformed tradition, see especially Reinhold Niebuhr's *Love and Justice* and Nicholas Wolterstorff's *Justice in Love*. Niebuhr maintained that love is a truly ultimate concept, with justice its approximation under conditions of sin so that justice instead of agapeic love is called for in cases of conflict. However, Wolterstorff argued that the conflict between justice and love is a false one, proposing instead an understanding of love that incorporates justice.

How, then, is God's providence, common grace, and God's work of conservation to be understood in such a context? To return to the question raised in the companion volume *Making Room for the Story to Continue?*: "How could the suffering of God's creatures in the 'Anthropocene' be reconciled with trust in God's loving care?" Clearly, an apophatic response to such a question is more appropriate than clever answers that cannot console those who put their trust in God's care—which remains at the heart of any adequate notion of providence.

Theses on God's Work of Conservation

Allow me to conclude with ten tentative theses regarding God's work of providence if focused on conservation:

1. Despite the considerable evidence to the contrary, trusting in God's care forms a core part of the Christian faith, cannot be abandoned without abandoning faith in Godself, and is precisely epitomized by the "nevertheless" of Habakuk 3:17.[104] Providence is about faith in God's faithfulness to the whole of creation in general and God's loyalty to God's covenant partner in particular. Such merciful covenantal loyalty (חֶסֶד) is a core theme in the Old Testament and is far more descriptive of God's character than omnipotence or omniscience may be.
2. God's providence cannot be subsumed under God's work of creation,[105] or ongoing creation, or salvation, or consummation, or election, without messing up the story of God's economy. However, when it becomes an independent interest, it has no credibility. This is what also plagues discourse on the theodicy problem. Neither fusion nor separation is a viable option. Traces of God's providence can best be identified when a Christ-like redemptive shape is evident. So God's care and God's work of salvation cannot be separated; God's care will always have a salvific intent.

104. Christian hope retains a sense of a "nevertheless" and eschews both pessimism and optimism. The scenario sketched in Habakuk 3:17 is more daunting than any the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change may have come up with: "Though the fig tree does not blossom, nor there be fruit on the vines; the yield of the olive tree fails, and the cultivated fields do not yield food; the flock is cut off from the animal pen, and there is no cattle in the stalls." But then the response is truly unheard of: "Yet I will rejoice in Yahweh; I will exult in the God of my salvation" (NRSVUE).

105. Despite Langdon Gilkey's tendency (following Whitehead and Tillich) to redescribe Christian convictions in abstract categories that do not do justice to their particularity, my sense is that his description of providence in terms of the polarities of destiny and freedom, and in terms of achieved actuality and future possibility, is on the right track. For Gilkey, God is the creative ground and ultimate goal of creaturely existence and therefore of history: "God is the power of being that carries forward the total destiny of the past into the present where it is actualized by freedom." See *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 249. As the ground of being, God transcends the transience, mortality, and contingency of creatures. But God is also the ground of possibility and therefore of autonomous human creativity in history (thus of *concursus*) (250). This enables Gilkey to see God as source not so much of conservation but of creaturely continuity and meaningful movement towards an open future (251).

However, to fuse the two is to restrict God's care to acts of salvation. Then the planetary width of God's care is lost, caring that includes the wicked, people of other living faiths, and other forms of life. The intuition that God's providence makes room for the story to continue is therefore appropriate.

3. The distinction between common grace and special grace prompts disturbing questions around the meaning of divine election and can only be retained if it becomes clear that special grace is a divine strategy for the sake of common grace so that Israel becomes a light for all nations, indeed all of creation. The Reformed intuition is that grace is there for the sake of nature so that grace is not somehow "higher" than nature. Nature need not be enriched (or "elevated") by grace. Likewise, God's special grace for the church is there for the sake of the whole world. Such a divine strategy may be risky, but the logic is clear, namely that the universal scope of God's work is based on its particularity.
4. God's providence necessarily includes the dimension of continuing creation (the constitution, sustenance and preservation of creatures and their creativity over time)[106] but also conservation in order to restrain the spread of evil, in the same way that wilderness preservation is needed to guard against encroaching agriculture, mining, industry, and urbanization. It helps to contain environmental impact in such designated areas, but that does not by itself address the roots of the problem in economic centers of power (not in wilderness areas).
5. God's ways of curbing evil cannot be understood only in terms of conservation; the rest of the story needs to be told as well. By itself, preservation does not do justice to evolutionary history, has to address the reality that creation no longer has integrity (given the curse of Gen 3:17), and fails to express the eschatological vision that God will make all things new (Rev 21:5).[107]
6. Conservation is an always inadequate term and can be retained only if it is made clear that this could at times imply establishing order amid chaos, but at times it could also merely mean maintaining such order, disturbing an unjust order, causing some creative chaos, or transforming any current social order for the sake of justice. Neither the triumph of sterile order nor the horror of sheer chaos is compatible with a God of history. Note that what plagues discourse on conservation also pertains to discourse on restoration.
7. Sustainability could be associated with God's work of conservation as long as the stability of ecosystems (and social orders) is not absolutized; the adaptability of any system is equally important for its survival.

106. See also Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 272.

107. See also Moltmann, *Ethics of Hope*, 147.

8. There is an urgent need to relate ecumenical discourse on sustainability to ecumenical discourse on ecojustice, as these themes stand in tension with each other given divides between the Global South and the Global North (to use such uneasy terms).
9. Understanding the shift from Holocene stability to "Anthropocene" volatility as "God stirring the soup" raises more questions than it can answer. Instead, what may be needed is something like a revisiting of the Noah story, not only the role of the ark in anticipating and preparing for a volatile transition (the lifeboat metaphor is dangerous and often exclusivist as the tragedy of the *Titanic* illustrates), but also a renewal of the covenant to rebuild a society no longer based upon fossil fuels and where well-being no longer assumes endless economic growth. The transition to a new dispensation will undoubtedly be volatile but the biblical notion of a covenant inspires courage, not despair.
10. This shift does prompt further reflection on the rubrics of *gubernatio* and *concursus*, given the anthropogenic causes of the disruption in the Earth System (noting debates on divides of race, gender, class, and caste regarding this "anthropos") and the ultramodern quest to displace God altogether by "playing God," indeed by becoming divine (*homo Deus* if perhaps not *theosis*).[108]

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108. See the two essays on God's governance in history and the problems raised by *concursus* elsewhere in this this volume.

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The Shift from the Holocene to the "Anthropocene": God's Governance in History Revisited

The Shift from the Holocene to the So-Called "Anthropocene"

The thirty-fifth International Geological Congress met in Cape Town from August 27 to September 4, 2016. During this meeting, the Anthropocene Working Group (AWG) completed a binding vote on two questions:

> Should the Anthropocene be treated as a formal chrono-stratigraphic unit defined by a Global Boundary Stratotype Sections and Points (GSSPs) [alias "golden spike"]?
>
> Should the primary guide for the base of the Anthropocene be one of the stratigraphic signals around the mid-twentieth century of the Common Era?[1]

To attain formal recognition for the "Anthropocene," its putative footprint would need to entail a more or less "permanent" addition to the composition

1. See the homepage of the Anthropocene Working Group at http://quaternary.stratigraphy.org/working-groups/anthropocene/ [last accessed October 15, 2024].

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of the Earth's crust and also needs to distribute across the planet's surface at approximately the same time.[2] The AWG selected Crawford Lake in Ontario, Canada, as the proposed location for a "golden spike" marking the start of the proposed "Anthropocene" Epoch, given the spike in the plutonium sediments accumulated at the bottom of this deep lake following hydrogen bomb tests in 1952.[3]

The AWG consists of thirty-four voting members, of whom twenty-nine voted in favor and four against this proposal. The AWG forms part of the Subcommission on Quaternary Stratigraphy (SQS) and the International Commission on Stratigraphy, and its recommendations have to be approved by the International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS) before this can be formalized. After a high-profile debate, a decision was reached by the IUGS on March 4, 2024, namely to *reject* the proposal to establish the "Anthropocene" as a formal epoch in the Earth's geological timetable. Despite contestations over the voting process, the IUGS announced on March 20, 2024, that it is upholding its decision in this regard. Jan Zalasiewicz, the chairperson of the SQS, responded to this decision by saying that "Another means will have to be found," namely to codify the "Anthropocene" as a concept outside the official geological timescale. The journal *Nature* commented that "[r]egardless of there being no formal Anthropocene epoch, the term will continue to be used in broad popular and scientific usage as the era of human-induced change."[4]

Despite the lack of formal approval by the IUGS, and given its continued use in scientific and popular debates, it may nevertheless be helpful to consider the following definition of the "Anthropocene" offered on the AWG homepage: "The 'Anthropocene' is a term widely used since its coining by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer in 2000 to denote the present geological time interval, in which many conditions and processes on Earth are profoundly altered by human impact. This impact has intensified significantly since the onset of industrialization, taking us out of the Earth System state typical of the Holocene Epoch that post-dates the last glaciation."

Allow me to offer seven preliminary comments on this definition offered by the AWG. First, the bottom line is that, according to the AWG, we are no longer living in the relative stability that characterized the Holocene Epoch since the end of the last ice age. There has been a rupture in the Earth System

2. See Clark and Szerszynski, *Planetary Social Thought*, 18.

3. See the ScienceNews report at https://www.sciencenews.org/article/canada-crawford-lake-beginning-anthropocene [last accessed October 15, 2024].

4. See the report by Alexandra Witze, entitled "It's Final: The Anthropocene Is Not an Epoch, Despite Protest over Vote: Governing Body Upholds Earlier Decision by Geoscientists amid Drama," that appeared in *Nature* on March 20, 2024 (barely a week before this manuscript was submitted for publication!).

that will remain evident in the Earth's rock layers for millions of years to come. Earth is a dynamic, self-organizing planet where sudden and drastic change (not only gradualist change) in the Earth System and in the interaction between its subsystems is possible. While there is planetary multiplicity, self-differentiation, and variability at all scales, the integrated Earth System exists in the singular.[5] There is an unresolved tension between the oneness of a finite earth (as assumed in Earth System science) and the suspicion in the humanities that any such a unifying move serves the vested interests of those (including geologists) in positions of power and privilege.[6]

Second, the stability of the Earth System has been disrupted ("profoundly altered"). This means that the interplay between the atmosphere, the geosphere, the hydrosphere, and the biosphere (including the noosphere and the technosphere) and their various subsystems is no longer what it used to be. The "many conditions and processes" that are altered are signaled by nothing less than climate change (some would suggest climate "breakdown"), ocean acidification (its "equally evil twin"), sea level rise, the loss of biodiversity, species extinction, deforestation, desertification, global pandemics such as coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), and so forth. Remarkably, these challenges are all related to the same underlying rupture in the stability in the Earth System. This impact "has intensified"!

Third, the shift from the Holocene may be gradual and slow from one human generation to the next, but in geological time it may also be deemed rapid and cascading, interlaced with irreversible tipping points that (for humans) may well be deemed "catastrophic."[7] This is symbolized by the

5. See Clark and Szerszynski, *Planetary Social Thought*, 54.

6. Dipesh Chakrabarty observes that the "one-worldism" of Earth System science (dubbed "lumpers") does not gel well with the "splitters," i.e., those in the humanities who emphasize different regimes of oppression (colony, race, class, gender, sexuality, etc.) See Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, 17–18. The "splitters" maintain that "the path for emancipation for all humans one day could not be found without *first* addressing and working through the conflicts and injustices these divisions entailed" (17–18). They are therefore extremely suspicious of all claims to totality and universalism. On this basis, Chakrabarty contrasts an emphasis on the global (in critiques of neoliberal globalization) and the planetary (based on a recognition of the singularity of the Earth System).

This contrast between lumpers and splitters captures the difficulty of coming to terms with the bottom line of a shift from the Holocene to the "Anthropocene." The splitters typically resist naming the "Anthropocene" as such and offer a range of alternatives.

See also Upolu Vaai's critique of the "onefication agenda of the gospel of uniformity promoted by the centers of knowledge" in "From Atutasi to Atulasi," 236. He explains: "Onefication is not about truth, but the control of truth. [...] It dismisses multiple stories and makes one story the only story. It strives to make visible the face of the one by making invisible the face of the many. This is in fact the real meaning of colonization, which comes from the word colon meaning to digest. Theology in the Pacific has been a slave to this colon narrative where only one culture, one way, one dance, or one destination digests all others in the name of an ultimate truth" (238).

7. See Clark and Szerszynski, *Planetary Social Thought*, 15.

precision marking of "golden spikes." It has to be noted, however, that the geological timescale thus imposes a chronological view of time, underplaying the distinction between qualitative time (*kairos*) and quantitative time (*chronos*),[8] even though the proposal of an "Anthropocene" suggests a scientific recognition of a *kairos* moment, a reading of the signs of the times, albeit one often devoid of hope.[9] This cannot do justice to an Indigenous understanding of time (where there is often no abstract word for time), where what matters is the ongoing flow of movements, the ebb and flow of currents without the pressure to rush things.[10] It is marked by a deep breath, a shared laugh, and a celebration of the joy of life despite what tomorrow may bring. Chris Thomas, following the announcement that the proposal of the AWG was rejected by the IUGS, adds this: "Many people in the humanities who are using the phrase find the concept of the articulation of a particular year, based on a deposit in a particular lake, a ridiculous way of framing the concept of a human-altered planet."[11]

Fourth, the most recent shift is anthropogenic: it has been caused by humans, or at least some human beings, namely those in the now-global consumer class.[12] While humans have always had an impact on local environments and larger ecosystems, the "Anthropocene" suggests a shift, indeed a rupture, in the Earth System as such. Except for the role played by cyanobacteria in the oxygenation of the earth's atmosphere, this is unprecedented in planetary history. That humanity has become a "geological force of nature" cannot be separated from the logic of domination that is characteristic of imperialism, colonialism, modernity, capitalism, industrialization, and neoliberal globalization.

Fifth, when using the term "Anthropocene" as such, with quotation marks and with reference to Paul Crutzen and the AWG, claiming that it is "widely used" cannot hide the fierce contestation that has erupted over

8. The classic analysis of kairotic time remains that of Paul Tillich in his *Systematic Theology 3*, 369–72.

9. See Northcott, "Eschatology in the Anthropocene," 109.

10. See Vaai, "We are Earth," 77.

11. Chris Thomas as reported by David Adams in "Ditching 'Anthropocene': Why Ecologists Say the Term Still Matters: Beyond Stratigraphic Definitions, the Name Has Broader Significance for Understanding Humans' Place on Earth," published in *Nature*, March 14, 2024.

12. For a discussion of this term, see my *Christianity and a Critique of Consumerism*. Not all households in a consumer society are necessarily part of the consumer class, while there is a (sometimes significant) minority of affluent households that are part of the consumer class in relatively poor countries. From the perspective of production, one may place the blame for anthropogenic destruction on the most affluent 1 percent of the population, but in terms of levels of consumption, this would involve around 25 percent of the global population. While levels of consumption apply to the consumer class, consumerism as a mindset, an aspiration, and indeed an ideology is found among the middle class and the poor alike—and tragically so.

naming it as such, its precise dating,[13] its anthropogenic causes, generalizations regarding the presumed "*anthropos*" across various global divides, debates in the humanities on culpability for the shift, and many more.[14] The underlying problem is that the advent of the "Anthropocene" as a historical marker cannot escape from the problem of a history written by the powerful (in this case influential scientists), by the victors of history, all too often telling a his-story. This applies even if the content of the story is one that fragments,[15] disrupts any hegemonic claims to totality (as the geological timescale may well assume). The danger remains that narratives of a rupture in the Earth System "can erase Indigenous peoples' perspectives on the connection between climate change and colonial violence."[16] At the same time, it is implausible that the shift to the "Anthropocene" is monocausal, that it can be brought under a single rubric such as industrialized capitalism, because socialist economies are also premised on sustained economic growth. Such debates are necessary, given the multiple power struggles at play, but none of this can alter the bottom line, namely the shift that is taking place away from the relative stability of the Holocene.

Sixth, to speak of a "shift" should not be underestimated. Compare that with coming to terms with fluctuations (e.g., mood swings) and change (e.g., growing older) in individual life, generational change, natural cycles associated with days and nights, seasons, daily weather changes, the tides, and so forth. Such a shift must be understood in terms of the way feedback loops operate in a self-regulating system to amplify small changes. Clark and Szerszynski offer a helpful explanation of what a "catastrophic shift" entails: "Feedback loops involve the recursive cycling of inputs or effects through a system, and tend to absorb and dampen down perturbations or stress. But once a certain point is passed, feedbacks have a habit of switching from a stabilizing or 'negative' function to a 'positive' amplification of pressures for change. And it is this passage over a threshold into self-augmenting change that can tip a system into a relatively speedy reorganization into a new operating state."[17]

13. I am persuaded by the argument of Clark and Szerszynski, *Planetary Social Thought*, 175, for a longer-term, more regionalized position that recognizes "the more gradual, patchy, discontinuous and incremental geological changes wrought by a range of human collectivities over multi-millennial time frames." The need for precision marking in the AWG is then somewhat misplaced.

14. For a discussion, see my "Some Theological Reflections on Multi-Disciplinary Discourse on the 'Anthropocene'."

15. As David Tracy argues, drawing on Walter Benjamin, "Strong Fragments Shatter, Fragment, Negate Any Closed Totality System." See Tracy, *Fragments*, 1.

16. Kyle White as quoted in Clark and Szerszynski, *Planetary Social Thought*, 53.

17. Clark and Szerszynski, *Planetary Social Thought*, 26.

Finally, before the advent of the Holocene, human communities were confronted by multiple fluctuations (consider transfers of leadership), but the most significant change was probably related to migration, while other social changes (beyond individual birth, bearing children, and death) were imperceptible. Amid the Holocene, there have been many fluctuations (given wars, the rise and fall of empires), but it was the shift to a dispensation beyond the last ice age that enabled the emergence of agriculture, towns, larger cities, empires, writing, the use of bronze and later iron, the introduction of the wheel, coins for trade, the plough, the lens, gunpowder, printing, the steam engine, internal combustion engines, artificial fertilization, computers, the Internet, and so forth. Each of these innovations brought about linear instead of cyclical change.[18] One may debate the magnitude of the changes brought about by the Industrial and the Digital Revolutions, together with the French and American Revolutions and their associated societal changes and turning points, at times prompting "rapid social change" instead of gradual, cumulative change.[19] However, the shift to the "Anthropocene," and its associated tipping points, may well prove to be comparable in magnitude with the shift from the late Pleistocene to the Holocene.

Note that speaking of a shift of this magnitude should not be confused with (secular or religious) apocalyptic expectations of "the end of the world," although such expectations may well be understandable amid such a shift. At least one may expect a critique of the present dispensation, a radical disavowal of the current global order, sensing that things cannot continue as they are. Speaking of a historical shift suggests a transition that may be inevitable but still requires coming to terms with.

Coming to Terms with This Shift …

How, then, should one assess the significance of this shift from the Holocene to the "Anthropocene," given the level of severity, with irreversible turning and tipping points, as a rupture in the Earth System, and as already there for three generations?

To reflect on current social change, to assess the significance of such change, is nothing but the long-standing task of interpreting this moment in history, now not only human history but also planetary history. A core assumption of discourse on the "Anthropocene" is that human history can

18. Note that linear change (as in linear algebra) may imply a straight line, but a single line may also be shaped in the form of a curve.

19. For this perceptive understanding of history as interpreting social change, see Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 1–35.

no longer be separated from planetary history.[20] The task is one of living within a dynamic planet, not by seeking to study and then transcend the natural order (the dream of modernity) but by navigating planetary volatility and thresholds.[21]

In the discussion below, I will suggest that this shift raises perplexing questions about the meaning of this historical transition. It raises complex philosophical questions about the meaning (if any) and directionality of history as such, about diverging notions of change, of time and what may abide throughout shifts in human and planetary history (eternity). It also raises disturbing theological questions: What may God be up to? Is God "stirring the soup," as it were, to prevent it from burning? Is such a powerful God who is governing history at all attractive? Even without reference to God, the shift to the "Anthropocene" raises questions around the ultimate significance of this moment in history.

Before addressing such questions, it is important to stress that coming to terms with this shift will shape global agendas for the foreseeable future. This will not only apply to the annual Conferences of the Parties (COPs) but also to the unemployed on the streets of many African cities, to subsistence farmers and fishing communities trying to come to terms with this rupture in the Earth System. This shift takes on ominous proportions for people living on low-lying islands who have been heavily impacted by waves of colonialism, industrialization, and neocolonialism, who have nevertheless warmly embraced Christianity, who seek to retrieve and preserve Indigenous ecological wisdom and to maintain their language and cultural identity, whose lives are shaped by both celebration and resilience, but who are reluctantly forced to acknowledge the shift as probably inevitable and irreversible—and may have to migrate from ancestral landscapes and seascapes against their wishes.[22] Perhaps one may begin to speak of the epistemological privilege of migrants?!

"Coming to terms" will entail very many detailed tasks but underlying all of that is the basic question posed by the bottom line of a shift from the Holocene to the "Anthropocene"—or whatever other name may be attached

20. See the first of Dipesh Chakrabarty's four theses: "Anthropogenic explanations of climate change spell the collapse of the age-old humanist distinction between natural history and human history." See Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History," 201.

21. On the notion of "planetary multiplicity," see Clark and Szerszynski, *Planetary Social Thought*, 88–90.

22. This provisional assessment is based on personal visits to Samoa, Tuvalu, and Fiji in August/September 2023 and conversations with students, pastors, and scholars from several other islands in the region. See also Maina Talia's grappling with traditional cultural resources and biblical narratives amid a climate crisis that may force people to relocate. He asks: "Will we still be able to dance and sing the *fatele* (a traditional dance) if we are compelled through no fault of our own to relocate?" See his "*Kauafua Fatele* for Christ's Sake," 66.

to that—namely how to respond to the transition phase. The advent of the "Anthropocene" poses a set of interlocking "wicked" or "superwicked" problems that humans and other forms of life have become trapped in.[23] Nevertheless, the transition still has to be negotiated.

The image that I have in mind here is one of canoeing down a swift-moving river, entering a portal with a series of rapids, and reaching a point of no return where one may be confronted with waterfalls, in the hope that some equilibrium may again be found downstream.[24] A better image (adapting the Māori metaphor of braided rivers) may be canoeing down a broad river over hilly terrain, with many tributaries, diversions, and confluences, so that the decision which stream to follow may be decisive.[25] If so, we are in for a rough ride anyway; some decisions can no longer be reverted, but it still matters which stream is selected because some may be catastrophic. Understandably, such a transition has ancient resonance and cannot but lure the creative imagination with *fascinans et tremendum*.[26] It is a field where Norse legends and fantasy writing are at play.

There are only a few basic options available for coming to terms with a shift of this magnitude. One definition of "coming to terms with" is "to learn to accept and deal with an unpleasant situation or event, especially after being upset or angry about it for a long time."[27] Such acceptance may be hardly appropriate, but neither is denial, especially if the advent of the "Anthropocene" is irreversible and can already be marked by the mid-twentieth century. If so, we are already living *in* the "Anthropocene." Fear and being shocked over the scale of the rupture[28] are understandable, but moral paralysis is hardly appropriate. Perhaps there is some room for "contending with" instead of "coming to terms with," while facing the planetary shift requires further elaboration.[29] The default position may well be to ignore the shift by following a "business as usual" approach, seeking

23. For a discussion, see my "Why, Exactly, is Climate Change a Wicked Problem?" I defended the view of sin as a common mess in which we find ourselves (together with other forms of life), to which we did not contribute equally and in which we do not suffer equally, in *Redeeming Sin?*

24. To my complete surprise, I recently found that Arnold van Ruler also employs this image but eschatologically, namely in an essay entitled "Eschatological Notices." He maintains that, in the eschaton, the kayak goes through great rapids, but it goes right through them. See his *Verzameld Werk 5C*, 904.

25. I am grateful to Jonathan Boston (Victoria University of Wellington) for suggesting this alternative image to me in person.

26. See Clark and Szerszynski, *Planetary Social Thought*, 22.

27. See https://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/come-to-terms-with-something [last accessed 14 April 2023].

28. See Bonneuil and Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene*.

29. See Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, 85–87.

more economic growth and/or development and more prosperity, albeit perhaps with a few more environmental precautions, eating and drinking and being merry. This may well prove catastrophic. In the imagery of canoeing down a river, this may lead to being confronted by dangerous rapids and deadly cliffs. In response, some are fastening their seatbelts, seeking to ensure their own survival. There may be some who would hope to side-step any looming catastrophe by escaping to safer territory or even to other planets.[30] Critics may be blaming the culprits (dirty industries, capitalists, technocrats), naming them and shaming them. There are also those who mourn over "much beauty irrevocably lost," and proceed to write a "requiem for a species."[31] Indeed, as we enter more deeply into the "Anthropocene," "grief will be our companion."[32] Others may just want to give up hope, life, and everything else. A few are arrogantly heralding the arrival of a "good Anthropocene."[33] Most are probably just trying to figure out what the hell is going on.[34]

In addition to such altogether human responses to the shift from the Holocene to the "Anthropocene," one may find especially three well-known and dominant approaches, both in global secular debates and in ecumenical circles. These can be captured with the key terms sustainability (mitigation), adaptation, and resistance (calling for justice). By contrasting these terms, the question may be framed in this way: is the shift to the "Anthropocene" a matter of sustainability or, instead, of habitability?[35] A few brief comments on each of these terms may suffice.

Some (especially from the Global North?) are desperately seeking to prevent the shift from the Holocene to the "Anthropocene" by sustaining Holocene conditions as long as that may be possible.[36] This is the intuition behind discourse on sustainability, the quest for sustainable development,

30. Other options include seeking to escape change, to control change, or to acquiesce passively in change. See Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 1.

31. The allusion is to Hamilton, *Requiem for a Species*.

32. See Clark and Szerszynski, *Planetary Social Thought*, 98, with reference to geographer Lesley Head.

33. The "Ecomodernist Manifesto" is a pertinent example of the call "to use humanity's extraordinary powers in service of creating a good Anthropocene," one that would promote the four human aspirations of peace, freedom, material well-being, and environmental health together. See *An Ecomodernist Manifesto*, signed by eighteen co-authors, http://www.ecomodernism.org/ [last accessed October 15, 2024].

34. An alternative may be found in Chakrabarty's advocacy for an "epochal consciousness" that is not oriented towards finding solutions but calls for endurance to live not only with the tensions of insolubility but also a sense of wonder and reverence—which places one (Chakrabarty acknowledges) in the neighborhood of theology! See Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, 197, 198.

35. For this proposal, see also Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, 83.

36. For a more detailed assessment, see my "What, Exactly, Needs to Be Sustained amidst a Changing Climate?"

or, if that fails, sustainable livelihoods at the local level. The question is not only *whether* the use of renewable resources can be sustained, *how* that can be sustained, or *how long* that can be sustained but also *what* it is that is to be sustained. The current global economic order? Economic growth? Industrialized civilization? Consumerist lifestyles? Ultimately, I suggest, what is to be sustained is the relative stability that characterized the Holocene. But what if the Holocene is no more? Those recognizing that it is already too late may at least be seeking to slow down or divert the process so that the ride is not that rough. The core task remains one of transforming the energy basis of the global economy from fossil fuels to renewable alternatives within the space of sixty years from 1990 to 2050. But even if that can be accomplished (which looks increasingly unlikely), would that suffice? Is the capitalist accumulation of wealth the primary problem so that nothing short of scaling down the size of the global economy (its resource extraction and energy consumption) would do?[37] What about the energy needs of growing economies in Asia and Africa? Some contemplate radical technological solutions in the form of carbon capture and solar radiation management, raising questions about the feasibility and the dangers associated with such solutions.

Others (especially but not only from the Global South) focus on the multiple tasks of adaptation to address the symptoms associated with the rupture in the Earth System: viral pandemics, sea level rise, cyclones, heat waves, droughts, escalating water shortages, flooding, coral bleaching, loss of topsoil, and many more. These efforts are commendable and necessary. The question will remain whether the solutions found are commensurate to the scale and severity of the problem. For example, erecting a sea wall of 1 meter in many urban areas and Small Island States may perhaps suffice for the rest of this century, but would it suffice in a world where the average surface temperature rises to 2.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels?

Yet others are protesting against and hoping to somehow resist the advent of the "Anthropocene." Such resistance may be found in prophetic and activist calls for justice. Discourse on ecojustice may be wedded with discourse on sustainability, but the global divides in this regard should not be underestimated. Calls for environmental justice (given environmental racism), ecojustice (given the link with economic and neocolonial exploitation), and climate justice (given that the impact of climate change is disproportionate to historic carbon emissions) come primarily from the victims, who are rightly skeptical about sustaining anything that has led to such injustice in the first place. But what may doing justice, giving each

37. I am drawing here on Chakrabarty's discussion of two narratives of climate change. See his *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, 135–41.

their due (*suum cuique*), restoring relationships of inequality (given the impact of centuries of imperialism and colonialism), and restoring ecological balance mean if it is no longer possible to restore Holocene conditions?[38]

Such resistance may be found not only against naming the "Anthropocene" as such but also against the science-based narrative as the only truth, often excluding references to culture and religion as resources for adaptation. The linear logic of the geological timescale is imposed upon an understanding of time as fluid, embedded in the movements of oceans, rivers, plants, animals, and humans in a single web of life. Such a linear logic is reminiscent of the colonial logic of domination in the name of differences of race, culture, language, and ethnicity. Instead, in many Indigenous communities around the world, there is a longing to retrieve Indigenous ecological wisdom, worldviews, traditions, cultures, and values. While some benefits of an industrialized economy are embraced, there is a need to make selective use of technology so as not to undermine the vitality of community life. At the same time, there is a need to cope with the migration, especially of youth, to cities and other countries in search of employment opportunities. Such Stoic resistance thus forms the training ground for cultivating the endurance and resilience that have enabled Indigenous communities to cope with other catastrophes in the past, even where this required migration. There is an insistence that Indigenous communities are not helpless victims but have cultural resources to address the challenges associated with the advent of the "Anthropocene." Some may show solidarity with the actual victims, lending a helping hand as "good neighbors."[39] Yet the question remains whether such "resistance" is commensurate to a shift that is already irreversible. Is this the most appropriate category to be used in a time like this?

Coming to terms with the challenge therefore implies the need to acknowledge failure: it is no longer possible to prevent crossing the 1.5-degree-Celsius threshold the world set as a target at the Paris COP in 2015. It is too late to avoid an irreversible shift. Nevertheless, as the image of canoeing down a river with many divergent streams suggests, there are still major decisions ahead. Some catastrophes can still be avoided through wise collective decision-making. Nevertheless—and this is the crux of the matter—the rupture in the Earth System, named as the "Anthropocene," implies the need for a shift in our collective thinking. Well-established categories such as civilization, excellence, economic growth, sustainable development, mitigation and adaptation, human flourishing, sustainability as such, even justice, can no longer suffice, at least not on their own.

38. See my discussion in "The Limits of Ecological Justice?"

39. The allusion is to Maina Talia's thesis, "Am I not your Tuakoi?"

What is required is a comprehensive transformation, but by itself the "trans-" in this term does not indicate the direction of such change, only the need for a change in form.

In academic circles, addressing this shift necessarily constitutes a multidisciplinary agenda, involving the full range of disciplines, forcing upon all of us the need to become *uni*versities again.[40] In this contribution, I will raise the question what, if anything, Christian theology can contribute to multidisciplinary efforts in this regard. For Christians, coming to terms with this shift is above all a pastoral and a prophetic task, at best in solidarity with the victims. There may be a need for confessing guilt over Christian complicity more than for confessing the Christian faith.[41] Nevertheless, there is also the question whether Christian theology as such can make a distinct contribution that does not merely repeat what others are saying. Perhaps, but then it may well do so by playing the fool, coming up with responses that others can shoot down for comic relief in search of more adequate answers. Or perhaps theology may play a role in articulating tacit assumptions but, as Walter Benjamin mischievously suggests, is otherwise best kept out of sight.[42]

Taking a Cue from God's Governance in History (*Gubernatio*)

I will take my cue here from a core Christian conviction, namely the trust in God's care. In the Reformed tradition, God's providence is usually understood in terms of three or four core themes, namely God's work of continuing creation, God's conservation to curb the spread of evil (*conservatio*), God's governance in history (*gubernatio*), and the interplay between God's agency, human agency, and creaturely agency (*concursus*). I will focus here only on God's governance in history. Whereas *conservatio* may suggest the need for ecological equilibrium, *gubernatio* suggests the recognition of movement, not merely a mechanistic, linear change in location but also the possibility of qualitative change.[43]

Accordingly, it is the mystery of God's providence that gives meaning to history.[44] God is steering history towards God's ultimate goal for the world,

40. On the need for and complexity of such a multidisciplinary approach, see Thomas, Williams, and Zalasiewicz, *The Anthropocene*.

41. See my "Confessing Guilt in the Context of Climate Change."

42. See the first of Walter Benjamin's "Theses on a Philosophy of History."

43. For a discussion, see Bergmann, *Creation Set Free*, 204–26. Qualitative movements in nature itself can be described in contrasting ways—as becoming, development, expansion, evolution, growth, metamorphosis, process, or self-organization. Each of these options has sparked theological interest.

44. See Niebuhr, *Faith and History*, 42.

despite multiple deviations, distortions, and disruptions. It is precisely when things seem to go wrong that such trust in God's governance, in Christ's reign, and in the counter-movements of the Spirit is expressed and then becomes tested and contested. This is epitomized by the execution of Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah, and the complete collapse of his movement (but for his mom and a prostitute). Time and again, often in hindsight, soon contested by others, the biblical authors discerned God's governance, not only in the history of Israel (and the later Jewish remnants of Israel) or in the church, but in world history. Accordingly, the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ is nothing less than the turning point in world history, indeed in cosmic history. Salvation does not entail an escape from history but is situated in history and takes place through history. On this basis, one may discern a sense of direction in history towards the coming reign of God, whether at a personal, ecclesial, national, or global level. Such discernment requires a reinterpretation of past saving events, correcting previous interpretations in the light of new events until a pattern emerges whereby the act of reinterpretation is regarded as belonging to salvation history itself.[45] By placing the New Testament on par with the Old Testament in the biblical canon, the historical nature of God's work was confirmed as open-ended.[46] This is expressed in the conviction that, ultimately, history is in God's hands.

At least, that is more or less what (some) Christians say they believe! Such a notion of God's providence is clearly what is at stake, from a theological perspective, in coming to terms with the shift from the Holocene to the "Anthropocene."

Of course, this confession is immediately contested by ample counter-evidence. In addition to many previous concerns over natural evil (symbolized by the Lisbon earthquake) and social evil (symbolized by Auschwitz and Hiroshima),[47] one may well wonder if the advent of the "Anthropocene" is not a final falsification of God's governance in history. How on earth could one claim that one event, namely the resurrection of Jesus Christ (based as it is on a rumor), is *the* turning point in history and that this still makes all the difference two thousand years later? One may well ask, "Where is the evidence?"

Moreover, the danger of any notion of providence as God's governance in history is that this would fall into the trap of hegemonic and oppressive

45. See Cullmann, *Salvation in History*, 88–89. For Cullmann, both event and the interpretation of the event (*kerygma*) are therefore important. The Word is itself an event, but to reduce event to kerygma prompts the danger of docetism (91). Inversely, it is the Word that interprets an event in history to form part of salvation history (see 136–40).

46. See Cullmann, *Salvation in History*, 297.

47. For a discussion of these symbols, see Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*.

totality systems by comprehending history as a totality, typically by the victors of history, on God's behalf, seeking to take God's place.[48] At best, the Jewish-Christian symbols of exodus, exile, cross, resurrection, and parousia disrupt any Hegelian sense of totality. Nevertheless, in speaking of God's governance in history, salvation history, or God's economy (*not* to be reduced to the history of salvation), some grand narrative can easily return—as is evident in successive empires legitimized in the name of a triumphant Christendom—whether Roman, Spanish, Dutch, Danish, French, British, German, or American, even South African. If history itself does not yield to the continuity of narrative, if it breaks up in images, disperses into fragments, how does one even begin to speak of God's governance in history?[49] Is any attempt to offer a God's-eye view on history not precisely the kind of arrogance that the historical, linguistic, hermeneutical, social, gendered, and spatial turns should have liberated us from?

Note again the triple meaning of the word "history" here, namely planetary "history" (the totality of natural history, including human history), the narrative account of portions of that "history" as a human way of engaging with the past (through storytelling but also through reflecting on such storytelling), and "history" as an (academic) study of such narrative accounts.[50] In practice, though, it is hard to separate any historical occurrence from its symbolic interpretation.[51] This distinction does allow for a speculative philosophy (and theology) on the meaning of such history, but any narrative account of such history is readily contested on epistemological grounds. Not surprisingly, the discipline of history is then dominated by epistemological debates and easily confined to the study of minute historical scraps. The question whether it is possible to speak of history as such therefore pertains to the second and third meanings of the word "history." There clearly is something like planetary history; any attempt to reconstruct such history as a whole, including theological views on history, is impossible (also because that history remains open ended) and can therefore fall into the trap of

48. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 1*, 144.

49. For David Tracy, the marginal fragment that "recalls forgotten, even repressed, memories of the suffering of the victims of history," the untold stories of those defeated by history, has to be privileged over any concept of historical totality. He contrasts the "fragment" with a "symbol," where either the Enlightenment or the Romantic nostalgia is maintained to grasp something of the now-lost harmonious whole. By contrast, the fragments (or better, "frag-events") fragment, shatter all totalities and oppressive closed systems, opening them for difference and otherness, to "liminal Infinity," to being bearers of infinity. See Tracy's *Fragments*, 1–2, 29, 68.

50. See Walsh, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, 16.

51. See Tillich, *Systematic Theology 3*, 301.

hegemonic grand narratives, while history as an academic discipline is characterized by an irreducible plurality of conflicting approaches. At the same time, any concentration on narratives (and words), following the linguistic turn, should not divert our attention from the suffering that is caused, for example, by ecological destruction. Words (and histories) can hurt too but not in the same way that oppression, tyranny, and genocide do.

In order to refrain from any futile apologetic approach in this regard, I will not offer a history or exposition of the doctrine of providence in any direct way but hope to show why this may indeed be relevant also for secular discourse on interpreting the shift towards the "Anthropocene."

Twelve Contrasting Assumptions Regarding Such a Historical Shift

How, then, does one come to terms with a shift of such proportions, from the Holocene to the "Anthropocene," given that no agriculture, no form of civilization, and none of the axial religions existed outside of the Holocene? Indeed, next to the shift to the Holocene itself, the shift to the "Anthropocene" may pose the biggest set of challenges to human survival over recorded human history.

Allow me to identify and contrast twelve diverging assumptions that may well be at play in the interpretation of such a historical shift.[52] I need to do so in the briefest possible form, painting only in very broad strokes, at the obvious risk of gross over-simplification.[53]

Indigenous Forms of Spirituality

At least since Mircea Eliade's description of the myth of the eternal return, it has been customary to describe the understanding of time in Indigenous

52. See also the overview of notions of the end of the world offered by Körtner, *The End of the World*, 107–93.

53. In an unpublished article entitled "Representations of the Past: Of Giving and Keeping Historical Accounts," my colleague Douglas Lawrie sketches different ways of structuring historical plots: (1) the Western progress plot to interpret the past as a history of the slow victory of civilization, reason, and freedom over barbarism, ignorance, superstition, and tyranny; (2) the exodus plot that allows for dialectical developments (liberation from oppression); (3) messianic plots that look forward to a glorious culmination; (4) the regress plot following some golden age; (5) cyclic plots following a creation—sin—punishment—grace or birth—growth—death pattern. Such plots are well-known theoretical possibilities. The exercise in the rest of this section is to identify assumptions that may come into play in coming to terms with a historical shift.

forms of spirituality as cyclical instead of linear.[54] There is a cosmic balance of forces governed by the interplay between day and night, summer and winter, ebb and flow, birth and death. If the cosmic harmony is disturbed through human behavior, by deviation from "the norm," the task of myths and rituals is to help societies to restore the equilibrium, to sustain these natural cycles.[55] Social cycles (weeks, months, and years) help to structure and thus simplify life. Such Indigenous cultures are found around the world, in Africa as in the Amazon or Aotearoa. There are many calling for a retrieval of such ecological wisdom as a response to the disruption of the balance in the Earth System. Others may be thinking that this approach cannot but fail to address a shift of this magnitude so that Indigenous cultures will find it hard to survive in an urbanized and industrialized context. Some paint post-apocalyptic scenarios where a return to such Indigenous forms of spirituality is deemed inevitable.

There remain some questions over a purely cyclical notion of time where both joy and sorrow are infinitely repeated, but where any moment in time is ultimately meaningless because no change or direction is deemed possible. It may be more accurate to say that the focus of such societies is the acceptance, transmission, preservation, and securing of life, following a rhythm of perennial return even though, in reality, traditions function while economic changes are introduced over time, leading to fundamental evolutionary changes.[56]

54. See Eliade, *Cosmos and History*. Eliade describes his main theme in a remarkably lucid way: "The chief difference between the man of the archaic and traditional societies and the man of the modern societies with their strong imprint of Judeo-Christianity lies in the fact that the former feels himself indissolubly connected with the Cosmos and the cosmic rhythms, whereas the latter insists that he is connected with History. Of course, for the man of the archaic societies, the Cosmos too has a 'history', if only because it is the creation of the gods and is held to have been organized by super-natural beings or mythical heroes. But this 'history' of the Cosmos and of human society is a 'sacred history', preserved and transmitted through myths. More than that, it is a 'history' that can be repeated indefinitely, in the sense that the myths serve as models for ceremonies that periodically reactualize the tremendous events that occurred at the beginning of time" (vii–viii).

55. Eliade argues that cosmogonic myths respond to the need for regeneration (whenever something goes wrong in society) by periodically suspending, even annulling time (by re-creating instead of restoring the world) so that "the world stands still." There is an anti-historical intent in the refusal to preserve the memory of particular (unusual) past events, the will to devaluate time and becoming, and therefore the refusal to understand humans as historical beings. See Eliade, *Cosmos and History*, 74, 81, 85. He concludes that "[…] the unceasing rehearsal of the same primordial myths […] although it takes place in time, does not bear the burden of time, does not record time's irreversibility; in other words, completely ignores what is especially characteristic and decisive in a consciousness of time" (86). Thus, "[n]o event is irreversible and no transformation is final" (89). Time itself is constantly regenerated by an eternal return (*illud tempus*) (90).

56. See Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 29, almost verbatim.

In the African context, John Mbiti's denial of an African understanding of the future was already heavily criticized in the 1960s.[57] One may argue that any traditional society preserves a narrative notion of time where the focus may be on telling a story about the (distant) past in order to understand the present, leaving open whatever the future may hold.[58] Narratives, one may say, by definition select and cluster together events from the past on the basis of present significance. Note that although stories can of course be set in the future, there can be no history or narrative description of the present or the future.[59] This would apply whether a story is mythical or historiographical, fantasy, fictional, or factual. To make prophetic claims about the future is to "extrapolate from the configurations and concatenations of the past in the direction of what is still to come."[60] The anticipation of the future is not itself narrative in structure but may be based on the narration of stories inspiring hope (such as the exodus and the resurrection). Stories may be repeated and repetitive, but there is some narrative directionality that suggests a spiral rather than a cycle.[61]

57. Mbiti's doctoral thesis was on *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background*. In *Introduction to African Religion*, he maintains the following: "African ideas of time concern mainly the present and the past, and have little to say about the future, which is in any case expected to go on without end. Events come and go in the form of minor and major rhythms. The minor rhythms are found in the lives of the living things of this earth (such as men, animals and plants), in their birth, growth, procreation and death. These rhythms are thought to occur in the lives of everybody and everything that has physical life. The major rhythms of time are events like day and night, the months reckoned on the basis of the phases of the moon), the seasons of rain and dry weather, and the events of nature which come and go in greater intervals (such as the flowering of certain plants, the migration of certain birds and insects, famines and the movement of certain heavenly bodies). All these rhythms of time suggest that the universe will never come to a halt, whatever changes there may be. In many places, circles are used as symbols of the continuity of the universe" (34–35).

58. For such a view of the relation between narrative and temporality, see Paul Ricoeur's now-classic three-volume work on *Time and Narrative*. His thesis is that "time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence." See *Time and Narrative*, volume 1, 52. Story is the mimetic mode through which temporality is socially constructed, in Ricoeur's terms prefigured, refigured, and configured (54). A story imposes some narrative consonance (or resonance) upon temporal discordance, which Ricoeur describes as the "violence of interpretation" (72). If so, the directionality within a narrative plot (a network of intentional actions) provides a clue to sense the directionality of human history. This applies whether the narrative is fictional or historical. It applies to the his-stories of the victors but also the stories of the victims of history whose stories cry out to be told with some vengeance (75). The content of the story therefore matters. This would also apply to the narrative of God's economy (see below).

59. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 1*, 147. Ricoeur explains the conclusion that there can be no history of the present or the future in two ways. Firstly, a narrator (situated in a particular time and context) describes the significance of a past event in the light of another past event. In Ricoeur's example, "In 1717, the author of *Rameau's Nephew* was born." Given the discussion above, one may say the same of a sentence like, "The AWG decided in favor of marking the 'Anthropocene' with a golden spike by the mid-twentieth century CE." Secondly, narrative descriptions differ from ordinary descriptions by employing "project verbs" that cover a range of subsidiary actions. E.g., "Since the term 'Anthropocene' was popularized by Paul Crutzen, there erupted considerable controversy over naming it as such." See Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 1*, 145–47.

60. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 1*, 144.

61. See the preference for a hermeneutical spiral instead of a (vicious) circle in Ricoeur's oeuvre, e.g., in *Time and Narrative 1*, 72.

From what I understand, Indigenous cultures from Small Island States, for example, do not adopt a purely cyclical notion of time.[62] In fact, there is no word for time in the precolonial Samoan language (*taimi* is merely a transliteration of the English word "time"). There are rhythmic cycles associated with planting seasons, day and night, the moon and tides. Events are not marked by linear distance but filled by an ecological matrix of fluid movements.[63] However, there is also the directionality of ocean currents that enabled ancient forms of navigation. There are some distant legends of having arrived on the islands once upon a time long, long ago. This allows for the recognition of the possibility of further migration sometime in an uncertain future.[64] But daily existence is characterized by an embedded and embodied flow of movements—waves, winds, clouds, leaves, living creatures, and the like. Such fluidity enables a critique of the linear mentality of converting "resources" into capital through extraction.

The Greek (Neo-Platonic) Return to the One: A Single Cycle

The intuition of Greek philosophers such as Parmenides, Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics was to discern in the world of pervasive change, temporal flux, and natural cycles an underlying timeless pattern. They were seeking to penetrate behind change and contingency to discover the realm of Being.[65] While entities may change perennially, the forms of such entities do not change and need to be uncovered. Likewise, history may be filled with changing events, but the forms of life and social structures were

62. See Pearson, "Oceanic Readings on Creation and Redemption," 371–80. These impressions follow from intensive conversations with academics and pastors from various islands during visits to Samoa, Fiji, and Tuvalu in August and September 2023. These are merely my impressions and remain subject to further corrections. Tafue Lusama observes that Tuvaluan society is "deeply shaped by a circular relational concept of time," resists Western linear time as underlying colonial conquest, and calls for a relational concept of time "that sees God enveloping and existing in time through the life of Jesus" in order to bring God closer to the climate crisis enveloping the world today. See *Vaa Fesokotaki*, 105–6. This does not imply that *te Atua* (God) is limited to Tuvaluan time and space; instead, Tuvaluan time and space form part of the being and life of God (133). God is therefore involved in everyday struggles to address climate change but is also beyond such struggles, offering a hope that builds resilience (133).

63. See Naisilisili, "Custodianship," 118.

64. The Ekalesia Kelisiano Tuvalu concluded in an unpublished but widely circulated statement, entitled "Dancing with God in the Rainbow," dated September 2016, that "[a]t this point in time the EKT supports the government's position that migration and relocation is not an option." It explains: "The proposal on migration avoids the radical call to change the economic practices that destroy the land and people. The need is to save the earth from destruction and not to save a few selected individuals from the drowning land." I received this document in the form of a handout.

65. I am drawing here partly on the still-excellent discussion by Niebuhr in *Faith and History*, 42. Niebuhr outlines three notions of history, namely those of classic culture, the Judeo-Christian tradition, and modernity.

given and regarded as legitimate because they were divinely ordained.[66] History may be a rather chaotic and ceaseless series of wars and struggles, but human reason (through memory, i.e., the memory of past events, consciousness, and foresight as the weaker twin of memory)[67] provides the ability to be emancipated from such cycles, to rise above the flux of temporal events, the tyranny of the present moment. Harmony cannot be found in changing events; the finite has no eternal meaning.[68] Truth cannot and does not change. While the Stoics spoke of eternal repetition, Plato saw the drama of history as necessary in order to complete a single cycle. In Plato's *Timaeus*, time is measured by the cyclical revolution of the celestial spheres and is defined as a moving image of eternity. Aristotle conceived time as coming round, as the rotation of a sphere. Being circular, time has no direction, no beginning, middle, or end except insofar as the circular movement returns back to itself.[69] In neo-Platonic philosophy, there is then a movement that is described in terms of a single cycle of alienation from the One through material externalization (creation through the Demiurge) and the quest of the soul to return to the One through rational contemplation of the essence of being. Either way, the emergence of novelty in history remains excluded by such circular movement,[70] where time is understood as a quantified and infinite continuum of precise, fleeting instants. Greek historians such as Herodotos and Thucydides developed a coherent sense of history moving from past to future, from barbarism to civilization, but did not maintain that history is goal oriented.

Such Greek notions of history leave open the question how the future is to be understood, if not as directed towards a certain purpose (σκοπός), goal (στόχος), or end (τέλος). Can it best be captured in terms of fate or fortune, doom or destiny? How is one's destiny to be interpreted—as something given (an apportioned lot), as forces beyond one's locus of control that predetermine what will become, or as raw materials (genes, talents) that are given and that remain available to engage with in freedom?[71]

66. See Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 188–89.

67. See Niebuhr, *Faith and History*, 21.

68. See Berkhof, *Christ the Meaning of History*, 20.

69. See Agamben, *Infancy and History*, 101.

70. See Niebuhr, *Faith and History*, 43.

71. I am provoked here by a discussion with University of the Western Cape (UWC) students of Langdon Gilkey's *Reaping the Whirlwind*. He offers an extended discussion of the role of destiny (what is given), given the contrast between fate and freedom (36–69). He wishes to maintain some faith in a nonfated future (90) amid a time when faith in history as progress has largely dissipated (9).

The Hebrew Affirmation of God's Presence in History

Some scholars, including secular scholars, claim that the origins of a more linear understanding of history are rooted in a particular prophetic strand of the Hebrew imagination,[72] even though a sharp contrast between Hebrew

72. This claim is made in three texts that I have read with a group of students for Contemporary Christian Theologies (TST 744 and 844) at UWC in 2023. See Fukuyama, *The End of History*, 56 (attributing the first universal history to Augustine); Berkhof, *Christ, the Meaning of History*; and Van Ruler, "Humanity—the Meaning of History" in *This Earthly Life Matters*, 177–97 (see also the section on Van Ruler later in this essay).

Hendrikus Berkhof puts this concisely: "We must thank not Greece, nor Persia, but Israel for our sense that history is goal-directed, and that as such it has meaning" (21). Langdon Gilkey (*Reaping the Whirlwind*, 159) maintains that the modern consciousness of history arose on the basis of the Christian interpretation of history developed by Augustine and Calvin: "The ontological ground for this confidence in the potential meaningfulness of time was given by the doctrine of creation and of divine sovereignty over time, and the linear conception of time that they imply; the ground for 'meaning' of each moment of time was provided by the promise of eschatological fulfillment; and the seal, sign and proof of the eternal meaning of thee finite moments was given by the experience of grace on the one hand and by the fact of the incarnation, on the other."

In addition, one may mention Reinhold Niebuhr, who states that "[i]t was Christian faith rather than modern science that first breached the classical conception of time." See his *Faith and History*, 46. Niebuhr notes that the biblical notions of creation and divine sovereignty over human destiny are hardly unique, but nevertheless have a unique quality: "This quality is given to Biblical thought by the fact that the God who is operative in historical destiny is not conceived as the projection or extension of the nation's or individual's ideals and purposes, nor as a power co-extensive with, or supplementary to, the nation's power; nor as a force of reason identical with the Logos which the human mind incarnates. Israel does not choose God. God chooses Israel; and this choice is regarded as an act of grace for which no reason can be given, other than God's own love (Deuteronomy 7:7–8)." See *Faith and History*, 115.

Jürgen Moltmann follows the same trajectory in his early *Theology of Hope* (see 95–102) by contrasting the epiphany cults of fertility religions with Israel's emphasis on history in the light of God's promises: "Beneath the star of the promise of God it becomes possible to experience reality as 'history'" (106). He maintains that "history" was a fundamentally foreign concept to Greek thought in search of the unchanging ever true, ever good and ever beautiful. Thucydides shows profound insights in human nature, but he too searches for what is abiding in the Peloponnesian War. In terms of this Greek cosmological logic (*logos*) and the Roman notion of political and juridical *ordo*, historical change forever poses a crisis (260). By contrast, Moltmann maintains, "the concept of history is a creation of Hebrew prophecy" (259). For Jews and Christians, the divine is not that which forever abides amid changing orders but the God of the possible and the new, one who induces change through God's promises. History therefore means the history of salvation. Over and against the spatial goal of perfection stands the goal of redemption in time (261). Therefore, discourse on world history, on history as a whole, "first became possible as a result of Christianity's sense of mission" (262).

It may well be that these sources rely directly or indirectly on Karl Löwith's *Meaning in History* (1949) and Mircea Eliade's argument in *Cosmos and History* (first published also in 1949).

Löwith argues that the very question on the meaning of history was brought into existence by Hebrew and Christian views on a history of salvation (4–5). History has an open horizon and an ultimate meaning because it has an ultimate purpose (goal, *telos*). Single events or a succession of events are not as such meaningful but become that when their *telos* becomes apparent. For Löwith, that goal is an expected (eschatological) future. By contrast, the Greeks examined the cosmos in order to find a fixed rational order, periodic regularity, and constancy amid temporal changes.

and Greek ways of thinking may be overstating the case. Likewise, a sharp contrast between Israel seeing God's revelation as in history – as opposed to in nature elsewhere in the ancient Near East – does not hold.[73] Israel's distinctiveness does not lie in its view of history or its view of God's actions

(footnote 72 continues)

Eliade maintains that the Hebrew prophets for the first time placed a value on history (if compared to cosmogonic myths) by interpreting events as punishments inflicted by Yahweh. He adds that, "This discovery was not to be immediately and fully accepted by the consciousness of the Jewish people, and the ancient conceptions were still long to survive" (104). In popular religion, the allegiance to the Baals and Astartes signaled a refusal to regard history as a theophany (108) in order to make life tolerable. Eliade then explains: "The God of the Jewish people is no longer an Oriental divinity, creator of archetypal gestures, but a personality who ceaselessly intervenes in history, who reveals his will through events (invasions, sieges, battles, and so on). Historical facts thus became 'situations' of man in respect to God, and as such they acquire a religious value that nothing had previously been able to confer on them. It may, then, be said with truth that the Hebrews were the first to discover the meaning of history as the epiphany of God, and this conception, as we should expect, was taken up and amplified by Christianity" (104). If an event becomes a theophany, an active presence of Yahweh, it becomes precious and no longer reversible (105). History is then a series of theophanies, negative or positive, each of which can be directly ascribed to the will of God (107). Moreover, this allowed for the regeneration of the world (and now of time) by a Messianic future, no longer by a ritual performance of the victory over the forces of death and darkness that occurs regularly every year (106). Messianism abolishes the possibility of history as a cycle that repeats itself ad infinitum: "When the Messiah comes, the world will be saved once and for all and history will cease to exist" (107). Eliade points out that the archaic impulse to abolish time is maintained not by a consciousness of an eternal present or a periodically repeated ritual but by expecting a final "end" to history itself (111–12), the renewal of the whole world (127), and indeed a victory of eternity over time (129). Accordingly, history is abolished in the final eschaton (130).

Eliade argues that there are many strands within Christianity that return to cyclical notions of time, not least in the liturgy and the liturgical year (although one must add that a Jewish liturgy often focuses on recalling the saving events in Israel's history). Nevertheless, Christianity is intertwined with modernity through its discovery of freedom and continuous time (in place of cyclical time) (161). He concludes *Cosmos and History* with these words: "Christianity incontestably proves to be the religion of 'fallen man': and this to the extent to which modern man is irremediably identified with history and progress, and to which history and progress are a fall, both implying the final abandonment of the paradise of archetypes and repetition" (162).

In *Peace by Peaceful Means*, Johan Galtung offers a detailed and quite technical comparison of the cosmologies embedded in Occidental I (Greco-Roman/modern), Occidental II (medieval), Indic, Buddhic, Sinic, and Nipponic civilizations. By "Occident" he understands the region characterized by the Semitic-Abrahamitic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam). He describes its understanding of time in this way: "Occidental cosmologies construct secular time as finite, with a beginning and an end, hence the drama, the telescoping of time, the crises" (225). He then explains: "In the construction of Time there is an Idea of Progress, at both the Personal and the Social levels, building strong persons and strong societies, under an impending Crisis confronting Occident I with 'make it or break it'. Strong people who have made it become social Elites, and strong societies that have made it come to the World Center. In the process Nature is subdued, also by an anti-holistic and anti-dialectic Episteme in the service of development as nature, personal, social, and world engineering. Guiding development is one, singular, universally valid Principle: to realize the Rule of God, personally and socially in the religious version (with Clergy on top), and to realize the Rule of Growth (with Money on top), personally and socially, in the secular version. The social and world Periphery consists of those people and societies that accept the guiding Principle; others, who do not accept the Principle, are Evil. Peace implies their elimination/incapacitation/marginalization, so that development can proceed unimpeded by evil forces. And this may have catastrophic implications for Other" (223).

73. See Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh*, 671.

in history (this was affirmed elsewhere in the Umwelt), but in the God of Israel's specific identity and character.[74]

Either way, according to this prophetic strand, history is not like a sea with many shores but like a meandering river with a source, course, and estuary, moving in a certain direction, perhaps towards a particular goal.[75] There may be an overall linear pattern where the events that unfold within time are never repeated, although the line is typically curved, not straight.[76] A singular line, whether curved or straight, necessarily reduces the complexity of multiple strands. One may say that ancient Near Eastern views of history were neither linear nor cyclical in the sense of a precise pattern of events repeating themselves in the same order, but "undulatory" in the sense of portraying the rise and fall of kings and empires.[77]

The Tanach bears witness to a God of history, one who makes history, whose presence may be found in historical change and whose self-disclosure enables people to make sense of their circumstances amid chaotic events. There are stories of place, displacement, and relocation, as is evident in the expulsion from Eden, the flood narratives, Abraham as the wandering Aramean, the exodus, the exile and the return from exile, and the diaspora. It is especially the exodus which suggests that change is possible for enslaved people escaping from Egypt. Things do not need to remain the same, so that this invited a sense of unfolding history from the exodus to the vision of Israel becoming a light for all the nations. It is the dialectic between God's promises, human unfaithfulness, and God's loyalty that keeps history moving. Nature is no longer seen only as a locus of epiphany but also as a place that can be transformed, allowing for the domination and exploitation of nature by the *imago Dei*.

This is certainly not the only trajectory in Israel's understanding of God—that is highly complex and subject to multiple shifts and turns in diverse cultic and political locations and changing periods. All too often there seems to be an endless repetition of new opportunities followed by downfall

74. As Norman Gottwald states, "Israel and its neighbors alike know the idea of purposeful divine action towards a definite goal in history, but they do not know of a comprehensive, detailed, and all-determining plan for history." See Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh*, 673, with reference to the work of Bertil Albrektson, *History and the Gods: An Essay on Idea of Historical Events as Divine Manifestations in the Ancient Near East and Israel* (Coniectania Biblica, 1967).

75. For such imagery, see Berkhof, *Christ the Meaning of History*, 17; also Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.3*, 193.

76. See the Pasifika wisdom: "A straight line is a curve." Or: "The shortest distance between two points is a curve" (i.e., implicit criticism is more diplomatic than direct criticism). A "curved" approach involves "a long process of consultation to make up the 'We', which includes the trees, land, ocean, and ancestors." Time is flexible and curved because it serves relationships. See Vaai, "From Atutasi to Atulasi," 245, drawing from the insights of Tevita Mohenoa Puloka from Tonga.

77. See Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh*, 673.

and the subsequent assessment "and Israel did what was wrong in the eyes of the Lord." One has to wonder why God became so angry with an oppressed people?! The successive renewals of God's covenant follow a spiraling pattern prompted by disobedience and punishment. Nevertheless, this particular prophetic strand proved to be, if not unique to Israel, at least highly influential.

Likewise, the Christian New Testament bears witness to an itinerant rabbi from Galilee and various apostolic witnesses from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria, to the ends of the earth. This message is radicalized by the resurrection of Christ. God's promises cannot but inspire hope and prophetic protest against the imperial powers that may be, the forces of death and destruction.[78] A God who had been present in history once was present in it still and would in the end bring total redemption.[79] One may conclude that this Jewish-Christian strand, probably influenced by the Zoroastrian belief in a final end to history after a cosmic struggle between good and evil, prompted a way of thinking about history as moving towards a glorious new world instead of a return to an ancient ideal.[80] Nevertheless, there is no divorce between history and cosmology.[81] The whole of creation is involved in all of God's great works.

Patristic Theology on the Οικονομία Του Θεού

The challenge for Patristic theology was to offer an account of the biblical God of history, the narrative structure of the Christological symbols (incarnation, cross, resurrection, ascension, session, and parousia), and the movements of the Holy Spirit towards the sanctification of the world, amid changing Roman politics and an intellectual world dominated by Greek philosophy. Some, like Tertullian, maximized an antithesis ("What does Jerusalem have to do with Athens?"), while others, like Origen, offered a tidy synthesis. Such a synthesis is found in the more intellectualist strands of early Christianity that tended to equate salvation with noetic contemplation, understood as a cycle of the individual soul's alienation and return to the One. If so, creation and consummation are not understood on a long linear sequence of events but as cotemporaneous, a punctiliar event, perhaps as an ongoing source of creativity and ultimate meaning.

78. This is a core insight emerging from Jürgen Moltmann's *Theology of Hope*. He argues that such promises elicit an irreversible direction that cannot be reduced to immanent evolutionary forces (103).

79. See Fackenheim, *God's Presence in History*, 29.

80. See Thompson, *The End of Time*, 13.

81. See Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement*, 147.

While many fell into the trap of intellectualizing the faith, the critique by Irenaeus of gnosticism and its intellectual withdrawal from history, in fact eliminating salvation history by replacing it with philosophical contemplation, remains significant.[82] It is his view on God's economy that continues to provide a sense of direction for contemporary narrative theologies. God's economy cannot be reduced to the economy of salvation but includes all of God's work—from creation and ongoing creation, providence despite the fall of humanity, election, salvation, and the formation of the church, its ministries, and missions to the consummation of God's work, at best understood as a renovation of what God has created.[83] At best, "God's economy" is not so much a redescription of human or planetary history but a multifocal lens through which any particular event can be interpreted. Either way, history is not constituted by a chaotic, competing array of forces (chance) nor by fate or fortune that corrupt human freedom and render life meaningless. Instead, the notion of God's economy portrays God as sovereign over the whole of history, holding things together through mercy and justice.[84] God's work of salvation, epitomized by the symbols of exodus and resurrection, suggests the possibility of the emergence of novelty in history, overcoming alienation through reconciliation. In contrast with the directionless time of Greek antiquity, time now has a direction and a purpose: it unfolds irreversibly from creation to consummation. Every event occurs only once and is unique and irreplaceable.[85]

Along similar lines, Eusebius of Caesarea understood world history as preparing for Christ's coming and as Christ's reign towards his parousia. Christ is thus both the center and the end of history. There is a path that traces human history from initial fall to final redemption.[86] History points to a significant future and not merely the recurrence of times in nature.

Augustine, especially, struggled to affirm the goodness of God's creation as a Christian within the neo-Platonic framework that he typically adopted. Yet it is his view of history that steered all subsequent Western developments. Against Roman views of history dated from the establishment of the eternal Rome, blaming Christianity for the terror of its imminent fall, Augustine portrayed a conflict between all earthly kingdoms and the "City of God," inaugurated by the coming of Christ, with the latter triumphing in the end.

82. See Cullmann, *Salvation in History*, 23. Cullmann insists that "Christian faith, like Jewish faith, was distinguished from all other religions of the time by this salvation-historical orientation" (25).

83. For a discussion, see my *The Earth in God's Economy*.

84. See Niebuhr, *Faith and History*, 24.

85. See Agamben, *Infancy and History*, 103. Agamben adds that Augustine resolutely separated time from the natural movement of the sun, moon, planets, and stars and turned it into an interior human experience (104).

86. See Eliade, *Cosmos and History*, 143. He adds: "And the meaning of this history is unique because the Incarnation is a unique fact." Since Christ died for our sins once and for all (1 Pet 3:18), it is a unique event, standing entirely on its own, that cannot be repeated or reproduced several times. Eliade draws here on an article by Henri-Charles Puech, "*La Gnose et le temps*," *Eranos-Jahrbuch* XX (1951), 70.

Augustine offers a critique of merely cyclical views of time.[87] For him, history is *en route* towards the coming reign of God.[88] However, for Augustine, the reign of God is not portrayed as an event in history, transforming history, or at the end of history (symbolized by a thousand years of peace). Instead, the reign of God is suprahistorical, beyond history altogether, and the church is the locus where this may be discerned.[89] Put differently, "the eschatological end is equidistant from every point in history."[90]

Augustine's theology of history remained influential for many centuries to come, not least in the vision of Joachim of Fiore who divided history in the three epochs of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Protestant reformers maintained such a dynamic notion of history but portrayed that often in negative terms in anticipation of the ultimate climax of history.

Modernist Notions of Progress

With the advent of modernity,[91] Jewish and Christian notions of history as directional (if not strictly speaking linear) became secularized so that linear progression became equated with exponential progress, developing from "lower" to "higher" (Lessing), from "primitive" to "positivist" (as per Comte), from the "survival of the fittest" to progressive, even eugenic development (social Darwinism). Note that Darwinian evolution through natural selection on the basis of random mutations also assumes directional change in natural history (marked by the emergence and extinction of species) but that such change is not regarded as progressive or teleological. No divine goal or intentional purpose is evident from the evolutionary process. Nevertheless, some do discern a directional pattern in cosmic, biological, and cultural evolution, arguably towards increasing diversity, complexity,

87. See Augustine's *City of God 12*, 13–15.

88. Eliade comments: "Thus Christian thought tended to transcend, once and for all, the old themes of eternal repetition, just as it had undertaken to transcend all the other archaic viewpoints by revealing the importance of the religious experience of faith and that of the value of the human personality." See Eliade, *Cosmos and History*, 137.

89. See Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 175. Augustine may indeed be regarded as the father of a modern historical consciousness in the sense of a linear sequence of unrepeatable moments. For Augustine, history is ruled by God's sovereign power and therefore has an ultimate purpose. However, that purpose does not lie in history itself, nor at the end of history, and does not imply a transformation of institutional structures. God's ultimate purpose is suprahistorical (as per the city of God) and access to that is mediated by the church to individual believers.

90. See Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 273.

91. Gilkey mentions three precursors to the dissolution of the Greek assumption of changeless forms, namely the role of unorthodox Christian forms of apocalypticism that allowed for change by divine fiat, the Renaissance critique of medieval structures, and the Reformation challenge to inherited ecclesial forms. See Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 189.

autonomy, symbiotic networks, and beauty.[92] If so, the significance of the emergence of humanity in evolutionary history can be affirmed, but its subsequent meaning and direction remain contested.

The Augustinian view of history as a struggle between two kingdoms (good and evil) thus gives way to a process of development on the basis of the good that is inherent in humanity.[93] The good of humanity replaces God (and Christ) as the goal of history.[94] Evil may then be ascribed to what is natural—which needs to be conquered rationally—so that progress, growth, and development become equated with redemption from evil (or the restrictions posed by nature).[95] The problem of evil is resolved by way of its elimination.[96] Note that a notion of progress can still be shaped in the form of a spiral, of rising to new forms of creativity and falling into self-destruction (a recurring cycle of gift, sin, catastrophe, and decay), but the process remains cumulative. Often it is regarded as "irresistible," automatically pursuing a straight or spiral course.[97] One may say that the belief in God's transcendent providence (which does *not* assume progress) was replaced by a secular belief in immanent and indefinite progress.[98] The story of

92. See also Rolston, *Genes, Genesis, and God*; *Three Big Bangs*. Michel Serres acknowledges that grand narratives cannot be avoided and believes that the enlightenment universalism has been broadened four times with the cosmic big bang, the cooling of our planet, and the appearance of ribonucleic acid (RNA) and of *Homo sapiens*. See Serres, *The Incandescent*, 103; also Moltmann, *Ethics of Hope*, 126.

93. See Berkhof, *Christ the Meaning of History*, 24.

94. With the confidence of an author from the 1960s, Berkhof nevertheless maintains that the concept of progress "came into the world only after and through Christianity." And: "Progress is at all times a hidden fruit of the Easter victory." Even if such progress is of an anti-Christian nature, it is still a consequence of Christ's reign. Likewise, the impact of growth may be positive or negative, but as such it is elicited by the Christian faith. See his *Christ the Meaning of History*, 171, 172.

95. Development discourse may therefore be regarded as a secularized version of the Christian doctrine of providence, if not redemption: "Providence recast as Progress. Predestination reformulated as determinism. The basic scenario of the scripture, Paradise—Fall—Redemption, comes replicated in evolutionary schemes." See Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *Development Theory*, 25. Also quoted in Zachariah, *Alternatives Unincorporated*, 25.

96. Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 3.

97. See the thirteenth of Walter Benjamin's "Theses on a Philosophy of History."

98. Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 60. In his seminal essay *Meaning in History* (1949), Karl Löwith argues that "[t]he modernist idea of time as the linear progress of history originates with Hebrew and Christian faith and ends with a secularized vestige of its eschatological pattern. Likewise, the secular belief in progress is derived from earlier notions of providence" (2). More recently, Giorgio Agamben argues that "[t]he modern concept of time is a secularization of rectilinear, irreversible Christian time, albeit sundered from any notion of end and emptied of any other meaning but that of a structured process in terms of before and after. This representation of time as homogenous, rectilinear and empty derives from the experience of manufacturing work and is sanctioned by modern mechanics which establishes the primacy of uniform rectilinear motion over circular motion. The experience of dead time abstracted from experience, which characterizes life in modern cities and factories, seems to give credence to the idea that the precise fleeting instant is the only human time." See his *Infancy and History*, 105.

history is no longer the story of God's kingdom but the story of freedom or reason, or civilization, or development, or progress.[99] For Hegel, especially, these developments must be understood as the dialectical movement of the Universal Spirit. This movement operates through the negation of the negative, precisely in the experience of time as a fleeting instant, the passing from being into nothingness and from nothingness into being. It is this dialectical movement that allows for the continuum of negative fleeting moments and that offers a built-in theodicy.[100]

The most obvious manifestation of such progress is modern science, but it is technological innovation and industry that demonstrate such progress most visibly.[101] The hope is to gain mastery and thus technological control over the forces of nature (although self-control proved to be more elusive!).[102] Industrialized capitalism is based on the surveillance of linear time-keeping for the sake of productivity, symbolized by the relentless steam engine and the ubiquitous mechanism of the clock. The Fourth Industrial Revolution does not make the first, second, or third obsolete (mechanized agriculture, mining, and heavy industry are still required), but the added layers clearly mark progression. One may not need every latest product, but one does need to keep up with the Joneses in order to communicate with others. The icon of such progress is economic growth, typically measured in terms of gross domestic product (GDP). According to this "monotheistic religion of progress," the mantra of economic growth is the only way to attain salvation.[103]

Admittedly, such progress is no longer necessarily and directly correlated with a growth in the use of energy or biophysical throughput. However, such decoupling and dematerialization have not yet translated in a decline in greenhouse gas emissions. Bending that curve still proves to be intractable[104] and even if successful will not resolve the predicament.[105] Moreover, where the benefits of such prosperity are not yet enjoyed by all, economic growth needs to be matched by development. This has yielded the United Nations' "millennium development goals" (MDGs) and now its

99. See Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 716.

100. See Agamben, *Infancy and History*, 107–8.

101. This forms the basis of Fukuyama's argument in *The End of History*, 71–81.

102. See Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 276.

103. See Zachariah, *Alternatives Unincorporated*, 23.

104. See my "A Meditation on Bending the Carbon Curve."

105. Thomas, Williams, and Zalasiewicz, *The Anthropocene*, put this concisely: "Reducing our predicament to the problem of climate change, then reducing climate change to CO_2 emissions, and finally measuring emissions at the point of energy production is an inadequate simplification of our dilemma" (152).

seventeen "sustainable development goals" (SDGs). The problem with the optimism of such views on progress is that they leave little room for death, including the death of civilizations, or for an ultimate judgment over history for the sake of the victims of history.[106] Where some see the widening of civilization in such progress, others see nothing but looming catastrophe.

One may conclude that such notions of progress assume a form of linearity in history. Such progress, or at least progression, is not necessarily tied to a singular or particular goal (*telos*) but may yield something undreamt of (the abolition of slavery, space travel). It should also be noted that progress may be measured with the yardsticks of technology or economic throughput, but it could also include less tangible aspects such as democracy, human rights, and the formation of a human rights culture (see below). However, it is when other yardsticks—such as environmental sustainability, moral values, or spiritual discernment—are employed that notions of progress become contested and where there may well be regression instead of progression.[107] There may indeed be progress in some realms, but any notion of universal progress becomes, as Paul Tillich observes, "a secularized and distorted form of the religious symbol of providence."[108] Progress in the fields of science and technology may be possible (but to what end?), perhaps also in education (towards maturity?), while progress in the fields of culture, art, morality, justice, wisdom, philosophy, or religion seems to be ever elusive.[109]

The Dynamics of Building a Better Society

Given the shift from prehuman to hunter-gatherer to agricultural to industrialized societies, where will the modernization process ultimately lead? The assumption of industrialized capitalism may be that a rising tide will lift all boats and that there will be a trickle-down effect in terms of benefits for all humans (if not for all other animals). Advocates of modernity will be able to gather statistics showing why this is indeed the case, for example, with reference to infant mortality rates, health care, and longevity (at least for some), food production, labor-saving devices, transport, and communication.[110] These aspects are typically correlated with higher levels

106. See the verdict by Niebuhr that neither classical nor modernist views of history can do justice to the available evidence. There is then no possibility of a final judgment over history within history. See his *Faith and History*, 245, 264.

107. See Goody, *The Theft of History*, 24–25.

108. Tillich, *Systematic Theology 3*, 328.

109. See Tillich, *Systematic Theology 3*, 333–39.

110. See, e.g., Pinker, *The Better Angels of our Nature*; also his *Enlightenment Now*.

of education. However, it is the democratic revolutions together with trade unions that ensure that such prosperity becomes available to all, if of course not equally distributed and not across all nations. The long-standing struggle for recognition has yielded a social order in liberal democracies based on equality before the law and representational forms of governance. This allows for a regulated market but not state control over every aspect of the national economy. The twin features of a market economy and a liberal (or social) democracy prompted Francis Fukuyama to propose, (in) famously so, that the "end of history" had been reached because no attractive and viable alternatives to these twin features could be imagined (by 1992), given the collapse of communism and fascism.[111]

For many, this idea that history is goal directed, that there is a movement through "development" towards "progress" and "civilization," is exactly what made Europe "great."[112] It is allegedly then the reason why its innovations and thought patterns are being copied and followed elsewhere in the world. Critics would insist with Walter Benjamin that there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.[113] Nevertheless, such critics, from both the left and the right, would not be keen to abandon the benefits of such "civilization"—but would still dispute its Western roots and forms. In Africa, such "benefits" include guns, cars, cell phones, medicine, television, democratic elections, and, of course, soccer. Yet at the same time, this dream of a better world has left in its wake a destructive pattern of colonial conquest with unintended consequences that now wreak havoc amid the "Anthropocene." The suspicion remains that this dream of a better world has Christian roots. In the words of Karl Löwith:

> Is it perhaps that the belief in being created in the image of a Creator-God, the hope in a future Kingdom of God, and the Christian command to spread the gospel to all the nations for the sake of salvation have turned into the secular presumption that we have to transform the world into a better world in the image of man and to save regenerate nations by Westernization and re-education?[114]

Note that such an account of the course of history towards building a better society serves a quasi-theological purpose, even in secular accounts.

111. This is Fukuyama's central thesis in *The End of History*. It is important to note that the full title of his book includes … *and the Last Man*. Fukuyama explores the question of what kind of humanity the "end of history" will yield. He considers critiques from the left (equal recognition remains imperfect) and the right (equality breeds relativism and mediocrity) and notes that liberal democracies are not self-sufficient; they depend on community life (traditionally based on common moral codes and a belief in God), although such moral communities have been under threat (326–27).

112. So Berkhof, *Christ the Meaning of History*, 29.

113. See the seventh of Walter Benjamin's "Theses on a Philosophy of History."

114. Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 203.

For Hegel, the account of the realization of Spirit is a true theodicy, a justification of God in history, to show that the course of history could be interpreted in a manner not inconsistent with an affirmation of divine providence.[115] Accordingly, the miseries that humans experience are not in vain but may be regarded as inevitable stages on the way to a morally justifiable goal.[116] History would make sense if it could be regarded as continuous if not straightforward progression towards a better society.

Towards a (Marxist) Utopia

The mechanism of the market may sustain economic productivity, although a dictatorship can achieve similar results in the medium term. Such productivity does not necessarily lead to equity and may yield higher inequality, even if workers can share in such goods and services through labor unions. Karl Marx famously proposed that capitalism will inevitably lead to a class struggle, followed by revolution and the establishment of a communist utopia in the form of a classless society. Marx's notion of dialectical materialism may not attribute any transcendental significance to history (which is nothing more than an epiphany of the class struggle), but his emphasis on the directionality of history remains unmistakable. If there is no primordial paradise, there is a remedy for the horrors of history in the eventual advent of a classless utopia. For Ernst Bloch, the future, the world of possibility, has an ontological priority over present realities. History is not determined by what is now (what is unjust), but by what it can become. Put differently, the dynamo of history is not God's promises or human projections of God (Feuerbach); neither is it the human intellect (the Greek *nous*) or finite freedom and a sense of responsibility based on human distinctiveness and human dignity (from Kant to Heidegger and Arendt).[117] The dynamo that drives history forward is not restricted to the human condition but is embedded in materiality itself, leading to evolutionary change (Darwin) and through human labor at times to revolutionary change (Marx).

115. See Walsh, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, 118, with reference to the concluding paragraph of Hegel's *Lectures on a Philosophy of History*.

116. See Walsh, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, 119.

117. See Jan Patočka's *Heretical Essays*, in which he traces the shift in the West from prehistorical times (before the emergence of cities (the shift from οἶκος to πόλις) and urban civilizations where the focus was on the transmission, preservation, and securing of life) to the "beginning" of history (1–52). His essays are "heretical" because he diverges from the assumptions on the dynamo of history of Husserl (rational insight), Heidegger (finite freedom), and Marx (class struggles). Patočka's own position is that the quest for the meaning of history—and therefore history itself—is prompted by the anxiety associated with a loss of any naïve sense of meaning that is restricted to the maintenance of life (53–77). Likewise, philosophy emerges from a questioning of any predetermined, preconceived answer to the meaning of life as embedded in myth (63).

Such directionality remains the tacit assumption of similar progressive quests, for example, emancipation from slavery, universal suffrage, decolonization, gay liberation, an end to human trafficking, and freedom from other forms of domination in the name of differences of caste, race, gender, language, or whatever else. One may observe that both modernist notions of progress and Marxist notions of dialectical materialism assume a universal history and indeed an "end of history"[118] but differ on the evolutionary or revolutionary ways in which this will come about. The crucial question remains whether the significance of any previous period is to be reduced to its role in ensuring a better future in some later dispensation. What, then, about the victims of history? Are they not again sacrificed for the sake of others to come?[119] What about the oppression elicited by the very instruments employed to ensure such progress when such quests fail, leading to disillusionment?

The Postmodern Dismissal of Any Teleology

It is safe to say that the hundred or so years from 1914 to the present have been characterized by fluctuations between optimism—over possibilities to overcome poverty, dictatorships, racism, violent conflict, and some ecological concerns—and extreme pessimism given the enormous weight of evils associated with the symbols of the Ardennes, Auschwitz, Hiroshima, the Gulag, Vietnam, the Khmer Rouge, the Great Acceleration, Rwanda, Kuwait, and the set of overwhelming disasters associated with the advent of the "Anthropocene." This is epitomized by Oswald Spengler's *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (*The Decline of the West*), which symbolically

118. Walter Benjamin, with his emphasis on fragments and cessations in history, may be an exception in this regard. In the seventeenth of his "Theses on a Philosophy of History," he critiques such a universal history and "recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past." See also Stéphane Mosès's *The Angel of History* in which he compares Franz Rosenzweig, Walter Benjamin, and Gershom Scholem's critique of the Enlightenment belief in humanity's inevitable progress. As the book's cover notes, "Instead, they imagined history as discontinuous, made of moments that form no totality but whose ruptures are both more significant—and more promising—than any apparent homogeneity. [...] Jewish messianism always had to confront the experience of catastrophe, deception, and failure. Mosès shows how this tradition informed a genuine Jewish conception of history in which redemption may—or may not—occur at any moment, giving a new chance for hope by locating utopia in the heart of the present."

119. Rubem Alves is surely correct in insisting that "[t]he will of God could never, therefore, be invoked to justify the status quo." However, the "therefore" refers to the previous sentence: "To be involved in God's time is thus to participate in a present that determines itself for the creation of a new tomorrow." He adds, "The new tomorrow is thus the sole determination of the present." There are times when it may be appropriate to sacrifice today for the sake of tomorrow, but such an emphasis on the always-extended future seems one-sided. See Alves, *A Theology of Human Hope*, 93, 94. Alves corrects this danger (against the early Moltmann) by acknowledging that "The pure futuricity of God is a new form of Docetism in which God loses the present dimension and therefore becomes ahistorical" (94). Instead, the presence of the Messiah means that the present is broken open toward the new (98).

appeared in German in 1918 (volume 1) and which rejected a Eurocentric view of history, according to an ancient-medieval-modern schematization, that portrayed European civilization as the highest form of human existence. Such fluctuations between optimism and pessimism may well be driven by the bifurcation between nature and culture (and between the natural and the artificial) and therefore a similar fluctuation between materialist reductionism and linguistic idealism.

The notion that history is directional, meaningful, progressive, or even comprehensible has become foreign amid postmodern suspicions that modernist assumptions lie at the root of such evils. The technological powers of humanity spell doom instead of ever-increasing progress. It amounts to suicide through progress. The prophet of such suspicions, now commonplace in academia, was Friedrich Nietzsche with his "*Umwertung aller Werte*" and the "eternal return of the same." The deeper reason lies in the historicism that emerged in the nineteenth century (see Troeltsch). For Heidegger, the historicity of human existence forbids all hope of transcending time and history by finding some form of universal.[120] If forms of knowledge, ideas, norms, and beliefs are products of their times and social circumstances, defined by categories of place, race, class, and gender, then it is impossible to identify any supra-historical trends, any over-arching goal in history. Any claim "to make history" becomes a sign of hubris.

One symbol of such critiques is the "incredulity towards metanarratives" first articulated by Jean-François Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979).[121] The argument is that such metanarratives, often described as "grand narratives," are totalizing stories about the direction that human history is taking. Such metanarratives ground knowledge and legitimize economic modes of production and cultural modes of consumption. As Lyotard rightly observes, "The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take. We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one [...]."[122] Philosopher Richard Kearney adds that "Post-modern thinking refuses to reduce the complex multiplicity of our cultural signs and images to a systematic synthesis [... it] renounces the modern temptation—from Descartes and Spinoza to Hegel and Marx—to totalize the plurality of our human discourse in a single system or foundation."[123]

The critique of any "grand narrative" suggests that producing any macro-history can only yield contextualized perspectives where powerful interests

120. See Eliade, *Cosmos and History*, 160 (almost verbatim).

121. For a discussion, see also Conradie and Lai, "On Setting the Scene for the Story to Begin," on which this paragraph partially depends.

122. Lyotard, "The Postmodern Condition," 74.

123. Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining*, 182.

are at play. No pattern can be imposed on history in terms of a flattened linear trajectory. Instead, history is more like a labyrinth where disparate events can be grouped together but carry no inherent pattern in themselves. As Peter Sloterdijk observes, despite constructing the course of history on a grand scale, such grand narratives remain provincial: "because of their incorrigible Eurocentrism, they were in conspiracy with the colonial looting of the world, [...] because they taught salvation history openly or covertly, helped bring profane disaster on a grand scale."[124] In the words of Michel Foucault, discussing his view on "genealogy" and his alignment with Nietzsche's contrast between "effective history" (*wirkliche Historie*) and more traditional views of history:

> Genealogy [...] rejects the meta-historical deployment of ideal significations and indefinite teleologies. It opposes itself to the search for "origins." [...] Genealogy, however, seeks to reestablish the various systems of subjection: not the anticipatory power of meaning, but the hazardous play of dominations.[125]
>
> History becomes "effective" to the degree that it introduces discontinuity into our very being—as it divides our emotions, dramatizes our instincts, multiplies our body and sets it against itself. "Effective" history deprives the self of the reassuring stability of life and nature, and it will not permit itself to be transported by a voiceless obstinacy toward a millennial ending. It will uproot its traditional foundations and relentlessly disrupt its pretended continuity. This is because knowledge is not made for understanding; it is made for cutting.[126]
>
> An entire historical tradition (theological or rationalistic) aims at dissolving the singular event into an ideal continuity—as a teleological movement or a natural process. [...] "Effective" history, however, deals with events in terms of their most unique characteristics, their most acute manifestations. An event, consequently, is not a decision, a treaty, a reign, or a battle, but the reversal of a relationship of forces, the usurpation of power, the appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who had once used it, a feeble domination that poisons itself as it grows lax, the entry of a masked "other." The forces operating in history are not controlled by destiny or regulative mechanisms, but respond to haphazard conflicts.[127]

And then:

> They do not manifest the successive forms of a primordial intention and their attraction is not that of a conclusion, for they always appear through the singular randomness of events. The inverse of the Christian world, spun entirely by a divine spider, and different from the world of the Greeks, divided between the realm of will and the great cosmic folly, the world of effective history knows only one kingdom, without providence or final cause, where there is only "the iron hand of necessity shaking the dice-box of chance."[128]

124. Sloterdijk, *In the World Interior of Capital*, 4.

125. Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 140, 148.

126. Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 154.

127. Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 154.

128. Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 154–55.

At its best, postmodernism offers resistance against complacent humanist self-understandings, against claims to presence not mediated through history and language, against totalizing systems that reduce everything to more of the same (Foucault). Such ideological legitimation is readily extended towards religious legitimation, with Constantinian Christendom playing a crucial role. As a result, Western stories of unification have become discredited—the idea of progress, Enlightenment universalism, Hegel's reign of the mind, Marx's classless society, Comte's march towards positivism, and also Nietzsche's will to power. And as Fukuyama admits, "to speak as Hegel did of World History is to invite sneers and bemused condescension from intellectuals who believe that they grasp the world in all its complexity and tragedy."[129] Indeed, with the repudiation of grand teleological schemata in history, teleology has almost become a swear word.

Given this critique and the need to be freed from of the demands of a suprahistorical history, does the meaning of life[130] and of history always lie in the present, in the social construction of reality? Is any (theological) account of history nothing but an ideological product of the dominant discourse, a narrative order imposed on the irreducible chaos of events in the interests of the exercise of power?[131] What happens, then, with any emancipatory struggles? It seems that the vision for a transformation of society then has to give way to the assertion and recognition of narrower group interests.[132] How can one cope with the horrors of history if one can glimpse no sign of some transhistorical meaning? Does some or other larger story (e.g., the rise and spread of capitalism) not lurk in the background as a framing device for any more localized story?[133] The

129. Fukuyama, *The End of History*, 69.

130. If I am not mistaken, phrases such as "the meaning of life" or "the meaning of history" are typically understood horizontally in terms of some or other future goal or vertically in terms of a higher purpose (what you live for). This assumes a certain directionality and often a teleology. Frank Martela and Michael Steger argue that there are in fact three meanings of "the meaning of life," namely in terms of coherence (a sense of comprehensibility, one's life making sense), purpose (a sense of core goals, aims, and direction), and significance (life's inherent value, having a life worth living). See Martela and Steger, "The Three Meanings of Meaning in Life." The same may apply on a larger scale to the meaning of history. If so, the meaning of history cannot be reduced to teleology but also does not exclude that. See also the discussion on "the meaning of history" below.

131. See Evans, *In Defence of History*, 196. Such critique of vested interests in the discourse of the culturally dominant elites still allows for partisan views of Black, Indigenous, women's, or queer history in order to empower those who were previously excluded. Academic discourse thus becomes a site of struggle. Evans finds a narcissism and an elitism (given jargon borrowed from literary theory) in such postmodernist discourse.

132. See Evans, *In Defence of History*, 198.

133. See Robert Berkhofer's notion of a (not *the*) "Great Story" (not to be confused with the critique of grand narratives) in *Beyond the Great Story*, 39. Berkhofer adds a scathing comment about any (theological!)

dissolution of faith in progress and the relativity and transience of social forms therefore render the historical process to be without direction or meaning.[134] One may even say that "history" as such does not exist, that there is no grand all-encompassing narrative guaranteeing a sense of history in terms of meaning or direction.[135] If so, not only is there no "end" to history; there has never been any such "history." History is not to be equated with reality.[136] If so, is there then no distinction between fact and fiction, between reconstructions and constructions for the present? But even if there is no history, perhaps there can at least be story … or stories?[137] And if there is story, then there is meaning—for a story without meaning is no story at all. Not surprisingly, one may well find a nostalgia for the abolition of time through the myth of eternal return.

Scientific Apocalypticism and Secular Post-Apocalypticism

If no sense of ultimate purpose can be discerned in human history, does that mean that there is no directionality either? If such a sense of

(footnote 133 continues)
quest for the ultimate meaning of history: "Speculation about the ultimate meaning of History as a totality stands outside the pale of professional discourse. It is considered the subject matter of old-fashioned philosophy of history and is relegated in current historical practice to that hell enjoyed only by the likes of Hegel and Spengler. Although historians certainly point out the meaning of the events and actions they cover in their books and articles, they plead agnosticism and maybe atheism on the larger meaning of History itself considered as an entirety. At best such misbegotten philosophical musings are studied as intellectual history to exemplify the quaint worldviews of past persons and eras. Nevertheless, historians do convey the meaning of their specific histories explicitly through their contextualization or implicitly through a Great Story. Even a denial of meaning to the course of history is, of course, a philosophy about the meaning of history" (40). I may need to plead guilty to such an "old-fashioned philosophy of history," if not of "enjoying such hell." However, the question remains whether such a refusal to address the ultimate meaning of history can address a challenge of the magnitude of the shift to the "Anthropocene."

134. See Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 197.

135. See Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, 184.

136. See the telling comment by novelist J.M. Coetzee: "I reiterate [...] that history is not reality; that history is a kind of discourse; that a novel is a kind of discourse too, but a different kind of discourse; that, inevitably in our culture, history will, with varying degrees of forcefulness, try to claim primacy, claim to be a master-form of discourse [...] a history is nothing but a certain kind of story that people agree to tell each other, that as Don Quixote argued so persuasively but in the end so vainly, the authority of history lies simply in the consensus that it commands. The categories of history are not privileged, just as the categories of moral discourse are not privileged. They do not reside in reality: they are a certain construction put upon reality." See his "The Novel Today," 4.

137. See the comment by Upolu Vaai, "Oral story is the matrix of Pacific knowledge. It does not bow to a systematic and single-strandic categorization. It embraces complexity. It enflames creative imagination. To uphold the beauty of complexity, oral stories utilize the method of allusion (through idioms and metaphors) to promote creative imagination and to protect us from the scientific obsession for specificity which leads to systematic sharp categorization," in "From Atutasi to Atulasi," 241.

directionality cannot be discerned in cultural evolution, can that perhaps be found in biological evolution or in cosmic evolution? In evolutionary biology, any embedded teleology is typically denied given that most random mutations are not fruitful. However, some would still say there is a clear pattern in biological evolution, if viewed in hundreds of millions of years, namely towards increasing diversity, increasing complexity, and (some may add) increasing beauty.[138] This may be observed despite the Ordovician-Silurian (440 million years ago, or mya), Devonian (365 mya), Permian-Triassic (250 mya), Triassic-Jurassic (210 mya), and Cretaceous-Tertiary (65 mya) mass extinctions. The identification of such a trend may be associated especially with the legacy of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, with Thomas Berry's reflections on the "universe story," and with the propagation of the "journey of the universe."[139] Accordingly, nature itself is regarded as directional and developmental, if not moving towards some Omega point.

In cosmic evolution, the picture is different given the laws of thermodynamics which suggest an "arrow of time" towards increasing entropy in a closed system. If measured in billions of years, the expansion of the universe does show a directional pattern. There is the "birth" and "death" of galaxies and stars, but this pattern is not cyclical. When the Sun becomes a supernova, the Earth itself will melt away, life on the blue planet will come to an end, and its "ashes" will be scattered throughout what was the solar system. The universe itself may come to an end in a "Big Crunch" (which would suggest a cosmic cycle or oscillation of cycles, reviving the myth of an eternal return), but it is apparently more likely that it will lead toward a cold death where the lights will eventually go out one by one. But this will have to be measured in up to 10^{100} instead of billions (10^{9}) of years.

Understandably, such scientific insights have fertilized the human imagination in the graphic form of a range of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic movies, books, cartoons, and series where humans or some subsequent species are confronted with pandemics, a disturbance in the ocean currents, rising sea levels, nuclear holocausts, volcanic eruptions, collisions with large asteroids, star wars, and more. The shift from the Holocene to the "Anthropocene" is almost made to sound mild by comparison. There is usually some or other Messianic figure who is called upon to save the day against the forces of death and destruction. This allows for either a lucky escape or a humbler new beginning. Alternatively, if the Earth itself becomes uninhabitable or destroyed, this encourages either extraterrestrial explorations and voyages or a shift from carbon-based to silicon-based forms of intelligence. In one way or another, the

138. John Haught therefore speaks of *The Promise of Nature*.

139. See Berry and Swimme, *The Universe Story*; Swimme and Tucker, *Journey of the Universe*.

directionality of history is still assumed, allowing for fluctuations from extreme optimism to extreme pessimism.

Theosis?

There are others who express the classic Orthodox hope for divinization (*theosis*): in philosophical terms, for the participation of the finite in the infinite; in theological terms, either for becoming divine or for partaking in the life of the Triune communion.[140] While the notion of kenosis (see next sub-section) perhaps has a rough secular equivalent in Stoicism, the hope for auto-divinization is epitomized by the European Enlightenment and the subsequent critique of religion: God not only became human in Jesus Christ, but the death of god also has to be proclaimed so that humans may become divine instead.[141] This reading of history is exemplified in secular hopes for artificial, silicon-based forms of intelligence, for an Internet of all things, and indeed the hope to become divine as *Homo excelsior* or even *Homo deus*.[142] Accordingly, deification is not to be understood as a process in time but as something "above" the flow of time, perhaps as the rational source of time-as-movement itself. Theosis breaks through in an instant along a "vertical" axis, not in a future located along a horizontal axis. In my view, such a gnostic escape from history—so that *theosis* is understood in purely noetic terms—cannot suffice and cannot do justice to what is material, earthly, and bodily.[143]

140. For one example in the context of Christian ecotheology, see Edwards, *Partaking of God*. Whereas Edwards envisages a cosmic participation in the Triune communion, David Bentley Hart offers a view on deification as already indwelling in nature, although he focuses exclusively on the rational desire for the infinite. Indeed, the rational mind is created specifically for the purpose of seeing God (18). He rejects any Thomistic partition between the natural and the supernatural and the assumption that grace needs to be superadded to nature. Instead, rational creatures have an inherent longing for God, to the point that Hart claims that creation is already deification (20). Indeed, "[e]ven God could not create a rational will that is not oriented toward deifying union with himself" (31). And: "We are nothing but created gods coming to be, becoming God in God, able to become divine only because, in some sense, we are divine from the very first" (34). As far as I can see, this comes at the cost of an unwelcome anthropocentrism and a nonecological eschewing of the finite. All finite concepts must be surpassed by the intellect as it ascends to a more direct apprehension of the infinite (25). For me, the question is how such an "unregenerate Neoplatonist" position (37) can escape from a modernist desire to become *Homo deus*. See the telling title of Hart's *You Are Gods*.

141. Fukuyama explains: "According to Hegel, the Christian did not realize that God did not create man, but rather that man created God. He created God as a kind of projection of the idea of freedom, for in the Christian God we see a being who is the perfect master of himself and of nature. But the Christian then proceeded to enslave himself to this God that he himself created. He reconciled himself to a life of slavery on earth in the belief that he would be redeemed later by God, when in fact he could be his own redeemer." See Fukuyama, *The End of History*, 197.

142. See especially Harari, *Homo Deus*; Lynas, *The God Species*.

143. For further discussion, see the essay entitled "The Rise of Prometheus and the Execution of God: The End of *Concursus* in the 'Anthropocene'?" in this volume.

Kenosis?

There are others who find a kenotic tendency in the history of the universe[144] that is exemplified in the incarnation, ministry, and death of Jesus Christ. This kenotic "principle" may also be read into "deep incarnation" (Niels Henrik Gregersen),[145] showing how pain and even suffering is built into and becomes fruitful in the history of biological evolution. Accordingly, kenosis is not understood as a once-off response (or "emergency measure")[146] to the spread of evil in the world but as an underlying cosmic principle exemplified by the incarnation of Jesus Christ. The cross then becomes the demonstration of such a cosmic principle and not a highly particular event in response to human sin (in the form of imperial oppression). Put cryptically, there is an Anglican emphasis on incarnation instead of a Lutheran (?) emphasis on the cross. The incarnation becomes by itself salvific.

Although both these last two positions assume the directionality of history, they adopt contrasting views on such direction.

Christian Eschatology and Apocalyptic

Christian hope cannot be translated into an exact chronological sequence of predicted events, with exact calculations according to a fixed timetable (which is not even possible for weather forecasts or economic forecasts). Eschatology is not about a history of the end or the end of history but about God's presence throughout history.[147] It harbors a protest against an unacceptable present and a trust that things will change. This is radicalized in forms of apocalyptic that are born from within a sense of crisis on the basis of the conviction that things cannot go on like this. The consolation that Christian apocalyptic provides is not the proclamation of an end to history but the reinterpretation of the present as a transition to a new dispensation.[148] This is easily misunderstood as the total sublation of history and the annihilation of the world. Apocalyptic scenarios around a possible nuclear winter or the advent of the "Anthropocene" amount to a "portentous reversal" of the fervent hope embedded in Christian apocalyptic.[149]

144. See Ellis and Murphy, *On the Moral Nature of the Universe*; also Rolston, *Three Big Bangs*, and "Kenosis and Nature."

145. See Gregersen, *Incarnation*; also Edwards, *Deep Incarnation*.

146. The term "emergency measure" (together with "intermezzo") is derived from the work of Arnold van Ruler, who used it polemically to insist on the historical and therefore contingent nature of the incarnation as a response to sin. See, e.g., *This Earthly Life Matters*, 243.

147. See Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ*, 28.

148. See Körtner, *The End of the World*, 126.

149. See Northcott, "Eschatology in the Anthropocene," 107.

Christian hope is ultimately not about things to come or benefits to be derived from that but a trust in Godself, in God's promises to make all things new (Rev 21:5). Such "things" include persons, institutions, communities, nations, the Earth, even creation itself. For Christians, such trust is based on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Such hope is expressed in especially four overlapping clusters of symbols around the reign of God, the resurrection of the dead, the parousia of Christ, and eternal life. However, there is no consensus on how such symbols are to be interpreted or how to cluster them together and which concepts are to be used (restoration following purgation, replacement following annihilation, renewal, recycling, fulfillment, consummation, elevation, divinization, recapitulation, or whatever else).[150] How, for example, is God's providence related to God's work of creation, of salvation and of consummation? Does Christianity assume "the end of the world," that is, as a future event in history? Should we still expect the Messiah to come or to come back?

Such questions suggest an underlying problem, namely whether or not Christian eschatology assumes a linear understanding of history. If so, some may argue that the colonial and capitalist logic of progress through the exploitation of nature together with the imperative of accelerated economic growth follow from such an eschatology. Then eschatological or at least apocalyptic thinking and its attendant future-oriented hope are implicated in the roots of ecological destruction. It is, then, Christendom's preoccupation with the future that spurred its grandiose attempt to subdue nature. In response, one has to insist that the eternal is not to be understood as some future state of things.[151] Some have proposed a realized eschatology that finds the kingdom of God in the here and now, built upon a sense of place and with an appreciation of natural cycles—which prompts the question whether this does not allow for an acquiescence in present power relations—and whether or not injustice, oppression, and tyranny can be overcome eschatologically. Alternatively, eschatology may be understood in noetic (often gnostic) terms as the contemplation of what abides amid natural fluctuations. Apocalyptic is then not about any final cataclysmic "end of the world" but a matter of seeing, vision and disclosure, revealing what is hidden behind a veil, unmasking the powers that may be.[152]

Such questions are pertinent but may be put aside for the moment, as I will return to some of that later.

150. I have discussed such debates in *Hope for the Earth* and recently in "Doing Eschatology in the South African Context."

151. See Tillich, *Systematic Theology 3*, 400.

152. See Keller, *Facing Apocalypse*, xvi.

Can One Discern the Finger of God in (Human) History? Some Reformed Perspectives

How, then, can one discern God's activity in the present, and how are we to respond to that? Can we relate the present to some eschatological goal? Does history have meaning and direction?[153] These questions about finding God's providence amid historical change are so complex that the temptation to give up on them is ubiquitous. But can one leave such questions aside and retain faith in a God of history? Can one abandon the quest for meaning and still remain human? Allow me a narrower focus in this section by drawing on an (alas) all-male cast in the Reformed tradition in which I find myself in order to address the question in the heading above.

Attempts to find the finger of God in human, planetary, or cosmic history are fraught with insurmountable problems. What some see as "our manifest destiny" others regard as imperial conquest. In South Africa, the Voortrekkers regarded their victory at the battle of Blood River as a sign of God's providence, and many Afrikaners saw God's hand in the victory of the National Party in the 1948 election.

An excellent example of such signs of providence may be found in Hymn 275 of the current *Liedboek van die Kerk* ("Songbook of the Church"), widely used in Dutch Reformed Church. In my youth in the 1960s and 1970s, this hymn was very popular, sung with reassurance and not without some nationalistic fervor. The hymn is based on "Our God, Our Help in Ages Past" (by Isaac Watts, 1708). The Afrikaans text was based on an earlier version in the *Hallelujah* songbook and was reworded by G.B.A. Gerdener in 1931. Gerdener was deeply involved in the attempt to offer a biblical justification of apartheid. Here are the five verses of the current Afrikaans text, juxtaposed with a rather literal English translation of my own:

O God van Jakob, deur u hand word steeds u volk gevoed; U het weleer op see en land ons vadere behoed.	O God of Jacob, through thy hand your people (*volk*) are still being fed; In ages past, on sea and land our fathers thou hast protected.
Ons dank- en smeekgebede gaan tot u genadetroon; wil ons en ook ons kroos voortaan u guns en trou betoon!	Our prayers of gratitude and petition Come before thy throne of grace; To us and our progeny in years to come, continue to show mercy and loyalty.

153. For such questions, see also Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 69.

Berei vir ons die lewenspad— wil deur u Gees ons lei; en as ons val, o Vader vat ons hand en staan ons by.	Prepare for us our path in life— Lead us through thy Spirit; And if we fall, O Father, Take our hand and stand by us.
Bewaar ons, Heer, in alle nood; hou oor ons lewe wag. Wil kleding skenk, gee daagliks brood— ons deel vir elke dag.	Protect us, Lord, in all distress; Watch over and guard our lives. Grant us clothing and daily bread, Our share for every day.
Beskikker van ons deel en lot in voor- en teëspoed, U is ons Vader en ons God— net U is waarlik goed.	Master of our lot and destiny, amid prosperity and adversity, Thou art our Father and our God— Thou alone art good.

Three brief comments may suffice. Firstly, the hymn offers a classic expression of faith in God's providence, both in the sense of *conservatio* and in the sense of *gubernatio*. Secondly, this hymn, with small variations, remained popular amid the rise of Afrikaner nationalism, at the height of apartheid hegemony, and up to this day. Thirdly, it therefore matters in what kind of context this hymn is sung. It can express trust in God's care, but the same text can also legitimize and serve to protect a middle-class lifestyle while ignoring the impact of imperialism and colonialism.

Given such examples, Susan Neiman rightly warns that belief in God's providence may well serve the purpose of acquiescence: "Providence is a tool invented by the rich to lull those whom they oppress into silent endurance. The rich have no need of virtue or faith for their desires are met without them. [...] Providence is either a tool invented for oppression or itself an instrument of injustice."[154]

Despite such warnings, Allan Boesak (a chaplain at the University of the Western Cape [UWC] at the time) published a series of sermons on finding the finger of God in the struggle against apartheid,[155] while Jaap Durand (the UWC vice-rector at the time) cautioned about such attempts at finding the finger of God in any particular context.[156] In its critique of state theology, the *Kairos Document* (1986) identified the Antichrist with clarity: "The god of the South African state is not merely an idol or false god; it is the devil disguised as Almighty God—the antichrist."[157] It spoke of God's work of

154. Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, 182.

155. See Boesak, *Die Vinger van God*.

156. See Durand, "God in History—An Unresolved Problem."

157. See *Kairos Documents* (edited by Gary Leonard), 54. See also the comment by Cullmann, *Salvation in History*, 310: "We may see Antichrist at work in a dictator in whom the demonic erupts openly in a self-deified government, as is described so forcefully in Rev. 13. But we shall never venture to say, even in this case, that this is now *the* Antichrist."

liberation in terms of the (church) struggle against apartheid but not with the same vivid clarity. Nevertheless, Albert Nolan wrote with some confidence a book entitled *God in South Africa* (1988), in which he located God's presence among the poor and oppressed in their struggle for liberation.[158] Whether that implies that God takes sides with any particular revolutionary movement of the day is another matter. Many saw the hand of God in the first democratic elections of 1994, but thirty years later others speak of a "negotiated settlement" and point to the danger of selling out to "white monopoly capital."

In the Reformed tradition, scholars have typically been extremely hesitant to be specific about God's governance in history. This is because of a characteristic emphasis on God's hiddenness, also and precisely when God is revealed. Put differently, while past salvific events are regarded as revealed through the formation of the biblical canon, current salvific events remain hidden. From the open-endedness of the New Testament, we may expect such salvific events to occur, but we cannot claim with any certainty how God is extending the history of salvation in Israel and through the church to the ends of the earth (or beyond).[159] Clarity can only be expected to emerge through the ultimate consummation of all things.

Calvin, more than most others in the history of Christian theology, spoke of God's hiddenness.[160] Calvin acknowledged that the order in nature that reflects God's work of conservation is not equaled in history, where disorder casts a dark cloud over attempts to find an experiential basis or empirical proof for divine providence. Believers can only see "through a mirror dimly" and then only in part. It is not always evident that God is at work restraining the wicked and the forces of societal chaos. Like Job, we may not always be able to understand God's ways and God's rule. History is all too often marked by blood and confusion so that believers have to trust in God's loyalty to creation, patiently waiting for God to govern the world with mercy and justice.[161]

In this, Calvin was followed by several Reformed theologians. Herman Bavinck, for example, devoted a chapter on "The Incomprehensibility of God" in his *Reformed Dogmatics*.[162] This was praised by none other than Karl Barth.[163] Likewise, Arnold van Ruler has an essay on "The Hiddenness

158. See Nolan, *God in South Africa*.

159. See Cullmann, *Salvation in History*, 300.

160. See Calvin, *Institutes*, III.20.40.

161. See Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory*, 32–35.

162. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics 2*, 27–52.

163. Barth, *Church Dogmatics II.1*, 186.

of God." He identifies several senses in which God is hidden, including (with reference to Luther) God's wrath. He says: "God is also hidden in God's wrath. [...] Wrath does not properly belong to God's being [*wezen*]. There is something pernicious about it. In it, God enters into God's opposite. God wants to vivify but kills; God wants glorification but wreaks destruction; God wants preservation but works perdition; God wants to elect but rejects. God changes into God's opposite: God almost seems a devil."[164] One may say that the evidence of God's wrath, interpreted in a prophetic mode, is much clearer than the ambiguous evidence of God's good governance.

In Karl Barth's own treatment of the doctrine of providence,[165] he makes a sharp distinction between the history of God's covenant, regarded as God's primary work, and world history. He regards the latter in terms of his formula that creation forms the external basis of the covenant. For Barth, providence concerns the establishment and preservation of this external basis of the covenant.[166] While the purpose and meaning of God's covenant are revealed and are clear (in Jesus Christ), the meaning and direction of world history are anything but clear. God's governance in world history cannot be traced or derived from the logic of developments in world history. God's governance also cannot be derived only from exceptional events, given that the selection of such events always remains somewhat arbitrary. God can only laugh at our attempts to collate evidence of God's rule. In this way, Barth retains his earlier emphasis on God's radical transcendence. This does not disable but precisely enables God's work within creation.[167] God's governance in history can only be confessed with a "nevertheless"[168] and then on the basis of the conviction that the God of the covenant is also the Lord of world history. At best, this conviction can be gathered from a reflection in the mirror of God's revelation, provisionally and with modesty, having just enough light to see events in world history in this light.[169] This mirror does not add anything to God's "primary" work in the covenant; it cannot repeat or imitate but can only reflect that.[170] In short, history serves the purpose of providing time, space, and opportunity

164. Van Ruler, *This Earthly Life Matters*, 79. Van Ruler adds the following: "Is this perhaps how we should interpret the 'eclipse of God' (Martin Buber) in the modern era? Does God withdraw from the human race in our time? Does God keep Godself hidden? Is that God's wrathful response?" (80).

165. See Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.3*, 3–287, especially 33–57.

166. See Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.3*, 45.

167. See White, *Purpose and Providence*, 96.

168. See Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.3*, 44.

169. See Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.3*, 57.

170. See Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.3*, 49.

for the divine will and action in the covenant of grace.[171] Barth affirms that the "King of Israel" is also the Lord of world history and is therefore active in world occurrence generally but then in a hidden way. This lordship and the divine economy cannot be directly traced from world occurrences or patterns derived from that. However, this does not mean that world occurrences are embedded in "a raging sea of events which has neither form nor direction."[172] The pattern and direction of world history is the same as that of sacred history: God's gracious creation, the reconciliation of the world with God in Jesus Christ, culminating in the final perfection. But this can only be discerned from God's clear revelation in Jesus Christ, not by studying particular world occurrences. Such hiddenness cannot be removed, at least not by human creatures.

In a chapter on "Providence and History," the Dutch theologian Gerrit Berkouwer sounds a biblical warning against any reading of the "signs of the times" that pushes towards finding the finger of God in any particular historical event. Not even the fact of the exodus serves as a proof of God's providence. Berkouwer quotes Amos 9:7: "Are you not like the Cushites to me, O people of Israel? says the Lord. Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?" (NRSVUE). The same applies to the cross of Jesus Christ, as this can simply be taken as a sign of the impotency of the would-be Messiah to save even himself (Luke 23:35). The underlying problem remains the arbitrary selection of events to serve as a legitimation of particular interests, seeing prosperity as blessing and victory as a sign of God's favor.[173] Indeed, we would do well not to hail the prophets of doom or the apostles of progress.

In *Christ the Meaning of History*, Hendrikus Berkhof recognizes the weight of such arguments and adds that the reason why such discernment has to remain provisional is because history remains open. God is not done with us yet. However, he insists that this does not imply that history and

171. See Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.3*, 47. Barth proposes a two-fold rule to understand God's governance. The first is to understand world events from a point of departure in the particular events attested to in the Bible—instead of constructing an understanding of God's identity and character independent from Jesus Christ. The second is to see world events in nature and history then in that light, from the conviction that the Father of Jesus Christ is also the Lord of world history. Any notion of a private history is therefore to be avoided. The circumference needs to be understood in terms of the center (for Barth, God's activity in Jesus Christ, not the church or Christianity). For Barth, since creation forms the external basis of the covenant, the general events of world history do not take place for their own sake but as "an outward platform for the fulfillment of the particular events. The general events have their meaning in the particular" (184). Here, Barth's position diverges from that of Bavinck: for Bavinck and his followers, salvation is not an aim in itself but is necessary for the sake of creation. Likewise, God's covenant is there to allow creation to flourish.

172. See Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.3*, 196.

173. Berkouwer, *The Providence of God*, 176–77.

God's judgment can be separated so that we live, as it were, in two worlds where no discernment between light and dark gray is possible. The Old and New Testaments are full of examples where events in history are interpreted in the light of God's revelation. Surely, it remains possible to identify both positive and negative signs of God's governance in history. What is problematic is to identify one particular event and portray that as God's doing (or the devil's work) while then arbitrarily selecting such events and ignoring other more ordinary events. To discern positive and negative signs is possible by identifying extended trajectories in God's revelation. Circumspection is obviously required—as contested examples such as the French Revolution, Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection, the rise and fall of communism, and so forth demonstrate. There is also a need to guard against equating God's work with that of the church. The interpretation and assessment of history is a hazardous undertaking, but that does not imply that it is impossible. Who would not see God's hand in the availability of life-saving medicines, a good harvest, or remarkable scientific discoveries? And who is not able to judge that national socialism and apartheid are movements that counter the coming of God's reign? Berkhof therefore insists that it is possible to distinguish between shades of gray.[174]

In *Reaping the Whirlwind*, Langdon Gilkey critiques three theological responses to the meaning of history, namely the liberal view of progress finding the meaning of history in progression towards future perfection, the return to a suprahistorical understanding of time, and eternity in early dialectical theology[175] that renders history itself meaningless, followed by a critique of futurist eschatological theologies (political theology and the emerging liberation theologies of the 1960s and 1970s) that radicalize an emphasis on a revolutionary future that leaves the past and the present devoid of God's faithfulness, again sacrificing the victims of the past for the sake of some future dispensation. He then raises the following pertinent set of questions: "How then are we to reinterpret providence *eschatologically*, as directed at a goal relevant to temporal process, as representing the culmination and not just the judgment of history? Can the kingdom, or even movement toward the kingdom, be for us what it was for the liberals, a credible *historical* category, a category applicable to the historical future? How *does* the ultimate goal of God impinge upon and relate to the moments of historical passage; if it is not simply 'above it', is it then simply its final end or terminus?"[176]

174. See Berkhof, *Christ the Meaning of History*, 198–204.

175. In his *Church Dogmatics*, Barth admits to a one-sided stress on God's transcendence so that he lost sight of the end, the goal (*telos*) of history. See Barth, *Church Dogmatics II.1*, 635.

176. See Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 274.

Gilkey's constructive position is that eschatological symbols such as the reign of God must have a double reference. They have an immediate and immanent reference to new possibilities for "social betterment" in the light of God's ultimate goal (which he describes in abstract terms as being, participation, community, and self-actualization). The emphasis on the not-yet allows for the lure of an eschatological vision in contrast with any present situation. The reign of God also has a transcendent reference beyond every historical possibility. It does not describe only a future *in* history but is also transcendent *to* history as such. In this way, the reign of God functions both as a lure in history and a judgment of history.[177] Gilkey ultimately grounds this in a process notion of God's providence as the very "ground of possibility" and therefore of continuity (sustaining creatures), transition, and creativity.[178]

The most detailed discussion of a theological understanding of history that I could find in Jürgen Moltmann's voluminous writings is in a section on "The Eschatological Resurrection of Christ" in his *The Way of Jesus Christ*. Moltmann acknowledges the question whether the resurrection is to be understood as an event in history (and not merely an interpretation of faith), as inescapable.[179] However, he stresses the need to also see history from the perspective of Christ's resurrection. This allows for a critique of the "modern" (read positivist) chronological paradigm of history. In a telling paragraph, Moltmann explains:

> From the seventeenth century onwards, the comprehensive paradigm "History" was developed in Europe, as a way of interpreting human beings and nature, God and the world. In this paradigm time ceased to be conceived of in terms of the cycle of the recurring seasons; it was now thought of as the line of human goals and purposes. In the human project "scientific and technological civilization," correspondences with nature and harmonizations with the cosmos were replaced by the new blueprint of progress from an ageing past into the new era of the future. The further the lordship of the Europeans over the other nations spread, and the more the domination of human beings over nature proceeded, the more the rich multiplicity of cultural histories gave way to the notion of the unity of mankind: the great singular concept "history" came into being, together with other singulars "the past" and "the future."[180]

Moltmann comments that within this "modernist paradigm" (affirmed by Ernst Troeltsch), the resurrection of Christ appears to be the product of fantasy or an irrelevant miracle. Even if the resurrection is regarded as an event (something that happened to the disciples more so than to Jesus?),

177. See Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 292–93.

178. See Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 303.

179. Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 227.

180. Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 227.

as a transient past event that moves further and further away from us as time progresses, it can neither determine the present nor can it have any relevance for the future.[181] He then explores the understanding of history in the work of Karl Barth (a divine history that judges but barely touches world history), Rudolf Bultmann (the existential experience of faith within human history), and Wolfhart Pannenberg (universal history that assumes the anticipated end of history), showing each of these to be one-sided. He engages especially with Pannenberg's view that the end of history is proleptically present in the midst of history through the resurrection of Christ. Accordingly, the resurrection of Christ offers the best available key to a philosophy of world history.[182] Moltmann affirms this insight but insists that knowing, doing, and hoping (Kant's three questions) are to be held together. If so, "reality is understood as history to the extent in which reality is disclosed by God's promise," by the presence of the promising God.[183] It is this horizon of expectation, based on a surplus of promise that exceeds the historical fulfillments of such promise, that renders events temporal and allows for an experience of such events as historical.[184]

Moltmann understands time neither as *chronos* (calendar and clock) nor as *kairos* (eternity in the moment), nor as vacant endlessness in time (the notion that world history will go on and on forever; the illusory immortality of the modern world),[185] but as *adventus*: the end of the current "world" and the coming/arrival of a new dispensation (aeon), the reign of God, symbolized by the death and the resurrection of Christ. This yields, Moltmann believes, a "totally unique interlocking of future and past": "the resurrection of the dead does not say merely that the past is open to the future, and that it is pregnant with future. It also talks about a future for those who belong to the past, and in so doing reverses time's direction."[186] The raising of the dead signifies the end of this time (dispensation) as the history of death—and the beginning of a new aeon, the new creation in which death will be no more.[187] God as the Wholly Other is not only a radical critique of this aeon but also the One who changes everything, making things new.[188]

181. Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 228.

182. Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 230–36.

183. Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 237.

184. Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 238.

185. Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 239.

186. Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 158.

187. Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 239.

188. Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 242.

Universal history is therefore not merely a hope for the present, being open to the future, but as the raising of the dead also the awakening of the past. This may be contrasted with a positivist reduction of history to past facts and times that have gone by. In this way, Moltmann seeks to retrieve a notion of history as the history of the anticipation of the future, at the level of individuals, families, societies, and civilizations, with planetary and indeed cosmic extensions.[189] History and nature cannot be separated from each other, as this allows for the human domination of nature. This is why the resurrection of the *body* (and not the immortality of the soul) provides the key for a theological understanding of history. Nature itself may be understood from the perspective of the resurrection.[190] In short, then: "The resurrection of Christ designates the history of the world to be the history of the end, and places the spheres of historical experience in the context and against the horizon of expectation of the new creation."[191]

Van Ruler on the Meaning of History

Given such dire warnings about discerning the finger of God in human or cosmic history, allow me to contemplate in more detail a section entitled "The Meaning of History Is Eschatological in Nature" from an essay by Arnold van Ruler entitled "Humanity—The Meaning of History," now available in an English translation.[192] I find the clarity of Van Ruler's argument both amazing and nerve-wracking because, if his argument holds, more or less, it becomes even harder to think theologically about the shift to the "Anthropocene."

Van Ruler has no doubt about the specifically Jewish and Christian origins of the very notion of history. The assumption of the directionality and teleology of history is inextricably tied to that. He states:

> That Being is at its core historical and that the history of the one human race has a meaning and is moving towards a goal, is *the* Christian biblical notion *par excellence*. That is what it is about in the Bible. That, even, is the gospel. Each time the Christian church has confessed to the salvific acts of God, this tended to result in a philosophy of history. Without this ferment, it would evaporate into idealism or Gnosticism or, currently, into existentialism or personalism.
>
> The content of the Christian gospel is skewed and explicitly falsified if no attention is given to the question about the meaning of history and no answer to it is given. And that not as an extra that people also examine. It is the heart

189. Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 240.

190. Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 247.

191. Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 158.

192. See Van Ruler, *This Earthly Life Matters*, 177–97. I am building here on my essay included in that volume, namely on "Van Ruler as an Early Exponent of Christian Ecotheology?"

> of the matter: from a Christian perspective we *cannot* have God and Christ and salvation and truth without having history and its meaning.[193]

On this basis, Van Ruler introduces a remarkably simple formula, namely that creation (or proton) + history = eschaton. The meaning of history is not already embedded in creation; the meaning of history is eschatological in nature. Van Ruler explains:

> The concept "creation" *alone* does not bring us to the concept "history." To get there, we have to consider that the Lord God did not merely call all things into being, but has also been so kind as to give them a *telos*, an *eschaton*, a purpose, a meaning. This purpose does not inhere in created things by way of entelechy. That things have a purpose is an aspect of the *gubernatio* as subsection of [God's] providence. That God governs things primarily means that God gives them a purpose.
>
> Only then is there history and a meaning of history. One can establish the great axiom with full certainty: without *eschaton* no history! The *eschaton* is the pulling force [*trekpunt*] of history. It sets history in motion. It gathers history together as a unity. It causes history to go somewhere specific. It implies that something comes of history—an outcome. It also brings about that history is irreversible and therefore unrepeatable and therefore once and for all.[194]

The full force of the statement "without *eschaton* no history" needs to be noted in the light of the discussion above. If any notion of the eschaton is denied (as is typically the case in postmodern discourse on history), it comes as no surprise that not only some meaning in history but the possibility of speaking of history as such becomes contested. Remarkably, Van Ruler does not understand the eschaton as the "end" of history in the sense of *finis*, termination, or culmination point, nor as something that lies beyond history. It is the eschaton not *in* (coming at the end of) history but *of* history, that is, of history as a whole.

> When we say: the meaning of history is eschatological by nature, then we are not saying: therefore, this meaning is located outside the world, outside time, outside history. *Eschaton* and history are fully correlated concepts. The *eschaton* is the *eschaton* only in that it is the *eschaton* of history.
>
> Therefore, one can also reverse the great axiom with full certainty: without *eschaton* no history, but without history no *eschaton* either! Just as the *eschaton* is the pulling force [*trekpunt*] of history, so history is the content of the *eschaton*. Had there been no history, God would not have been able to call an *eschaton* into being. For the *eschaton* is something that happens to history.[195]

Van Ruler adds:

> All truly eschatological concepts are concepts that proclaim something about the world here and now and about what is to happen to it. There is a definite

193. Van Ruler, *This Earthly Life Matters*, 180.

194. Van Ruler, *This Earthly Life Matters*, 189.

195. Van Ruler, *This Earthly Life Matters*, 190.

> identity between this world and the world to come. It passes through death. And through judgement. So, one can say: it passes through the end. Perhaps even: it passes through nothingness. But then it remains this created reality that passes through all this. And it really passes *through* it. Eschatologically what matters is not a world other than this one that we now have and are. Of this world we are not, from a Christian perspective, quit in all eternity.[196]

Van Ruler adopts an Irenaean understanding of the eschaton as *anakephalaiosis*, the "encapsulation of history." For Van Ruler, the eschaton is best understood as the consummation of the whole historical process. The eschaton is truly a con-summa-tion: everything is added together. It is not merely some future dispensation or the end destination of history but the gathering together of the whole of history. It enables one to judge the significance of every moment in history in terms of its destiny. In biblical terms, the eschaton is therefore described as "*anakephalaiosis* (recapitulation, bringing together under one heading, literally counting together [*optelling*])—*apokalupsis* (revelation, disclosure)—*crisis* (verdict, judgement)—*teleiosis* (fulfilment [*volmaking*])—*sunteleia* (consummation [*voleinding*])."[197] Recapitulation as the gathering together of the times is therefore not to be understood in terms of elevation (as Roman Catholic interpretations of Irenaeus's notion of recapitulation tend towards). He resists the temptation to pose a tension between nature and grace. Instead, grace enters into and transforms history. Salvation does not add anything ontologically to the history of creation, as sin does not have ontological status either. Likewise, the eschaton does not add anything to the history of God's creation as, the underlying problem does not lie with creation, or with history, or with temporal finitude, but with sin.

Consummation is nevertheless more than merely a coming to an end, or an obliteration, but also not a continuation, a repetition, or a return.[198] It is the whole of history, every moment of it, that is thus gathered together, disclosed, held, judged, completed, fulfilled, consummated, and glorified in God's presence.[199] Remarkably, this does not exclude but precisely includes the catastrophic. Here is Van Ruler one last time:

> This element of catastrophe in particular, which involves taking evil seriously as a problem to be overcome, makes it quite impossible to equate the *eschaton* with the *proton*. There is a plus. History has a real meaning. The *eschaton* is creation plus history.

196. Van Ruler, *This Earthly Life Matters*, 190–91.

197. Van Ruler, *Theologisch Werk I*, 223 (my translation).

198. See Van Ruler, *Theologisch Werk IV*, 112.

199. In his doctoral thesis, also his magnum opus, Van Ruler followed the biblical terminology to speak of the purpose of Christ's coming as the fulfillment of the law. See Van Ruler, *De Vervulling van de Wet*.

> Therefore we also have to say, when we regard matters theologically in broad overview, that the world progresses. It moves *from* proton *to* eschaton. This awareness of freedom, of progress, of evolution is deeply ingrained in the Christian faith. One could say: it *is* this faith in its essence: this trust that the world progresses and comes into its own—also when it goes under.[200]

Is History Going Somewhere?

One may conclude that while some are adamant that history is going somewhere, and they know where, others are equally adamant that history is not going anywhere, or that one cannot know that anyhow. Some may doubt whether one can even speak of "history" as such, certainly not "universal" history. Instead, there may be only a myriad of local stories, each with vested interests at play. While some prefer to focus on a cyclical pattern, seeing in it God's work of conservation and sustenance, others see a more linear understanding of history as implied in the Christian faith and may then seek God's governance in that history, hoping for a radical transformation of unjust social orders. Yet others see such a more linear pattern, epitomized by economic growth, as a core assumption of modernity lying at the very root of ecological destruction and see Christianity as deeply complicit in that. Accordingly, modernity only became possible on the basis of Jewish-Christian assumptions.

Given the enormous complexity of the issues discussed above, it would be facetious to give clear answers to the question whether history is going somewhere. At the same time, it is important to remove false obstacles and unnecessary stumbling blocks. At the risk again of gross over-simplification, let me try to disentangle some of the claims made about meaning that may be attributed to history and what is at stake from the perspective of the Christian faith.

The End of the World? / The End of History?

First, it is necessary to state that Christians do not have privileged information regarding the "end of the world," that is, whether history will come to an end (understood as *finis* and not as *telos*),[201] how it will end, or when that may be. Since Kant's famous essay on "The End of All Things"

200. Van Ruler, *This Earthly Life Matters*, 191.

201. See also Tillich, *Systematic Theology 3*, 394.

(1994), it has been hard to even imagine[202] such a temporal end, as time itself implies ongoing change.[203] To claim to know any of that would be to fall into the trap of eschatological creationism, not to mention Christ's own prohibition against such speculation (Matt 24:36). Whatever the parousia of Christ and other eschatological symbols could mean, they need not be associated with apocalyptic but still very literal descriptions about the "end of the world," as a termination event or singular point in time somewhere in the chronological future, for example, given any array of bad omens (whether in the form of moral decay or natural catastrophes), the dangers of a nuclear war, or for that matter the advent of the "Anthropocene." In this sense, the future remains open.

Christian hope cannot be reduced to any particular event in history, or to the eternal now of an ever-present instant (or instead of an instant, an age *zwischen den Zeiten*) or to the end (again as *finis*) of history. If the parousia cannot be identified with a temporal future in the flow of time, it is inappropriate to speak of it as being "delayed" or as "coming soon" (as the not-yet that will come and will then pass away and be no longer). With Moltmann, the "will come" of the parousia (ἐρχόμενον in the Nicene Creed, *venturus* in the Apostolicum) is best understood in terms of the future as *adventus* and not as *futurum* (a second coming or a return).[204]

As far as Christian believers can say, human, planetary, and cosmic history is in God's hands. We may expect history to continue to run its course for the time being,[205] uninterrupted by any scenario about "the end of the world," although some "worlds" should and will come to an end, hopefully soon. The last age in a chronological sense is not the same as the final age in an eschatological sense.[206] Not even Jesus knew the "end" in a chronological sense. Christian hope is not based on a chronological (where duration can be calculated and a sequence of events can be

202. Let me yield to the temptation to draw on Kant's rhetoric: "But that at some point a time will arrive in which all alteration (and with it, time itself) ceases—this is a representation which outrages the imagination. For then the whole of nature will be rigid and as it were petrified: the last thought, the last feeling in the thinking subject will then stop and remain forever the same without any change. For a being which can become conscious of its existence and the magnitude of this existence (as duration) only in time, such a life—if it can even be called a life—appears equivalent to annihilation, because in order to think itself into such a state it still has to think something in general, but thinking contains a reflecting, which can occur only in time." Kant, "The End of All Things," 227.

203. Kant's argument is complex and satirical, but it needs to be noted that he distinguishes between the "natural" end (for him a moral *telos* that we can understand very well on the basis of human reason), a mystical or supernatural end to efficient causes (of which we can know nothing at all), and a contra-natural (perverse) end (which results from misunderstanding the final end). See Kant, "The End of All Things," 224.

204. See Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 317.

205. See Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth*, 5, but also Moltmann's critique in *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 158.

206. See Tillich, *Systematic Theology 3*, 308.

plotted diachronically) or a kairological (eternity captured in a moment) concept of time, or any notion of timeless eternity.[207] It expresses the hope that this "world" (dispensation, age, aeon) will come to an end and expects the dawn of the age (αἰῶνος in the Nicene Creed) to come.

What we know about civilizations is that they rise and fall. What we know about the history of species is that they come and go. This applies also to hominin species. From science, we know that the Earth will melt away when the Sun becomes a supernova. The arrow of time suggests a process towards increasing entropy so that, in the end, all the lights will go out. But that assumes a closed system. Beyond that, given the limits of our knowledge of any end of history within history, an apophatic response is appropriate, leaving any Alpha (the forever before) and the Omega (the forever beyond) safely in God's hands.[208] This forms a core dimension of a spirituality nourished by faith in God's providence.[209]

In the interim, it is best to refrain from idle talk about the end of history or the end of the world. The Christian hope cannot be reduced to such an end if understood as a termination point (*finis*). Instead, it anticipates that, in a world already reconciled with God in Christ, all things will be put right. The cosmic scope of this hope allows for a critique and relativizing of any other anticipations of a better future. Jürgen Moltmann puts this somewhat cryptically: "There is no 'end of history' before the resurrection of the dead and the annihilation of death in the presence of God, not in an ideal 'global state' either or in a hegemonial imperium; for they themselves, after all, are in need of redemption."[210]

Directionality in History?

Second, there can be little doubt that some form of directionality can be discerned in history even if the actual direction, typically marked by a succession of stages, remains fiercely disputed. Such directionality applies at the level of a person's life story, a family tree, a nation, a civilization, a language, a species, and a planet alike. Once one zooms out, there is an obvious directionality in cosmic, planetary, biological (marked by

207. See Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 158.

208. The terminology of the forever before and the forever beyond, thus avoiding any linear chronological sequencing, is derived from Upolu Vaai. See his "We Are Earth," 75.

209. Jürgen Moltmann explains the significance of not knowing crisply: "We do not know whether humanity will survive this self-made destiny. This is actually a good thing. If we knew with certainty that we would not survive, we would do nothing; if we knew with certainty that we would survive we would also do nothing. Only if the future is open for both possibilities are we forced to do today what is necessary to survive tomorrow." See *The Spirit of Hope*, 8.

210. Moltmann, *Ethics of Hope*, 228.

mass extinctions), hominid, and cultural evolution. There may be linear patterns (marked by years, seasons, stellar constellations) and cyclical patterns (marked by day and night, the moon and tides) of time that are hard to harmonize, but an eternal return of the same cannot do justice to patterns that are indeed linear. Cultural change in preliterate societies may be more imperceptible, but the changes from bone and stone tools to bronze and iron tools and from hunting and gathering to agriculture show such a directionality clearly.

To discern such a directionality is not a specifically Christian claim, but it is certainly compatible with any Christian understanding of history. The problem is, of course, that the Christian calendar (marked by "before Christ" and "*anno Domini*") has become "common" so that this calendar (instead of the Roman *ab urbe condita* or the Chinese New Year) has been imposed on all others and monopolized for international usage. Nevertheless, such directionality is arguably also compatible with Indigenous views of narrative time. Linear calibration forms an intrinsic part of life stories that move from birth and subsequent birth days to death.[211] The stories that we tell indicate that things do not always remain the same, even if patterns recur. Things do change and some changes are irreversible, for example, those recorded within the geological timescale. One such change is the shift from the Holocene to the "Anthropocene." Admittedly, such a perspective is not always welcomed by Indigenous communities, given the impact of linear notions of time under conditions of coloniality.[212]

Affirming such directionality is nevertheless important for a Christian understanding of history. The tendency to regard eternity as something purely suprahistorical (from Augustine to dialectical theology), so that eternity hovers over every moment in time,[213] does not do justice to the flow of history or to the reign of God in history. It reduces salvation history to an existential encounter with history.[214] The tension between an "already" and a "not yet" in the coming reign of God and therefore in salvation history

211. See Goody, *The Theft of History*, 18.

212. Goody frames this contestation as follows: "Any idea of exclusive calculation having to be made in a linear mode rather than a circular one is mistaken and reflects our perception of an advanced forward-looking west and a static backward-looking east." See Goody, *The Theft of History*, 18.

213. See Bultmann's famous comment that we therefore need to awaken that moment: "In every moment slumbers the possibility of being the eschatological moment. You must awaken it." In this way, what is temporal, and especially the future itself, soon disappears behind the eschatological horizon. What remains is merely a new human self-understanding, a change in human consciousness. See Bultmann, *History and Eschatology*, 155.

214. See Cullmann, *Salvation in History*, 48.

(as developed especially by Oscar Cullmann)[215] assumes such directionality. Some continuity is characteristic of salvation history, but so is the transformation of the old to liberate, reconcile, and reconstruct what is. This implies the need for renewal and social transformation. In Marxian terms, salvation history is not merely a hermeneutical clue to *understand* history but also a prophetic call to *change* it.[216] From a Christian perspective, such directionality is symbolized by the continuity and discontinuity between Jesus of Nazareth and the resurrected Christ.[217] Without continuity, it is not the *earth* that is saved; without discontinuity, the earth is not *saved*. Christian eschatology assumes some directionality even if the relation between proton and eschaton remains highly contested.

A purely cyclical worldview cannot do justice to the temporality, relativity, contingency, and mortality of our existence. Ahistoricism cannot do justice to the Christian confession of a God of history who enters into history and makes history. However, radical historicism cannot do justice to the confession of a *God* of history either (only polytheist views on various gods acting *in* history are then possible). Such a directionality may also apply to the stories told within the Jewish-Christian tradition about the revelation of God's character—from the God of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to the God of Israel, to the God of all nations, indeed the Creator of heaven and earth.[218]

Discerning Such Direction

Third, discerning the actual direction matters, as this calls for a reinterpretation of the past.[219] One cannot grasp the whole of history (at any of the levels mentioned above) because the whole is not yet there.[220]

215. See Cullmann, *Salvation in History*. For Cullmann, salvation history implies a degree of linearity but then a fluctuating and not necessarily a straight line (15). It also assumes a vertical axis, given the saving act of God in Christ (16).

216. Müller-Fahrenholtz, "Salvation History," 1014.

217. See Cullmann, *Salvation in History*, 103.

218. For such a directionality in God's revelation, see Pannenberg's much-debated "Dogmatic Theses on the Doctrine of Revelation" in *Revelation as History*, 123–58.

219. See the sixth of Walter Benjamin's "Theses on a Philosophy of History": "The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer; he comes as the subduer of Antichrist. Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious."

220. See Pannenberg's "Dogmatic Theses": "Now the history of the whole is only visible when one stands at its end" (142). My sense is that even though Pannenberg speaks too readily about "universal" history as a "whole" and the "end" of history, his intuition that Christ's resurrection is a proleptic anticipation of the meaning of history and therefore of this moment in time is on the right track, as is his emphasis on the historicity of nature. Inversely, any notion of human history therefore requires an (ecological) a sense of place.

Even after the death of an individual, a person's legacy is subject to change as this depends upon subsequent developments. We live only from fragments, but we cannot but try to gather such fragments in order to make sense of the meaning of our lives. Even where I have to account for my own life story, my memory will be selective; there are many aspects of my life that will remain hidden to myself, that are repressed at a subconscious level, that I do not and cannot grasp.[221] One's life story may have neither unity nor sequential coherence that could be rendered intelligible in the form of a single story. There may be no unifying narrative pattern, no quasi-divine view on history.[222] The kingdom of God remains as hidden as the kingdom of the Crucified. It is revealed exactly when all evidence seems to be against it.

Nevertheless, to give up prematurely on discerning such directionality is inappropriate. We have nothing more than a few scattered clues as to where things may be going, but it matters how we make use of such clues to construct the meaning of our lives and of history at various levels—individual, communal, national, and global. To abandon this task is to succumb to what is less than human. This is again not a Christian specific claim, but Christians certainly do participate in such processes of sense-making and make use of core Christian symbols in this regard. However, discerning such directionality should not be confused with judging such directionality (see below).

Judging the Direction of History

Fourth, such a directionality can be judged in different ways, for example, in terms of steady progress (given the role of science and technology), or as rapid decline, or as an interplay between rising and falling. One may, for example, discern a pattern of increasing diversity, complexity, and beauty in evolutionary history. One may also recognize the "arrow of time" and observe that entropy may perhaps have the last word in cosmic evolution. There may be the birth of what is novel but also the death of what has become degenerate. A Christian understanding of history does not prescribe any such judgments, but they do matter. It can and does interpret birth as part of God's good creation and death as part of being a finite creature. One's birth and death shape one's destiny,

221. Richard Niebuhr observes that the meaning of our lives typically escapes us because our memories are so selective: "We do not really know what we have done and are still doing to others, not even to those closest to us, for example to our own children." He suggests that God's revelation in Jesus Christ helps Christians to disclose the deeper meaning of their past, present, and future. See Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 65. For the discussion in this paragraph, including the quotation from Niebuhr, see also my essay in volume 1 of the *An Earthed Faith* series.

222. See Fergusson, *The Providence of God*, 4, with reference to insights derived from Galen Strawson.

the time that is allotted and which lies beyond one's locus of control.[223] There may be a tendency towards the cumulative impact of human sin but also a tendency towards the extension of grace over space and time. Some things do need to end, but this may be a sign of grace in allowing what is to come. The question is then this: what is it that has to end? The eager expectation (not fear!) for a final gracious judgment of every moment in time remains an integral part of Christian hope. It is especially important for each and every victim of history, even if the image of God as a Judge has often been used by authorities as a scare tactic.[224] It then helps to affirm that it is Christ, the Lamb that was slain, who will judge the living and the dead (κρῖναι ζῶντας καὶ νεκρούς). The obvious needs to be added here: judging the direction of "where things are going," on a macro- or a micro-level, is not an exclusively Christian responsibility but one in which Christians of all walks of life can and do participate to make up their own minds as to where things are going. This is epitomized by the task of prophets. However, the ultimate judgment is not in our hands but rests in the deliberations between the παντοκράτορ, the ἕνα Κύριον Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν, and the παράκλητος.

Teleology?

Fifth, there is a need to treat teleology in history with some circumspection, as any such goal can easily become equated with destructive notions of progress.[225] Although providence is not to be equated with teleology or destiny, it is hard to avoid some broad sense of orientation towards a goal. To deny any sense of purpose in history may well undermine an affirmation of the goodness of creation and the worthiness of many an emancipatory struggle. For example, the goal of reducing infant mortality is surely appropriate. However, to claim that such a goal will only be reached in the end along a linear axis denies the meaning of the rest of history and would

223. See the discussion by Barth, as an example of God's governance, in *Church Dogmatics III.3*, 226–38.

224. Tafue Lusama therefore seeks to counter such an understanding of God as Judge in his *Vaa Fesokotaki: A Theology of GOD for a New Oceanic Climate Change Story*. In fact, he argues that it is a warped understanding of providence with God as judge that has undermined an adequate Tuvaluan response to climate change (49).

225. This danger is not avoided in the following formulation by Karl Löwith: "The future is the 'true' focus of history, provided that the truth abides in the religious foundation of the Christian Occident, whose historical consciousness is, indeed, determined by an eschatological motivation, from Isaiah to Marx, from Augustine to Hegel, and from Joachim to Schelling. The significance of the vision of an ultimate end, as both *finis* and *telos* [for Löwith the Kingdom of God], is that it provides a scheme of progressive order and meaning, a scheme which has been capable of overcoming the ancient fear of fate and fortune." See Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 18.

sacrifice every previous generation for the sake of a next generation.[226] Any notion of the completion of history underplays the "wreckage of history" that such a temporal end would not redeem.[227] Eschatology cannot be reduced to any inherent (moral) teleology or to futurology, as Christian hope challenges any present acquiescence in the status quo.[228] To claim that "the end of history" can already be discerned (Fukuyama) is to close off history prematurely. To see the goal of one's life in terms of reaching its end seems self-contradictory. To be too particular about the goal of history is to make everything else subservient to that goal (e.g., prosperity, health, achievements, advancement, democracy). To focus on a single goal (universalist aspirations) tends to become imperialistic and hegemonic. As Paul Tillich observes amid an emerging nuclear and space age, "The moment of greatest integration in all history implies the danger of the greatest disintegration, even of radical destruction."[229]

In my view, it may suffice to see such a goal in broad terms in the same way that a couple starting a family would at best hope to share their love for each other more broadly. For Christians, the goal of history can therefore be sketched in equally broad terms such as sharing the Sabbath rest, God's covenant,[230] peace (through justice), love, and joy. The vision of the coming reign of God

226. See the second of Walter Benjamin's "Theses on a Philosophy of History": "There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim. That claim cannot be settled cheaply. Historical materialists are aware of that."

227. See White, *Purpose and Providence*, 138, with reference to Miroslav Volf's work.

228. See already Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 252.

229. Tillich, *Systematic Theology 3*, 341. See Tillich's discussion of self-integration and centralization (339–42). Empires are not only built upon a will to power but also upon a vocational consciousness. For Tillich, the Roman Empire represents the law, the German Empire the *corpus Christianum*, the British Empire Christian civilization, the Russian Empire the depth of humanity against a mechanized culture, and the American empire the principle of liberty. The disintegrative and destructive side of Empire is therefore as obvious as its integrative, creative side (340).

230. See the adamant position adopted by Karl Barth in this regard: "As the creation of all the reality distinct from God took place on the basis of this purposed covenant and with a view to its execution, so the meaning of the continued existence of the creature, and therefore the purpose of its history, is that this covenant will and work of God begun in creation should have its course and reach its goal. There is no other meaning or purpose in history. For there is no other God, and in the will of this God there is no other purpose but the election of grace resolved and fulfilled by Him from all eternity." See Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.3*, 36. The question then remains whether the covenant is there for the sake of God's work of creation or whether the covenant is the ultimate goal of creation. For Barth, at least, "the doctrine of providence presupposes that this special history is exalted above all other history" (37). The history of the covenant is God's primary work (49). The created cosmos forms the external basis of the covenant, a *conditio sine qua non*, the theater of God's great acts of grace (48). Accordingly, God's work of conservation is for the sake of covenant of grace: the creature cannot preserve or sustain itself but must be preserved so that it can be present in the divine work of deliverance and liberation and participate in the divine covenant of grace (80). Note the contrast with Van Ruler's position in this regard, namely that the covenant is necessary but then for the sake of the whole of creation.

(in secular terms, the social ideal,[231] planetary well-being, or the flourishing of life) likewise remains broad but then also functions as a protest against destruction, injustice, oppression, and tyranny. The kingdom *of God*, of *this* God, as revealed in the crucified and risen Messiah, serves as a challenge to the sovereignty of Caesar and subsequently to many other kingdoms and principalities.[232]

Such a broad and necessarily vague goal, without stipulating specific outcomes, deadlines, and targets, does allow for a sense of purpose in life and in history. Admittedly, terms such as goal, purpose, and meaning are often used interchangeably. It may suffice to suggest that a sense of purpose indicates how particular agents (or agencies) relate to an envisaged goal. This implies the need to explain why such a goal is worthy, why this applies to a particular agent, and how that agent's current life, activities, and decisions are aligned with such a goal. To have a sense of purpose is to be able to explain what I am living for at this moment in time. A loss of a sense of purpose may be a widespread and haunting experience in a postmodern context. From the perspective of the Christian faith, the question is not only whether such a sense of purpose can be identified or whether that is indeed worthy, but also whether such a sense of purpose is merely the result of the social construction of reality or whether it can in some sense be *found*, discovered as already there.[233]

I would concur with Ted Peters that it is problematic to seek some sense of purpose *in* nature, as if that can be detected through a scientist's or a historian's gaze. Instead, he affirms a divine purpose *for* nature. This is not merely based on human subjectivity (one faith perspective alongside others) but on the subjectivity of Godself. If there is a sense of ultimate purpose for Big History (the history of the universe), then that may at best

231. See Van Ruler's question: "What, after all, is the kingdom of God but the social ideal?" in *This Earthly Life Matters*, 193. Karl Barth describes the goal of earthly history (the millennium) likewise as the social*istic* ideal. See Barth's essay on "The Problem of Ethics Today," 157.

232. I can therefore live with this lucid answer that Van Ruler offers to the question whether history is going somewhere: "History is going somewhere. It moves towards something. Namely towards the ultimate kingdom. But God's kingdom is not to be equated with God. It is the entire created reality in its completed and redeemed state. Yes, more than that: it is the summation and summary of the historical process. Therefore the eschaton casts us back fully into the present. Those who think eschatologically also think historically. They think and live horizontally." See *This Earthly Life Matters*, 254. One may add, with Ted Peters, that the future is not merely the result of actualizing a potential that is already present (*futurum*), or the appearance of something absolutely new (*adventus*); it is also the invasion of the present by the proleptic power of what is yet to come (*venturum*), participating now already in what is yet to be consummated. See Peters, *God—the World's Future*, 320–21.

233. See White, *Purpose and Providence*, 1. He tracks the "obstinate" and remarkable persistence of such a sense of purpose in Western thought and literature, despite a loss of a belief in God as personal agent. White, however, defends God's providence as characteristically personal in form. In one formulation, he puts it like this: "God's purpose is carried out primarily by personal interaction with creatures and their purposes, not simply by impersonal fiat [...] the purpose of this providential activity is a creative and redemptive love" (73). Could one then say that the purpose of God's care is God's love? Perhaps, but, I suggest, only if the purpose of redemptive love is regarded as creative love. Redemption is not an end in itself.

be found in God's affirmation of the inherent goodness and meaning of things and God's promises to make all things new.[234]

The Meaning of History?

Sixth, there is considerable debate among philosophers and historians on whether any meaning can be attributed to history as such. Note that the focus here is on history in the sense of the totality of events in natural history, including human history, and not the narrative account of portions of that "history", or to the academic study of such "history." We only have access to "history" through narrative accounts, but what is at stake here is not the meaning of narration but of what is being narrated.[235]

The word "meaning" in the phrase "the meaning of history" (or the meaning of life) is notoriously slippery and for some rather old-fashioned. In general, it could refer to intelligibility (does it make sense?), but such intelligibility can be understood in diverging ways (coherence, causation, purpose, implications, value, quality, worthiness, etc.). In philosophy, a distinction is typically made (e.g., following Gottlob Frege) between meaning (sense; German: *Sinn*) and significance (relevance for me/us, today; German: *Bedeutung*), thus between what is more objective and what is more subjective. One would speak of the significance of an event but hardly of the significance of history. It is also possible to understand meaning in terms of purpose, but that seems restrictive. All purposeful actions may be meaningful (or sometimes lose their meaning), but not every meaning is purposive.[236] Mistakes may be intelligible and presuppose a purpose but are not purposeful. To speak of the value of history sounds odd, as this seems to assume value for something else (God, the common good, εὐδαιμονία, comprehensive well-being?). To speak of the intrinsic worth of every form of life and of every moment in history may be appropriate, but the worth of history is again an odd phrase. As Paul Tillich observes, "'the value of life' has neither the depth nor the breadth of 'the meaning of life'."[237] Moreover, an authentic, meaningful life is scarcely possible and becomes illusory if the meaninglessness of the larger whole is maintained.[238] Nihilism may be as dogmatic as a naïve, unbroken faith in meaning![239] There is only one thing that is worse than dogmatic certitude about the revealed meaning of history, and that may be

234. See Peters, "Does God Have a Plan for the Big History of the Cosmos?," 200.

235. See Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 28.

236. See Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 54.

237. Tillich, *Systematic Theology 3*, 304.

238. See Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 59.

239. See Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 59.

an equally dogmatic certitude about life's meaninglessness. The question about the meaning of history thus returns.

Karl Popper maintains that history has no meaning in the sense of a grand patterning of history or some Clue or Meaning to history that can be traced according to a single plot. He does admit that "[a]lthough history has no ends, we can impose these ends of ours upon it and although history has no meaning we can give it meaning."[240] The British philosopher William Walsh poses the alternatives starkly: "Either (it is said) we must admit that history has a meaning, that there is point, significance, intelligibility in the historical process as a whole, or we must accept the view that history is a chaotic aggregate of unconnected events and processes, lacking all rhyme or reason."[241] He maintains that the project of penetrating below the surface of history to find its hidden meaning "seems scarcely respectable" but admits that there is a strong moral revulsion in accepting that the suffering and disasters that historians narrate are pointless and meaningless.[242] The American historian Robert Berkhofer, following Nietzsche, admits that there is no such meaning but that meaning is imposed through narration and specifically through emplotment that creates a narrative unity from a diversity of events, showing how discrete events are interconnected. Such patterning distinguishes history from chronicles and annals. He concludes that although "Grand-scale teleology may be dead in professional historical practice, [...] narrative teleology remains alive and well in historical texts."[243] If so, as the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka observes, the quest for meaning thus ends where it began: "with the bondage of life to its self-consumption and with work as the basic means of its perpetuation."[244]

240. Quoted in Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story*, 115. The reference is to Popper's *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, 278.

241. Also quoted in Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story*, 116. See also Walsh, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, 119.

242. See Walsh, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, 119.

243. Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story*, 121.

244. See Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 74. Patočka adds that humans cannot live without meaning and that this requires absolute (better: ultimate) meaning, or else the meaning of any one event will be undermined by the meaninglessness of the whole. For him, this implies that "humans cannot live with the certitude of meaninglessness" (75). He calls for "an unheard of *metanoein*" that allows for a return of mystery, preferring "seeking the truth" above "having the truth" (with reference to Lessing). Seeking meaningfulness requires a prior shaking off of any naïvely accepted meaning, the recognition that any given claim to find such meaning is problematic (76). The infinite depth of reality implies that we cannot see its bottom (75). Uncovering meaning (ἀλήθεια) implies a concealment of being (Heidegger). Patočka maintains that the quest for meaning in history need not be abandoned but then "on condition that humans are prepared to give up the hope of a directly given meaning and to accept meaning as a way" (77). Any hope to find meaning either in the immediacy of life or the scientific investigation of particular objects is bound to end up in a deprivation of meaning, in nihilism. This is a position that I can only affirm from a theological perspective. See, however, also the footnote below on Patočka's critique of Christian theology.

Is it then only speculative philosophers and some theologians who are still able and willing to speak of meaning in (not *the* meaning of) history? Is any meaning derived from history then dependent upon salvation history and the schematization of creation, fall, salvation, and judgment?[245] Does any attempt at finding meaning in history depend on a secularized form of Christianity so that abandoning the Christian faith as a source of meaning (and its central themes as meaningless, divorced from reality) implies an abandoning of any meaning in history? Any attempt to hold unto such meaning is then like trying to hold onto the waves in a shipwreck![246]

At least it should be clear that the meaning of history (in terms of its worth or significance, if not necessarily in terms of its ultimate goal or destination) cannot be derived from any fleeting moment or experience or from any historical processes.[247] It cannot be found in some or other supra-historical category (e.g., an abstract notion of transcendence) either, at least not only.[248] This is an escape route that has often plagued Christianity, namely in devaluing this world by positing another "true" world. This famously prompted Nietzsche's plea to stay true to the earth instead.

To see the meaning of one's life in terms of "going to heaven one day" is an obvious example, but fellowship with God, the reign of God, and the vision of divinization, or of transfiguration, can easily fall into the same trap of escapism, of thinking that the purpose of this earthly life is to "return" to God.[249] At best, these notions can avoid such escapism, for example, by affirming creaturely being: creatures are not their own beings but exist (now already) by participation in God's being. If so, one may then say that the purpose of a

245. See Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 69.

246. For this image, see Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 69, with reference to Karl Löwith.

247. See Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 191: "The problem of history as a whole is unanswerable within its own perspective. Historical processes as such do not bear the least evidence of a comprehensive and ultimate meaning. History as such has no outcome."

248. Contra Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 66–67, who emphasizes the Greek instead of the Hebraic influence on the Christian faith by suggesting that meaning in history is imposed by faith from an otherwise inaccessible "true world." He says: "The significance of the Christian experience in history is now this: what the philosophical claim of a firm *epistēmē*, denied by skepticism, cannot warrant, what humans cannot achieve with their most strenuous efforts, is easy for God. Faith, God's word addressed to humans and the response to this word, *displaces the relation to the cosmos as of secondary importance* and ultimately as unimportant. Christian theology seemed not at all bothered that the explication of God's address to humans took place in the sphere of the transcendental *chorismos* posited long ago for a wholly different purpose by Plato's metaphysics. *Divine transcendence*, whose conceptual foundations undoubtedly do not lie in Israel's treasure of ideas, *is an inheritance of the 'true world' formulated once by Plato and transformed theologically by Aristotle*. The Christian faith is not a meaning sought by humans and autonomously found by them, but is rather dictated from that world." The description in the phrases that I italicized may be accurate of some trajectories in Christian theology but are widely disputed, also and especially in contemporary ecotheologies.

249. Van Ruler comments: "We wish to 'return' into God, into heaven, into eternity. As if we come from there! As if that is where we belong!" See Van Ruler, *This Earthly Life Matters*, 253–54.

journey or pilgrimage includes reaching the final destination but cannot be reduced to that. The meaning of the journey lies in the journey, in journeying itself. Every moment is therefore precious. Every moment is in need of a gracious judgment.[250] Every moment is in need of healing. If so, that requires an understanding of transcendence as the transformation of the present, of the status quo.[251] Amid such a journey, one needs to discern the movement and momentum of the Spirit in a particular moment. God holds not only the whole world but also the whole of history in God's hands. Every moment is to be treasured—and where necessary transformed—in God's presence.[252]

The meaning of history can therefore be found only from within history. In the flow of time, this is hard, given the memory of past suffering and anxieties over what the future may hold. The present cannot always be sacrificed for the sake of either the past (maintaining tradition) or the future (dreaming about a better world).[253] With this recognition, Christians

250. See the third of Walter Benjamin's "Theses on a Philosophy of History": "To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past-which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments. Each moment it has lived becomes a citation *ordre du jour*—and that day is Judgment Day." Also note his observation that "every second of time was the strait gate through which Messiah might enter" (thesis B). The messianic moment (*Jetztzeit*) stands against the homogeneous empty (quantified) time of the ruling class, which is history written from the perspective of the victors. It is time at a standstill, poised, filled with energy, allowing for an interruption, a cessation of what has come before, ready to take a "tiger's leap" (thesis XIV) into the future. For a discussion, see Agamben, *Infancy and History*, 112.

251. See Rieger, *Theology in the Capitalocene*, 80.

252. Leopold von Ranke famously maintained that "every epoch is immediate to God." Accordingly, from God's eternal perspective, there is no distinction between different periods of history; all were the same and equally important in God's eyes. For historians, this implies that the past should not be judged by the standards of the present; each epoch should be regarded in its own terms (a common assumption among historians). For a discussion, see Evans, *In Defence of History*, 17. This argument may be well taken, but note the different implication drawn from that, namely that meaning cannot be understood only in terms of the current epoch or some teleological purpose to be reached "in the end." Again, if every epoch is immediate to God, then every moment in history is precious.

253. For me, the lure of a better tomorrow and the disappointments that failed revolution yields are captured exceptionally well by the English lyrics, written by Herbert Kretzmer, of "Empty Chairs at Empty Tables" if contrasted with "Do You Hear the People Sing?" in *Les Misérables* (the lyrics are widely available from the Internet):

> Do you hear the people sing?
> Singing the song of angry men?
> It is the music of the people
> Who will not be slaves again!
> When the beating of your heart
> Echoes the beating of the drums
> There is a life about to start
> When tomorrow comes!
>
> Will you join in our crusade?
> Who will be strong and stand with me?
> Beyond the barricade
> Is there a world you long to see?

may confess that it is hard to make sense of history without discerning God's presence in history. Only a fully Trinitarian understanding of transcendence will do, one that affirms God's presence (God's embodiment as Immanuel), pneumatic movement (sanctification), and the parental love that holds all of this together.[254] An utterly transcendent God, described with the Greek omni-characteristics) cannot help us and has become unattractive. As Upolu Vaai rightly notes, "[T]he cross of Christ is symbolic of a dirtified approach to life that nurtures power that emerges from the dirt communities. A God with less dirt is not a loving God whom the dirt communities could trust."[255]

On the other hand, a completely immanent (pantheist) God, who is present amid sentient suffering, may be far more attractive nowadays but can only help if such a God can transform such suffering.[256] Otherwise, the danger is that suffering becomes sacralized. There may be only one thing that is worse than an omnipotent God, and that is an impotent God or no God at all, but then God's power is the power of a vulnerable God, a crucified Christ.[257]

(footnote 253 continues)
And, by contrast:

There's a grief that can't be spoken
There's a pain goes on and on
Empty chairs at empty tables
Now my friends are dead and gone

Here they talked of revolution
Here it was they lit the flame
Here they sang about tomorrow
And tomorrow never came.

254. See my argument in "Only a Fully Trinitarian Theology Will Do, But Where Can That Be Found?"

255. Vaai, "A Dirtified God," 26.

256. Vernon White formulates the question in terms of transcendence and immanence: "In broad terms we still need to ask which is more tolerable—a transcendent and sovereign creator who can and does ultimately redeem all, or a vulnerable God who suffers and weep with us?" He defends the former but agrees that a Trinitarian view of God would require both God's transcendence and God's immanence. See White, *Purpose and Providence*, 135.

257. Tim Gorringe recognizes that there are dangers on both sides here. He speaks of God's power as the power of the Word, of vicarious suffering, of community, and of the poor in history, as well as the power of God's patience. See Gorringe, *God's Theatre*, 63–68. In *The Power of God and the Gods of Power* Daniel Migliore offers a lucid summary statement. He says:

> [...] the power of the living God of the Bible is radically different [...] from the power exercised by our many personal and corporate idols. [...] The living God is not a projection of our will to power or our deep-seated desire to dominate others. While majestically strong, the living God shows that strength most awesomely in the humility of a servant Lord. The living God is not the guarantor of the way things are but the disturbing God who keeps us restless for a transformed world. Creator and redeemer, the living God is full of surprises and repeatedly challenges all our presuppositions about what it means to be truly divine and what it means to be truly human. Altogether different from the dead idols that we fabricate with our hands and construct in our imaginations, the living God is strong enough to will to be with his creatures, to become vulnerable for their salvation, and to triumph in his vulnerability. The living God exercises power even in weakness and exposes the weakness of our vaunted powers (15).

There is then a need to hold together the horizontal (the immanent) and the vertical (the transcendent) dimensions of our lives and of history without subsuming one under the other.[258] Likewise, it is necessary to hold together the normative significance of the Christ-event (even *senkrecht von oben*) and the historical (salvation in history).[259] Or, one may add, the presence of the "already" celebrated in sacramental traditions and the "not yet" presence of God's reign emphasized in prophetic critiques of the status quo.[260] A vertical axis alone (one that absorbs the eschaton into the relation between time and eternity)[261] would not suffice precisely because of present injustices. It then leaves the continuation of history devoid of

258. See the profound essay by Van Ruler entitled "Vertical and Horizontal" in *This Earthly Life Matters*, 253–56. Here is the gist of his argument: "We can distinguish between the words 'vertical' and 'horizontal' in this way. The horizontal refers to the movement within which all finds itself; the vertical refers to the relationship in which all stands. There is—in the Christian view—no vertical movement: we do not ascend to God. But the relationship in which all stands is not purely horizontal; it is at its core vertical. The essential relationship that makes things what they are is the relationship to God, being held in God's hands, standing before God's face" (55). And: "Faithful existence fully enters into and becomes engrossed in the horizontal reality, but as open reality, as creation. It is open to the Creator. The Creator deals with it according to God's pleasure. To summarize it in a single sentence: we are in time and time is in God's hand" (56).

259. See Cullmann, *Salvation in History*, 100. He adds: "The vertical aspect of the Christ-event does not set aside the horizontal aspect of the salvation happening but interprets it afresh" (101).

260. See Tillich, *Systematic Theology 3*, 391. In a passage worth quoting at some length, Tillich also employs the categories of the vertical and the horizontal: "The implication of this for the churches as representatives of the Kingdom of God in history is that it is their task to keep alive the tension between the consciousness of presence and the expectation of the coming. The danger for the receptive (sacramental) churches is that they will emphasize the presence and neglect the expectation; and the danger for the activistic (prophetic) churches is that they will emphasize the expectation and neglect the consciousness of the presence. The most important expression of this difference is the contrast between the emphasis on individual salvation in one group and on social transformation in the other. Therefore it is a victory of the Kingdom of God in history if a sacramental church takes the principle of social transformation as its aim or if an activistic church pronounces the Spiritual Presence under all social conditions, emphasizing the *vertical line* of salvation over against the *horizontal line* of historical activity" (391, my emphasis).

261. This raises the thorny question about the relationship between time (and therefore history) and eternity. This question obviously cannot be resolved here. The question, as Paul Ricoeur also observes (see *Time and Narrative* volume 1, 87), is how to think of death and eternity together. This includes the death of an individual organism but also the "death" of each moment, of every year, and then also the "death" of a language or a civilization, also of the Holocene epoch. One needs to distinguish between Hebrew notions of eternity as a sense of the everlasting (Eccl 3:11), what endures (הָעֹלָם), the New Testament notion of relative eternity as age or aeon (αἰώνιος), and more abstract notions of infinity. The philosophical options to contemplate eternity include timelessness (thus immutability, the cessation of movement), endless duration, the possibility of simultaneity, the eternal significance of the moment where time comes to a standstill, the transformative power of the future over the present (of possibility over reality), and seeing history as a whole (which is not yet constituted). Suffice it to say that Christians cannot think of time (each moment), whether understood as *chronos* or *kairos*, quantitative or qualitative time, only in terms of death (Heidegger's *Sein zum Tode*). Time has to be understood in terms of its Creator if the confession holds true that the world was created "with" time.

I am nowadays toying with a notion of eternity as a sustaining fountain of life, of renewed time in God's presence. See also my earlier attempt to grapple with such questions in "On Human Finitude and Eternal Life."

meaning, even beyond interpretation, with one damned thing just following another.[262] Likewise, a horizontal axis alone would not suffice because the hope for a better world that will arrive sometime in the future would again mean that each present generation is to be sacrificed for the well-being of a next generation. Any religious sense of awe suggests that there is "more" to the world than we could imagine. "God" is the name that could be given to the mystery of that "more."[263]

It is for any adequate ecotheology crucial to add that the horizontal includes not only a temporal dimension but also a spatial dimension—as the concept of a horizon also indicates.[264] The significance of an embodied sense of place is the message from multiple forms of Indigenous theology from around the world. This invites a critique of land dispossession and ecocide.[265] Likewise, eschatology may be about a sense of place, of God's nearness or presence, before it is about time.[266] It is only once the place of story (the location where a story is told) is recognized and critiqued that one can begin to tell the story of place.[267] A creative tension between the spatial and the temporal, the horizontal and the vertical, the historical and the transhistorical, between creature and Creator, immanence and transcendence, is therefore required to make sense of our lives.[268] Without knowledge of God, the flow of time can be riddled with anxiety. Without being embedded in the flow of time, knowledge of God (of what is truly ultimate) would not be possible.[269] One may say that the meaning of this day is found in living with others before the face of God with gratitude and joy, in memory of what happened yesterday (perhaps pain) and in anticipation of what tomorrow may bring (perhaps joy). Something similar would apply to the meaning of my life and of history as such.

262. See Evans, *In Defence of History*, 30.

263. See my extended discussion of the mystery of history in *The Earth in God's Economy*, 113–220.

264. For a discussion, see my "An Emerging Horizon."

265. See, e.g., Jawanza Eric Clark's *Reclaiming Stolen Earth*, where such an emphasis on the spatial is emphasized in critique of the Western emphasis on linear time.

266. See Westhelle, *Eschatology and Place*. See also Upolu Vaai's critique of the removal of God from what he calls "dirt" in "A Dirtified God."

267. See Conradie and Jennings, *The Place of Story and the Story of Place*.

268. Reinhold Niebuhr argues that the transhistorical (symbolized by the hope for a divine judgment and for the resurrection of the dead) precludes one from presuming that any culminations within history are ultimate or final. He adds: "Whether dealing with the Alpha or the Omega of history, [...] the Christian faith prevents provisional meanings, judgments, and fulfilments from becoming ultimate by its sense of a final mystery of divine fulfilment beyond all provisional meanings. But it does not allow this ultimate mystery to degenerate into meaninglessness because of its confidence that the love of Christ is the clue to the final mystery." See *Faith and History*, 243–44.

269. I am alluding here to the famous opening section of Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

A Decisive Turning Point in History?

Finally, the core Christian conviction regarding a theology of history pertains to finding the key to unlock the meaning of history. That claim has to do with faith in Jesus as the Messiah. A Christian view of time is based neither on the beginning (e.g., the Roman *ab urbe condita*) nor on the end (the Jewish expectation of the Messiah to come) but on the middle, interpreting history from this point backward and forward.[270] It is not the only available clue to understanding the meaning of history, but Christians do claim that this is the clue that will help to unlock (all) other clues.[271] According to Christian witnesses (Christians are mere witnesses, not bulldozers or final judges), Christ is the decisive turning point of human history, maybe even of planetary and cosmic history.[272] Christ came "in the fullness of time" (Gal 4:4), in the last days (Heb 1:2). In terms of deep (cosmic) time, Christ appeared only very recently.[273]

This is an astounding claim that may well sound ludicrous and offensive to outsiders—classicists and modernists alike—given the subsequent history of Christendom. This turning point was recognized in the Western calendar and through colonization imposed on all others, even when hidden by the nomenclature of the "common era." But that should be the only true stumbling block in the biblical sense of a σκανδαλον. The scandal of particularity is not only that this is an "astonishing thin line" within world

270. See Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 182. Löwith adds that "the story of the central event, as presented in the Gospels, presupposes everywhere the unity and solidarity of the history of salvation from beginning to end. The particular story of Jesus Christ is, at the same time the universal history of salvation" (187). One may push this even further to speak of God's whole economy, not only the history of salvation. In a postmodern climate, such unity will of course be hard to find, precisely wherever the scandal of particularity is abandoned. In such a climate, Christians may do well not to claim such universality in advance but to share their excitement about one fragment that may serve as a clue, a key to unlock the meaning of others.

271. This is not the place to develop a theology of revelation. The formulation above suggests that what is being revealed is who God is on the basis of what God has done, is doing, and may be expected to do. Revelation is not to be reduced to the contrast between Scripture and nature as sources of revelation. The whole of history (which remains incomplete) may be regarded as the arena of revelation (as Pannenberg argues). There are many available clues to detect the meaning of history, but Christians claim to have found a master clue in the resurrection of Jesus the Christ. See Pannenberg, *Revelation as History*. See also my argument in "On the Hope."

272. This conviction is expressed by Moltmann in his *Ethics of Hope*: "In the raising of the crucified Christ, Christians have behind them the great turning point of all things, and they therefore hope for the eschatological turning point of the world" (39).

273. If the history of the universe (roughly 13.7 billion years) is compared with a calendar year (31,536,000 seconds), then Christ came (roughly two thousand years ago) four or five seconds before midnight on December 31.

history in its totality (as Karl Barth admits),[274] but the claim that this has in fact changed world history, that it has proved to be a decisive turning point in history. This is the paradox, that the cross as the sign of deepest ignominy has conquered the world of imperial conquerors through the resurrection of this Jesus and what he stood for.[275] The knowledge of the identity and character of the Messiah who has come (not enigmatic speculations about future events) forms the basis for Christian hope.[276] This also means that the Christ-story can be used as a lens to interpret any other event or sequence of events. As Vernon White observes, God's purposes can therefore be identified anywhere, although in practice they can only be found in fragments, scattered sparsely throughout history and cannot be traced from any linear shape of history.[277] On this basis, one may interpret any particular event—let us say the advent of a democratic dispensation in South Africa in 1994—with both vindication and judgment, without fully resolving the tension, allowing for the "long pedagogy of God's people."[278]

Having said that the coming of the Messiah is the turning point of history, it is equally important to affirm that the coming of the Messiah is not an end (*telos*) in itself but the means towards that end.[279] The coming of the Messiah is necessary but then for the sake of history, to allow history to flow by addressing the stranglehold, the pervasive power of sin and imperial evil. The coming of Christ is necessary but then as an "emergency measure" to address the problem of sin.[280] Likewise, salvation (or for that matter liberation)

274. See Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.3*, 36. For Barth, world history in its totality belongs to the special history of God's covenant, must converge on this astonishingly thin line and must "finally run in its direction."

275. See Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 3. However, the incarnation is not an instantiation of a general cosmic principle but a necessary prelude to the dialectic between cross and resurrection as the hinge upon which history turns. *Contra* Löwith: "The Christian interpretation of history stands or falls with the acceptance of Jesus as Christ, i.e., with the doctrine of the Incarnation" (184).

276. See Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ*, 139.

277. See White, *Purpose and Providence*, 119. White does not find providence evident in the big linear stories of history but in a "shadowy shape": "[I]t certainly does not emerge as one story of unequivocal progress where the sequence moves in clear linear progression towards a single goal; its meaning emerges instead only through the very particular shape of the pivotal redemptive act of Christ, and then a largely hidden joining of instants and small scattered stories with him, in which that shape is echoed and repeated" (140).

278. See White, *Purpose and Providence*, 123.

279. I am following Van Ruler here against Hendrikus Berkhof (and behind him Barth). Christ is not the meaning or the purpose of history, only its turning point. A Christocentric hermeneutic of history is therefore appropriate but can easily be misunderstood. However, I am not following Van Ruler's own formulation that humanity is the meaning of history either. It also does not make sense to say that "creation" (*creatura*) is the meaning of history. The reign of God as inaugurated by Christ may help here precisely because it is so necessarily vague. See also the discussion by White on Barth's Christocentric hermeneutic of history that employs the particular Christ-narrative to make universal claims, thus holding together the universal and the particular. See White, *Purpose and Providence*, 95–100.

280. See, e.g., Van Ruler, *Verzameld Werk III*, 448.

is not an aim in itself. In Reformed terms: justification is crucial but then for the sake of sanctification. We need to be saved in order to be. However, salvation is not about salvation, or the experience of salvation, or about being saved, or even about the Savior. Salvation is about being. Salvation is necessary in order to allow God's creation to be, to exist and flourish before God's face.[281] Salvation is necessary for the river of history to flow. Being Christian is not an aim in itself, either. Christians believe that we do need to become Christian in order to become human. Christianity is there for the sake of the well-being of society, interpreted in Christian terms as the coming reign of God.

■ And the Shift to the "Anthropocene," Then?

What, then, can one say about God's governance amid the tumultuous shift towards the "Anthropocene"? How is the story of the advent of the "Anthropocene" to be told? Can such a story be told, if the "Anthropocene" is indeed unprecedented in recent human history? How does one weave the exponential "great acceleration" into any narrative plot? What about the postmodern claim that it is not possible to find any meaning (in terms of a sense of purpose) in history? If so, how could one then claim that it is possible to discern God's governance in history, and in a time such as this? Note that the question need not be the grand speculative one of understanding the meaning of history as a whole, although this can hardly be avoided, one may say as long as the problem of evil continues to raise metaphysical questions.[282] The question that cannot be avoided is how the shift from Holocene stability to "Anthropocene" volatility is to be understood. With apology to Marx, if we cannot alter the irreversible advent of the "Anthropocene," we do need to understand it in order to come to terms with what this may mean.

I presume that for many, an apophatic response would need to suffice. What more can one say, anyway? If, like Job of old, we cannot understand where the world ultimately comes from, how can we expect to understand how it is governed? To do so is to overstep the limits of our knowledge.[283]

There is some consolation in that there have been so many previous occasions when the same apophatic conclusion was reached. Consider the

281. This captures a core insight of Van Ruler on the relation between creation and salvation. See *This Earthly Life Matters*, 97–101, also my discussion of his position in this regard (38–39). Van Ruler asks: "Why are we really there?" And then answers: "We are clearly not there simply so that we may be saved. […] In fact, the concept 'salvation' itself points in another direction. It suggests that it is not about the Savior, also not about salvation, not even about the being saved of those saved but about the being of those saved. The primary consideration is to be able to be there again, before the face of God, and also, going beyond this, about simply being there" (187–88).

282. See Walsh, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, 150.

283. See Wood, *The Question of Providence*, 39, drawing on the discussion by William Sherlock (1641–1707).

Babylonian exile, the execution of the Messiah, the fall of Rome and Roman civilization, the plague, the Lisbon earthquake, Auschwitz, Hiroshima, the Gulag, the Rwandan genocide, and whatever else one may wish to add from the horrors of history. We do not really know God's ways. Hard evidence for God's governance is hard to come by. Most claims for a clear answer have proved in hindsight to be ideologically distorted. Even if the symptoms of a rupture in the Earth System exceed any previous horrors, the underlying question would be similar: what is God up to?

This leaves contemporary Christians with a harsh dilemma. On the one hand, one can hardly negate God's governance in history without abandoning faith in God altogether. On the other hand, it seems that one can only make claims about God's governance if one refrains from any specific instance—in one's own life, one's family, an organization, congregation, community, or country. If so, God's governance dies the death of a thousand, nay, billions of qualifications.

An obvious escape route from the horns of this dilemma is to see "Anthropocene" turbulence as God's punishment for the sins of those humans responsible for that. The track record of this response in recent times has been unattractive to say the least. Consider how the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) was regarded as punishment for homosexuality or promiscuity. Something similar would apply to the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center, the tsunami of December 26, 2004, COVID-19, and whatever else. Catastrophes tend to be followed by a search for scapegoats who then need to be sacrificed.[284] Jesus' "blasphemy" is one example. Moreover, this prompts questions about God's justice: why is such punishment dished out to those who are the victims of an unequal and unjust global economic order? A theology of retribution serves to reinforce the belief that the innocent are somehow at fault.[285]

One should not exclude the possibility of God's punishment merely because it seems to be unattractive nowadays. The biblical narratives regarding Eden, the flood, the exile, the prophets, and the Messiah should warn us in this regard. Even from a secular perspective, it is plausible to assume that an industrialized global economy will at some point come to an end, collapsing as a result of its own environmental impact, as did previous empires. Can this not be understood as God's final verdict on the sins of the ruling powers, even if this also implies the demise of those on the margins of society?

Nevertheless, the New Testament vision is not one of a punishing Father but of a merciful God of love and compassion, awaiting reciprocal love.

284. See Moltmann, *Ethics of Hope*, 171.

285. Pearson, "Unwrapping Theodicy," 191.

The Messiah has come and need not be crucified again. The Spirit is a comforting παράκλητος. Accordingly, there are only things that are already judged and forgiven or still to be judged and forgiven. All will, God-willing, be forgiven, but all must first be judged.

Returning to the image of canoeing down a turbulent river, one may again contemplate the image of Noah's ark. Is a new kind of ark perhaps needed, given that the shift to the "Anthropocene" is of the same order of magnitude as the end of the Pleistocene, flooding Mesopotamia with melting ice leading to sixty meters or more of sea level rise? Such a new ark would be in line with the biblical way of speaking of a new exodus, a new covenant, a new king, a new Jerusalem, even a new earth where righteousness shall dwell (2 Pet 3:13). However, the image of the ark risks a judgmental approach where God is again viewed as a God who metes out punishment, death, and destruction. Is the assessment of Genesis 6:6, "The Lord saw that the wickedness of humans was great in the earth and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually" (NRSVUE), really what is needed as the Holocene comes to an end?

Moreover, the image of an ark must be contested given its exclusivity and any juxtaposition with the metaphor of a lifeboat with its racist and classist underpinnings (viz. the tragedy of the *Titanic* and Garrett Hardin's infamous version of the "tragedy of the commons").[286] Indeed, the exclusivist symbols of Noah's ark and the *Titanic* may mark the beginning and the end of the Holocene. Without a more inclusive rainbow covenant, the symbol of the ark cannot suffice. The end of Pleistocene prompted the Neolithic revolution and thus a wide-scale societal transition from a lifestyle of hunting and gathering to one of agriculture and settlement, yielding an expansion of production and human population. It allowed for civilizations to emerge but also for ever-more sophisticated forms of violence. If so, what kind of revolution would the end of the Holocene bring? What kind of covenant would be needed for that?

What, then, can one say about God's governance in history? Is an apophatic response the best one can do?[287] My sense is that, given the weight of nineteenth-century assumptions on progress, together with twentieth-century disruptions of any such hopes and looming twenty-first-century prospects of irreversible thresholds, few would dare to go beyond this. To speak of Christian views on

286. Timothy Gorringe argues that the two images of the ark and the lifeboat differ: "The Noah story is set in the context of a covenant with the whole of creation. It is a redemptive image." He also thinks of not one ark, but of many arks created by, in, and for their local communities. Building an ark entails three core aspects, life in community, the practice of virtues, and a sense of place. See Gorringe, "On Building an Ark," 28, 29.

287. I take counsel here from David Tracy's emphasis on living with and from fragments: "[W]e must let go of the hope for any totality system whatsoever, paying attention instead to the explosive, marginal, saturated fragments of our heritages. [...] we should try to blast the marginalized fragments of the past alive with the memories of suffering and hope: release the frag-events from their seeming coherent place in the grand narratives we have imposed upon them. Learn to live joyfully, not despairingly, with and in the fragments of the traditions we do in fact possess." See Tracy, *Fragments*, 31.

God's governance in history, to proclaim that there is a directionality, indeed a sense of purpose in history, and to relate God's coming kingdom to human and planetary history, may seem to outsiders to be completely out of place, downright arrogant, and utterly foolish.

Moreover, the two go-to ecumenical root metaphors for ecotheology, the whole household of God and a pilgrimage towards justice and peace, seem to unravel in the face of "Anthropocene" turbulence.[288] Can one still speak of the whole household of God?[289] Is the earth not more like a house on fire? Does the metaphor of a journey, a pilgrimage for justice and peace hold? Is there any other route that one can follow, or is the shift to the "Anthropocene" indeed a dead end, also for Christianity?

Perhaps, but for the one symbol—nothing but a rumor first spread by uneducated women—that is at the very core of the entire Christian tradition: the resurrection of the Messiah as an event in history, disclosing the meaning of history, and the subsequent hope for the resurrection of the dead that is still to come, if perhaps not as a singular event in some more or less remote future.[290] If so, God is not the quintessence of Roman power or Greek laws of nature but is revealed in the quickening of life through the Spirit, liberating people from the deadly delusions of power and possessions.[291] Speaking of God's providence in history separately from God's work of salvation and consummation runs into dead and deadening ends.

Christian hope therefore retains the sense of a "nevertheless" and eschews both a pale pessimism and a cruel optimism. As Indigenous communities throughout Pasifika illustrate, there is a need to retrieve a vibrant theology and spirituality of celebration.[292] The scenario sketched in

288. See my "Rethinking Root Metaphors in Ecotheology."

289. This root metaphor is widely employed in diverse contexts, including Fiji, South Africa, and South Korea. See, e.g., the volume edited by Ayre and Conradie, *The Church in God's Household*. See also the following emphasis on God's household by Upolu Vaai, who integrates a sense of justice within this household: "Recently, the decision by the Pacific church leaders to change the Pacific ecumenical story from 'unity in Christ' that has dominated Eurocentric ecumenism to that of the 'household of God' reflects a 'down to dirt' shift to reconnect deeper with the Pacific people's ecological worldviews, retrieving eco-relational life-affirming values fundamental to Pacific dirt communities to frame a new liberative story that is inclusive of all life in the cosmic household. It also reflects how Pacific churches have moved beyond the limitations of a human-centric redemption history to script a salvation story that is creation oriented." See Vaai, "A Dirtified God," 24. However, in a follow-up article, Vaai seeks to move beyond the household model, noting that the assumption of ownership remains hierarchical, while the Aiga-model that he proposes assumes the wisdom that "we are earth" so that the earth does not need to be managed. See Vaai, "We are Earth."

290. Contra Agamben's gnostic suggestion that the resurrection of the dead has already taken place and that this constitutes a radical break in the continuous time assumed in Greek antiquity and Christian patristics alike. See Agamben, *Infancy and History*, 110.

291. Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 241.

292. See Vidal, "A Pacific Theology of Celebration."

Habakuk 3:17 is more daunting than any report the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate change may have come up with: "Though the fig tree does not blossom, nor there be fruit on the vines; the yield of the olive tree fails, and the cultivated fields do not yield food; the flock is cut off from the animal pen, and there is no cattle in the stalls."

But then the celebratory response is truly unheard of, almost unimaginable: "Yet I will rejoice in Yahweh; I will exult in the God of my salvation" (NRSVUE).

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The Rise of Prometheus and the Execution of God: The End of *Concursus* in the "Anthropocene"?

Introduction

In the Reformed tradition, three, sometimes four, aspects of God's providence are typically identified, namely God's ongoing work of creation (*creatio continua*), conservation (*conservatio*), governance in history (*gubernatio*), and then also the interplay between God's agency and human agency (*concursus*).

One may say that *concursus* is not a separate aspect of God's providence but that it is a subsidiary implication of *conservatio* and *gubernatio*, as well as of *creatio continua* if agency is attributed to creatures other than humans. If the distinction between primary and secondary causes is maintained, God works in the world only through secondary causes, including human agency. God's providence does not imply that human agency is not possible or that human responsibility is not crucial. This requires an understanding of God that steers between an Epicurean deism

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that would remove God from the world and would make divine agency impossible, and a Stoic pantheism that would imprison God in the world,[1] between a Stoic emphasis on fate and an Epicurean emphasis on chance. Moreover, human agency needs to be related to what is material, bodily, and earthly, and therefore to creaturely "agency," especially that of nonhuman animals.[2]

How, then, is the interplay between God's agency, human agency (especially the agency of the victims of oppression), animal agency, and the movements of other animate and inanimate beings (and perhaps those of angels!) to be understood? The notion of *concursus* (concurrence) suggests that these forms of agency are not alternative explanations that exclude each other but that they are compatible with one another. Is this interplay to be understood in such a way that humans are created co-creators, perhaps cooperating with God (if not for their salvation)? Or is this best understood as God "accompanying" the creature?[3] How do all things work together (συνεργεῖ) for the good, especially for those who are called by God, according to God's purposes (Rom 8:28)? How is God working (ἐνεργῶν) everything in everyone (1 Cor 12:6), both to will (θέλειν) and to work (ἐνεργεῖν) (Phil 2:13)? How can one give a plausible account of the Pauline saying that it is not him but the grace of God in him that does something good (1 Cor 15:10)? What could it mean that "[i]t is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20, NRSVUE)?

In this essay, I will start with a number of observations on *concursus* that seek to articulate important if conflicting intellectual developments leading up to contemporary discourse in the context of the so-called "Anthropocene." I will then explore how this interplay between divine and human agency is radicalized in the "Anthropocene" in a rather unprecedented way, so much so that the human presence will become inscribed in the Earth's rock layers for many million years to come.

Ten Observations on the History of *Concursus*

1. The Christian emphasis on *concursus* was necessary in order to guard against a Stoic notion of the divine world-reason (Greek: πρόνοια; Latin: *providentia*) which creates order in chaotic matter and ensures a

1. See Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory*, 16, following Calvin's argument.

2. I warm to Upolu Vaai's notion of "dirtification" in order to root life in the soil that nurtures it. See Vaai, "A Dirtified God," 16.

3. "Accompanying" is the term that Karl Barth prefers, emphasizing that God affirms, recognizes, and respects the autonomous activity of the creature. See Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.3*, 92.

rational world order, purposefully oriented for the good of humanity.[4] In the Stoic logic, providence is ultimately identical with the *heimarmene* (Εἱμαρμένη), the impersonal force of fate that pervades everything in a planned manner and to which not only humans but also the gods are subject: whatever will be will be (*que será, será*). An emphasis on *concursus* was then necessary in order to guard against a divine all-determinism that undermines human freedom. It also helps to guard against arbitrary divine intervention in history, which would exacerbate the theodicy problem. Instead, God typically works in and through creatures as secondary causes. This also implies that God's work is necessarily hidden behind such secondary causes. Nevertheless, the question remains whether God's use of humans as secondary causes is compatible with human freedom. How does God gently influence the hearts and minds of humans to direct their steps (see Prov 16:9)?[5] The mere presence of God may by itself have causal influence (e.g., in the case of a teenager who is madly in love with someone or the visceral impact of the presence of one's enemies). It is not presence itself that matters (that applies also to one's enemies) but the identity and character of the one who is present. But can providence be reduced to a way of *being* (presence), or does it also assume that God is *doing* something in the world through secondary causes?

2. Given the emphasis of Augustine, Luther, and Calvin on the bondedness of the human will, indeed the total depravity of the human condition, unmerited grace, and divine predestination, any Protestant notion of *concursus* (the interplay between divine providence and human freedom and responsibility) also had to guard against a form of divine determinism in order to allow for freedom, contingency, and chance within the parameters of God's purposes.[6] By contrast, the Pelagian, humanistic, Renaissance, Molinist, and Arminian traditions continued to emphasize human freedom and responsibility. God can still ordain things to happen but only in the sense that God has foreknowledge of what will happen

4. See the excellent summary by Jaap Durand in *Skepping, Mens, Voorsienigheid*: "Under the caring planning of this *pronoia*, all events take place both in nature and in human history. The world order is rational and planned, purposefully oriented towards what is good and useful for humanity. Therefore, harmony is the outstanding feature of providence. In the consciousness of this providential order, the individual can feel secured in the cosmic order. Human history is absorbed into a harmonious whole. In fact, there is little talk of a genuine history in which every moment is unique and unrepeatable. There is no linear course of history, only a cyclical one, the ups and downs of origin and decay, birth and death. But still, in the arising and passing away a fixed proportion and harmony is maintained. Against the background of the eternal cycle of cosmic events in all its vicissitudes stands the constant: the reasonable world law, the logos according to which everything happens" (my translation) (53–54).

5. Proverbs 16:9 reads: "The human mind plans the way, but the Lord directs the steps" (NRSVUE).

6. See Fergusson, *The Providence of God*, 96.

(not the other way around).[7] It is the assumption of God's omniscience that yields the long-standing problem of divine determinism so that God's providence seems incompatible with human freedom.[8] Modernity may be understood as a rejection of such divine determinism as inhibiting human freedom, autonomy, and self-actualization. Accordingly, *concursus* could at best be understood in a Pelagian way as mutual cooperation between divine and human agency. More typically, God came to be regarded as a competitor or threat to human freedom rather than as it source.[9] At times, this yielded the opposite extreme—a form of pantheism, the divinity of the cosmos itself, where Mother Nature assumes the role of God's providence. Such divine status could be easily extended to include the care provided by human reason, human institutions, the state, the Party, and the Führer.[10]

3. Amid the rise of early modern science and the emergence of a materialist, mechanistic, "clockwork" understanding of nature, the agenda of modern philosophers such as Descartes, Kant, and Hegel was to establish an island of human freedom, given the tendency towards a materialistic determinism.[11] The deist God of modernity became equated with the laws of nature so that the recognition of a moral law within was also needed. Any subsequent notion of human dignity—and therefore human freedom, human rights, and human responsibility—had to be based on human distinctiveness but no longer on religious assumptions on being created "in the image of God." The result is a form of humanism described

7. See Thomas, *What is Providence?*, 20.

8. For a defense of such a "risk-free" notion of God's providence, see Paul Helm's *The Providence of God*.

9. See Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement*, 157.

10. See Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.3*, 111–12. Barth explicitly counters National Socialist and Marxist notions of providence on this basis. In response, he develops a notion of *concursus* as accompaniment instead of cooperation so that God's sovereignty is recognized. The concept of *concursus* is then irreversible: "God 'concurs' with the creature but the creature does not 'concur' with God [...] As God co-operates with the activity of the creature, His own activity precedes, accompanies and follows that activity, and nothing can be done except the will of God" (112–13). Divine *concursus* with the creature therefore does not imply creaturely *concursus* with God (134). For Barth, this does not imply human submission before sovereign caprice, because God's sovereignty is revealed in Jesus Christ and not in the arbitrary will and superior power of some abstract supreme being. It also does not imply that anything is subtracted from, added to, or infused upon the creature, whose integrity is maintained (136).

Barth insists that *concursus* cannot be first explained philosophically and then applied theologically: "It does not first consider the creature and its activity in general, then work out a concept of the supreme being, then confer upon this being the name of God, and then conclude that there may perhaps be an activity of God in and above the activity of the creature. On the contrary, it first knows the activity of God in a particular cosmic action in which God has made Himself known. It perceives that the One who acts at this point and in this way is the supreme being" (141). This allows Barth to offer a "simple positive answer" to the "how" of divine *concursus*, namely through the wisdom and goodness of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God's Word (142).

11. See also Fukuyama, *The End of History*, 151.

by Charles Taylor as "providential deism": God relates to humans in an impersonal way by establishing a certain order of things, including a moral order that reveals God's purposes. We human beings are able to grasp that order and obey God by following the demands of that order, without recourse to confessional divides.[12] Adhering to such a moral order—and inciting reform, even revolution, wherever this is inadequate—is possible through purely intra-human powers.[13]

4. Human freedom continued to be undermined by a recognition of how human consciousness is shaped, if not determined, by biological evolution (Darwin), labor relations (Marx), interests (Bentham and Mill), the subconscious (Freud), the will to power (Nietzsche), the use of language (Wittgenstein), selfish genes (Dawkins), the social construction of knowledge (Foucault), gender (feminism), and social location (decoloniality, subaltern movements). Social change is embedded in natural history. Accordingly, by empirically uncovering the ways in which the laws of nature shape social laws, one may discover the direction of social change and act in accordance with that.[14] Such a secular emphasis on law (social determinism) seems to smother human freedom so that destiny is experienced as fate and therefore as despair.[15]
5. At the same time, the power of the human imagination was recognized in the social construction of religion as maintained by a lineage of scholars that includes Feuerbach, Hegel,[16] Marx, and others. The powers previously attributed to God are rediscovered as sources of moral inspiration within us. As a result, it became more difficult to account for divine agency in a world where the laws of nature operate and where human autonomy does not allow for divine sovereignty. Any notion of God was understood to be a human projection so that "God" came to be created in our human image.

12. See Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 223. Note that this excludes the possibility of special providence and a transformation of human beings beyond the spatial and temporal dimensions of finitude (224). Providential deism becomes anthropocentric (focused on human flourishing) and leads to an atrophy of devotional life (228).

13. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 245.

14. See Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 196.

15. See Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 244.

16. One may of course refer to a huge corpus of literature in this regard. I found this passage from Francis Fukuyama quite lucid: "According to Hegel, the Christian did not realize that God did not create man, but rather that man had created God. He created God as a kind of projection of the idea of freedom, for in the Christian God we see a being who is the perfect master of himself and of nature. But the Christian then proceeded to enslave himself to this God that he himself created. He reconciled himself to a life of slavery on earth in the hope that he would be redeemed later by God, when in fact he could be his own redeemer. Christianity was thus a form of alienation, that is, a new form of slavery where man enslaved himself to something that he himself created, thereby becoming divided against himself." Fukuyama, *The End of History*, 197.

In the end, God's agency became at best a decorative way of describing human agency and at worst a human projection, typically employed by those in positions of socio-economic privilege and power to keep those whose labor is exploited complacent. Any notion of *concursus* evaporated as a result. The acknowledgment that liberal Christianity did indeed entail a human projection of God prompted the emphasis on an infinite qualitative difference in early dialectical theology: we can know neither God nor ourselves by starting from pious feelings of dependence (Schleiermacher), the dialectics of history (Hegel, Marx), or moral consciousness (Kant, Ritschl). Again, such an infinite qualitative difference allowed little room in early dialectical theology for any form of *concursus* beyond a very narrow Christological concentration.

6. In discourse on theology and the natural sciences, the possibility of noninterventionist objective divine action (NIODA) in the world, also before the advent of humanity, has been explored extensively in conversation with quantum cosmology, quantum mechanics, chaos and complexity theory, evolutionary biology, and the cognitive sciences.[17] While the debate remains inconclusive, various approaches with diverging metaphysical assumptions crystalized, allowing some room for divine action, if with considerable difficulty. For example, the possibility of self-organization at various levels of complexity (in systems far from equilibrium) allows for a dynamic and nondeterminist[18] understanding of nature but at the same time explained creativity in nature in a way that does not require but still allows for divine agency.[19]

7. In philosophical debates, the notion of double or multiple agency is often discussed with reference to Austin Farrer's notion of a causal joint.[20] While this debate is not resolved either, many scholars would consider the possibility that events can be ascribed at different levels of agency. In an often-cited example, Solomon could be said to build a temple for God without laying a single brick. It required the work of architects, transporters, craftsmen, slaves, animals, and so forth (each with a distinct form of agency), but it was only possible

17. See the culmination of this project in Russell, Murphy, and Stoeger, *Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action*. I have reviewed this project in *The Earth in God's Economy*, 175–220, and in more detail in an Afrikaans publication *Lewend en Kragtig*.

18. Despite concepts such as chaos, complexity, emergence, and self-organization, chaos theory is more deterministic than it may sound. For a discussion, see Russell, Murphy, and Peacocke, *Chaos and Complexity*.

19. For Holmes Rolston, God is "the atmosphere of possibilities," the metaphysical environment in, with, and under nature, which lures earthen histories upslope. Indeed, "God orchestrates such self-organization, steadily elevating the possibilities, making for storied achievements, enriching the values generated." See *Genes, Genesis and God*, 367.

20. See Farrer, *Faith and Speculation*, with a significant corpus of secondary literature. While the concept of multiple agency is indeed plausible, the causal joint remains hard to specify.

through God's allowance.[21] The question then remains how God's work of conservation and governance in history may be understood accordingly.[22] The problem of the causal joint nevertheless remains: with the rise of modern science, it became difficult to explain how God can make any particular difference in what happens in the world. The rise of a historical consciousness in the nineteenth century posed a similar challenge, as divine agency is not only controversial but seems redundant.[23]

8. In recent theological discourse on creation theology and anthropology, divine agency, human agency, and the activities of other creatures are typically not regarded as mutually exclusive.[24] Humans are widely regarded as "created co-creators"—although the phrase remains contested.[25] God's work of creation takes place through secondary causes and, more specifically, through the creativity of creatures. This is symbolized by the phrase in Genesis 1:11 and 24: "Let the earth bring forth!"[26] However, in some theologies of becoming (leaning towards pantheism), God's own agency tends to become minimal so that it is not clear what value God's work of creation adds to cosmic, planetary, biological, and human evolution.[27]
9. In secular debates in the fields of psychology, social work, social theory, gender theory, and development studies, the agency of those who are poor, oppressed, marginalized, victimized, enslaved, battered, imprisoned, handicapped, exploited, assaulted, raped, and violated in countless other ways is typically emphasized as a crucial aspect for healing and well-being. In short, despite the might of governments and corporations, the "principalities and powers," the poor are not powerless. Liberation becomes possible on the basis of the agency of the oppressed, especially subaltern social movements.[28] Recognizing the personhood

21. I found the discussion of Brümmer in "Farrer, Wiles and the Causal Joint" particularly helpful.

22. Traditionally, four dimensions were identified, namely permission (God's allowance of creaturely fault), hindrance (God's obstruction of evil purposes), direction (God's channeling the consequences of creaturely actions according to God's own purposes, and determination (God's limitation of creaturely powers, actions, and passions). See Wood, *The Question of Providence*, 88.

23. See White, *Purpose and Providence*, 89.

24. The is the core argument of Michael Welker in *Creation and Reality*.

25. See Hefner, *The Human Factor*. For me, the problem is that the differences between God's work of creation and human creativity are not sufficiently captured by this phrase.

26. See Van den Brink, *Reformed Theology and Evolutionary Theory*. The title of the Dutch original is significant: *En de Aarde Bracht Voort*.

27. This is my assessment of Catherine Keller's *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming*.

28. See the thought-provoking chapter on "Social Movements as Text: Subaltern Reflections on Epistemology" in George Zachariah's *Alternatives Unincorporated*, 69–95. He concludes that "[s]ocial movements, as intentional political organizations of communities at the grassroots, attempt to understand social reality with a political and ethical motif in order to transform it radically. It is an engaged and collective construction of

and agency of victims (thus their capabilities) is the key to overcoming victimhood.[29] If anything, God's work of liberation can *only* take place through the agency of the poor and oppressed. This serves as a critique of assumptions about the divinely ordained agency of colonizers and their missionary zeal to "employ the strengths and advantages they have received from Providence for the general good of humanity," especially for those who are "underdeveloped."[30] Young people from Pacific islands refuse to be portrayed as the passive, hopeless victims of climate change. They insist: "we are not drowning, we are fighting."[31] What, then, about the agency of other creatures that, as Pope Francis observes, "have stopped being our companions along the way and have become instead our victims"?[32]

10. Finally, one also needs to mention discourse on human agency in the context of artificial intelligence and on the prospects of transhumanism. Does artificial intelligence merely enhance human agency through adding microchips to the brain, in the way that spectacles, hearing aids, cochlear implants, pocket calculators, pacemakers, word processors, and numerous other inventions have long done? Is the ancient dream of longevity, indeed of immortality (understood as a continuation of temporal life after death), being fulfilled through biological enhancement, genetic engineering, neurotechnology, and the digitalization of consciousness? Can a secularized transhumanism be seen as a parody of theosis?[33] Or, as in science fiction, could the world be run by supercomputers who will enslave human beings for their own purposes? What are the prospects that a *Homo excelsior* could replace *Homo sapiens* as the cleverest of the hominins? Will they look down on the mediocrity of ordinary *Homo sapiens* in the way that nineteenth-century Europeans could regard themselves as superior to other races, cultures, or civilizations? Or is the problem that humans—who would prefer to

(footnote 28 continues)
knowledge mediated by their particular experience of marginality and counter-hegemonic discourses, being generated in their struggles. For these reasons, social movements are the sites of an alternative narrative and therefore they have the epistemological agency to construct liberating knowledge" (92).

29. There is, again, a huge corpus of literature here. Much of this goes back to Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and, more recently, to the capabilities approach associated with Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum.

30. Quoted from an 1897 French document by George Zachariah in *Alternatives Unincorporated*, 14.

31. See Lusama, *Vaa Fesokotaki*, 136.

32. Pope Francis, *Laudate Deum*, §15. He adds: "Let us stop thinking, then, of human beings as autonomous, omnipotent and limitless, and begin to think of ourselves differently, in a humbler but more fruitful way" (§68).

33. See Delport, "The Artifice of Eternity"; also the volume edited by Cole-Turner, *Transhumanism and Transcendence*.

speak to other humans—are already being treated like robots by automated systems designed by companies to reduce their workload? Pope Francis sees the quest for artificial intelligence as integrally based upon the quest for unlimited economic growth: "Artificial intelligence and the latest technological innovations start with the notion of a human being with no limits, whose abilities and possibilities can be infinitely expanded thanks to technology. In this way, the technocratic paradigm monstrously feeds upon itself."[34]

The Rise of Prometheus[35]

The doctrine of providence as reflection on a trust in God's care assumes a recognition of what lies within one's locus of control and what does not. It is therefore not to be reduced to fate or destiny, to what has been allotted to us by God in terms of length and strength, intelligence, good looks, musical ability, or physical agility. This is how "Providence" (with a capital) is sometimes understood in a secular context and thus becomes a nickname for God.[36] Such providence then requires contentment with what one cannot change in life. In the famous, widely cited prayer for serenity attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr, knowing the difference is what matters: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." The reference to wisdom may be telling: while humanity may seek God-like powers, it would also require God-like wisdom.

This is pertinent given the modernist assumption that the best response to the recognition of human limitations is to extend one's locus of control. If so, religion is an expression of impotence, while the conquest of nature constitutes a critique of religion. Instead of waiting upon chance or on God to set one's sails to the wind, the best option may be to build a steam engine that is not dependent upon favorable winds.[37] Such an ability to extend one's locus of control constitutes the story of science and technology over the last few hundred years. If so, the advent of the "Anthropocene" may constitute both the success of our human ability to alter the Earth

34. Pope Francis, *Laudate Deum*, §21.

35. This section is largely based on a chapter on "Idolatry in the Anthropocene" in my *Secular Discourse on Sin in the Anthropocene*, 171–92. The argument is reframed to address issues related to *concursus* instead of idolatry and then developed further.

36. The following formulation by Immanuel Kant is therefore striking: "Contentment with providence and with the course of human things as a whole, which do not progress from good to bad, but gradually develop from worse to better; and in this process nature herself has given everyone a part to play that is both his own and well within his powers." For this quotation, see Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, 145.

37. The metaphor is derived from Bertrand Russell. For a discussion, see Niebuhr, *Faith and History*, 98.

System and the failure to come to terms with the consequences of that. Ironically, it is not God but humankind who is now playing dice with the world without knowing all the rules of the game.[38]

In the context of modernity, the new gods of Nature, Evolution, Reason, Market, Technology, State, Development, Communication, and Media Attention typically assume all the god-like characteristics and creative capacities that God the Creator is denied by secular critics.[39] Likewise, growth becomes both the supreme end and the supreme means for achieving salvation.[40] Indeed, as Susan Neiman recognizes, "The cunning of reason, the invisible hand, and the proletariat are different ways to replace the hand of Providence and cannot be understood without it."[41] What makes this awkward is that substitutes for God as a super-agent is replaced by categories that are devoid of such agency.[42] Thus things that are less than human are exalted as divine—a strategy that is typically exposed in the prophetic critique of idolatry.[43]

Following the shift from a geocentric to a heliocentric worldview (Copernicus), the recognition of human descent in common evolutionary history (Darwin), the acceptance of a geological timescale (deep time) and the exploration of exoplanets and perhaps astrobiology, humans have become decentered in cosmic and evolutionary history. However, human brains and especially human societies are the most complex feature of the universe that we know of. With the recognition of the "Anthropocene," the decentralization of the place of humans in the cosmic scheme of things has become inverted. It seems that we humans are back in the center of the story—prompting considerable confusion.[44] The prophet of such Promethean aspirations was Friedrich Nietzsche. God had to be declared dead so

38. See Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, 158, with reference to an argument of John McNeill.

39. This is the argument of Harvey Cox in *The Market as God*.

40. See Van Hoogstraaten, *Geld en Geest*, 49.

41. Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, 315.

42. Hamilton, *Defiant Earth*, 101.

43. Herman Bavinck (writing in 1894) captured the mood at the time particularly well: "Not too many years ago man's health and weal were sought exclusively in the exploitation and domination of the earth. Secularization was the watchword of the century. The ties that bound man to eternity were to be broken; paradise was to be established for man on this earth. God and religion were, at least in the supernatural sense, the enemies of the human race. 'The natural would become the super-divine'. Nature was God. Art, scholarship, science, and industry were deities to be worshiped and served. Culture made cultus superfluous. Humanity replaced Christianity, and hygiene abolished morality. The theater was an improvement on the church, and Lessing's Nathan a more-than-adequate substitute for the Bible. The doctrine of the incarnation of God was inverted into the dogma of the deification of man." See Bavinck, "Common Grace," 54–55.

44. See also Grinspoon, *Earth in Human Hands*, 214.

that the *Übermensch* can come to fruition—now in the shape of the cosmopolitan consumer.[45] Susan Neiman traces this back to the failure of the theodicies provided by philosophers such as Leibniz but also Rousseau and Kant. With a parody of Marx's famous thesis, she comments: "Theodicies had hitherto tried to defend God, the point was to replace Him."[46] She explains:

> The wish to displace God that is contained in every attempt to re-create the world is the very essence of the sin of pride. It's pride that can lead to rebellion caused by the contemplation of all the evil in Creation. If God failed to get it right, why don't we do without Him and take over the job ourselves. The urge to humility is a product of acquiescence, if not terror: we agree not to understand why there is evil.[47]

In the context of the Promethean dreams of controlling the Earth's climate, the Enlightenment critique of religion, namely that humans create their gods in their own image, according to their needs, desires, and aspirations, thus becomes radicalized. As Ludwig Feuerbach already asserted, "The turning of history will be the moment when man becomes aware that the only God of man is man himself. Homo homini Deus!"[48] We become gods when we are able to create "God" in our own image. This is no longer meant as a critique of religion but as a celebration of human ability. Indeed, the human project, or at least the project of modernity, is to take God's place.[49] We can not only "make" God but custom engineer God to ensure that there is a space for a system-compatible God.[50]

Moreover, in naming the "Anthropocene" as such, the displacement of God has taken a new form, namely through the advent of the "God species" (Mark Lynas), also called *Homo deus* (Yuval Harari). Through the rise of modern science, we are even able to exercise God's power, to bring forth life based on chemical algorithms.[51] Indeed, humans are now like gods: they not only desire favorable weather (for social comfort, good harvests, and maintaining economic and military interests) but also hope to have the technical means to bring that about.[52] This is the hope of humans to achieve

45. See Sloterdijk, *In the World Interior of Capital*, 209.

46. Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, 109.

47. Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, 114.

48. Quoted in Goudzwaard and Bartholomew, *Beyond the Modern Age*, 61.

49. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 1*, 159, with reference to the work of Louis O. Mink.

50. See Hamilton, *Earthmasters*, 111, with reference to positions adopted by Brad Allenby. The reference is to Allenby, "Earth System Engineering and Management," *IEEE Technology and Society Magazine* (2000/01), 10–24.

51. Mark Lynas is unashamedly reductionist on this point: "[A]ll life is reducible to chemistry—there is nothing more to it than that. No essential life force, no soul, no afterlife." See Lynas, *The God Species*, 5.

52. Northcott, "On Going Gently into the Anthropocene," 25.

immortality, to become divine. Accordingly, we might as well abandon the lesser gods of money, status, and consumption, and indeed any celestial god. Humans, or rather some humans, perhaps transhumans, may hope to become not only the "masters of the planet" but through artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, the dream of extended longevity, geoengineering, and space travel (even time travel) also the masters of the universe. In the words of Harari, "having raised humanity above the beastly level of survival struggles, we will now aim to upgrade humans into gods, and turn *Homo sapiens* into *Homo deus*."[53] Harari observes that it may be impossible to maintain social order without meaning, but against all expectations, God's death did not lead to social collapse. Humans were able to find meaning in themselves without reference to some great cosmic plan, to create meaning in a meaningless world.[54]

In *The God Species*, Mark Lynas explores the myth of Prometheus who stole fire, the preserve of the gods, from the supreme god Zeus and brought it to humans. He comments that the human use of fire has given us an evolutionary advantage through cooking food (releasing more energy for human brains to develop), protection against predators, and warmth during cold nights. This food–fuel relationship defines the fire-ape, *Homo pyrophilus*. At the advent of the "Anthropocene," such use of fire became expanded through the use of fossil fuels for transport, industry, and technology. Lynas comments that "being armed with fire put the rest of the world at our mercy" and adds, "Using the tool of the gods, we were to become as gods."[55] For Lynas, the God species should not shirk such responsibility but should learn to use such divine power wisely.

Erle Ellis cheerily declares that the "Anthropocene" is far from the crisis it is portrayed as; instead, it offers a new beginning, "ripe with human-directed opportunity."[56] He explains that "our unprecedented and growing powers also allow us the opportunity to create a planet that is better for both its human and nonhuman inhabitants. It is an opportunity that we should embrace."[57] Elsewhere he adds that:

> We are poised at an important time in human and Earth history. For the first time, we have clear knowledge that we can and are changing the way the entire

53. Harari, *Homo Deus*, 24.

54. Harari, *Homo Deus*, 258, 259.

55. Lynas, *The God Species*, 29.

56. See Ellis, "The Planet of No Return," 43.

57. Ellis, "The Planet of No Return," 38.

> planet functions. This is an amazing opportunity—humanity has now made the leap to an entirely new level of planetary importance.[58]

Ellis likens this to parental responsibility and asks, "Will we be proud of the planet we create in the Anthropocene?" He answers that he considers it his duty to try to make this happen. He admits that "the Earth system we are creating won't be any more perfect than we are" but is willing to bet that the good will outweigh the bad.[59] The use of the word "create" is astonishing. It seems that humans are no longer merely co-creators with God but are able to create the planet themselves, assuming the task of an "almighty Father," the Creator of heaven and earth. In the words of Stewart Brand, often quoted by Ellis, "We are as gods and HAVE to get good at it."[60] To which Mark Lynas adds, "Amen to that"! There is a similar tone of optimism in David Grinspoon's assessment that we as human beings are able to "play god" as far as mass extinctions are concerned. He says:

> For our entire history, human beings have been causing brutal extinctions of other species, but here's a hopeful thought: twenty-first-century humans could be first ever to decide *not* to behave like this. From now on, or as long as humans (or thinking creatures descended from or created by us) are here on the planet, extinction will be a choice. Obviously the current carnage, the mass extinction that we are now starting to manifest, has to stop. Then what? What extinction rate would we prefer? Do we wish to eliminate it entirely? Then what about biological innovation? If we choose to eliminate all extinction, then this is equivalent to saying we are the gods in charge of all future species. We will either have to play god or allow species to go extinct (which, I suppose, may still be a form of playing god).[61]

If and when such a god will prove to have feet of clay, this may well invite apocalyptic imagery. Then *Homo industrialis* will be turned into a fallen angel, even the imperious Antichrist who is bringing on the "end of history."[62] Or, in the words of Donna Haraway:

> The Story of Species Man as the agent of the Anthropocene is an almost laughable rerun of the great phallic humanization and modernizing Adventure, where man, made in the image of a vanished god, takes on super powers in his secular sacred ascent, only to end in tragic detumescence, once again.[63]

Where does such a narrative of the fallen Promethean hero (reminiscent of the figure of Lucifer) leave us? For the ecosocialist critic Ian Angus, this

58. Ellis, "Neither Good Nor Bad."

59. Ellis, "Neither Good Nor Bad."

60. Also quoted in Lynas, *The God Species*, 22. The reference is to Brand, *Whole Earth Discipline: An Ecopragmatist Manifesto* (New York et al.: Viking, 2009), epitaph on page 1.

61. Grinspoon, *Earth in Human Hands*, 165.

62. Northcott, "On Going Gently into the Anthropocene," 32.

63. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 47.

means that political leaders and economic leaders have to recognize that the gods they now serve are false.[64] However, in secular discourse, especially in a Marxist context, this is hard to come to terms with. Is a different ideology needed? Should material conditions be altered? Will the Earth itself ensure that a new equilibrium be reached? Where would help come from?[65] Timothy Morton, for one, is driven to agree with Heidegger that "only a god can save us now," but he comments that Heidegger forgot to add, "We just don't know what sort of god."[66] These are indeed the final words of his book *Hyperobjects*.

In *Requiem for a Species*, Clive Hamilton recognizes that the modernist pursuit of utopia through endless growth, based on the belief in the human ingenuity, in the power of knowledge, and in the human capacity to control things cannot be sustained.[67] The lesser gods of money, growth, and hedonism have to be abandoned. The powers we most trust to save us (freedom, democracy, scientific progress, technology) have betrayed us and now threaten to devour us.[68] Somewhat surprisingly, he looks towards the celestial gods to retaliate, to reinforce a sense of cosmic mystery. Perhaps, he concedes, it is only the celestial creator God who has the power to save us.[69] Perhaps we will need to turn to a sense of the sacred for protection.[70] He even asks, "Will the late surge of militant atheism come to be seen as a Homeric burst of pride before the fall?"[71]

In *Earthmasters*, Hamilton devotes a section to the dangers of "playing God" and tests the attempt to mimic God's omniscience, omnipotence, and benevolence through geoengineering. Even atheists aspire to attain such God-like attributes. Hamilton critiques such a pursuit with the astute observation that we want "to supplant the gods in order to counter the mess we have made as faulty humans."[72] The danger is not only the dire consequences that may follow from the self-destructive Promethean

64. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 112.

65. This echoes the words of Psalm 121:1. In secular discourse on the "Anthropocene" few would dare to add that "[m]y help is from Yahweh who made heaven and earth."

66. Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 201. The reference is to Martin Heidegger, "*Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten*," an interview published in *Die Spiegel* (May 1976): 193–219. Morton translates *Gott* with "god" (without the capital).

67. Hamilton, *Requiem for a Species*, 210.

68. Hamilton, *Defiant Earth*, xi.

69. Hamilton, *Requiem for a Species*, 221.

70. Hamilton, *Requiem for a Species*, 221.

71. Hamilton, *Requiem for a Species*, 222.

72. Hamilton, *Earthmasters*, 180.

attempt to enter the domain of the gods, that playing God "betrays a deep fault in the human character."[73] He regards it as safer to face up to our failures and to devote ourselves to the Pelagian task of becoming better humans. Remarkably, he recognizes the ecological significance of maintaining a distinction between Creator and creature:[74]

> According to this Soterian view, if we are so mistaken in our understanding of the world and our role in it that we are drawn into playing God with the future of the planet, then thinking must be grounded in a different relationship between humans and the world, one that recognizes the boundary between the domain of mortals and that of the gods.[75]

From Christian Critiques to Christian Self-Critique[76]

Arguably, the Christian critique of idolatry has become a relic of the past in pluralistic cosmopolitan contexts, where instead of the critique of worshipping false gods, it is the failure to tolerate, to respect, even to appreciate religious diversity that is subject to critique. There is indeed a reversal of values, symbolized by the title of Friedrich Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols* (1888), so that "idols" may be promoted and turned into celebrity television programs. Social cohesion in a religiously plural society can only be found on the basis of religious tolerance. Any critique of idolatry, especially if aimed at outsiders, smacks of the kind of intolerance that will return us to the religious wars of the past. Monotheism is often regarded as dangerous, prone to fundamentalist abuse, while religious pluralism (or relativism?) may be regarded as the default position. Mark Sagoff, an apologist for ecomodernism, argues, for example, that ecomodernists should reject the "monotheistic view of nature that environmentalists borrow from Judeo-Christianity," namely that "when God became One, nature became one." He even suggests that environmentalism has been described as "Calvinism without God." By contrast, pre-Christian religions viewed nature as "local and assigned gods and spirits to trees, the wind, the harvest, and the sun." Sagoff concludes that, "The theological hope of ecomodernism is that we can understand nature to be many, many places, each with its own guardian spirit. The hope is that human beings will become the guardian spirits of the natural world."[77]

73. Hamilton, *Earthmasters*, 180.

74. See my "What Is the Ecological Significance of God's Transcendence?," 87–99.

75. Hamilton, *Earthmasters*, 183.

76. This section also follows upon the chapter on "Idolatry in the Anthropocene" in my *Secular Discourse on Sin in the Anthropocene*, 171–192. The argument is again reframed.

77. For these quotations, see Sagoff, "A Theology for Ecomodernism."

Paradoxically, religious pluralism may well become "the only way"—in order to resist any forms of exclusivism or even inclusivism that may wish to include the "other" within the self. If such inclusivism is not a form of colonizing, it is at least an *Anschluss*. In a so-called secular age, forms of agnosticism and atheism are widely prevalent, although militant (missionary) atheism may be critiqued for the same exclusivist intolerance found in monotheism. For many citizens in industrialized societies, polytheism, recovering forms of animism, and exploring the female deities of primal religions seem far more attractive (and esoteric) than the muscular religions of the Axial age and their organized forms in world religions. As Susan Neiman observes, even the sins ascribed to pagan gods are worthier of imitation than those of monotheism: "What are lust and adultery next to the cruelty and vengeance ascribed to the Christian god of love."[78] The default assumption is therefore a rough equality or commensurability between most forms of religion[79]—while only fundamentalism, religious support for terrorism, and extremist forms of Satanism may still be denounced as intolerant. The assumption of religious freedom is that religion is a matter of voluntary association and private worship—so that the public influence of religion is necessarily constrained.[80] In short, if "God" is no longer needed as a working hypothesis for the production of wealth or social stability, the critique of idolatry seems misplaced.[81] The Dutch ethicist Hans Dirk van Hoogstraten formulates this provocatively: "In terms of the Holy Trinity, we could say that the place of God the Father is taken by the economy, the place of the Son by politics, and the place of the Holy Spirit by ethics. The Son (politics, government) executes the will of the Father (economics, free market), and they both send the Spirit (ethics, ideology) to the people. The Spirit provides social directives and ethical rules."[82] Either way, the "voice of God" represents the moral order of a Western elite, more recently of the consumer class.[83]

Given such a functional replacement of faith in God by substitutes, one may argue that the question is not whether one believes in God or not, but in which God/gods one believes. In a pluralistic culture where it seems a matter of consumer choice to select a god that can best meet one's spiritual needs, many would wonder why they need to pick and choose. Would some form of eclecticism not make better sense? Is it not strategically wise

78. Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, 156, in conversation with David Hume.

79. See Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 155.

80. See Goudzwaard and Bartholomew, *Beyond the Modern Age*, 33.

81. See Van Hoogstraaten, *Geld en Geest*, 28.

82. Van Hoogstraaten, *Deep Economy*, 3.

83. Van Hoogstraaten, *Geld en Geest*, 38.

to alternate one's gods depending upon the circumstances? Why back only one horse? Why not design one's own god? However, consumer choice in selecting a god also implies deselection. The God of Christian monotheism has been accused of being ultimately responsible for the suffering in the world. The case for the defense (various theodicies that have been offered) has failed, and God has been found guilty. God's justification of the godless is rejected by insisting that there is no justification for this God. Choose any god you wish, as long as it is not this one!

For Christians, this is of course hardly an option. As Joerg Rieger argues in his book *Jesus vs. Caesar*, there is a fundamental tension at the heart of Christianity.[84] This is not a tension between belief in God or atheism or secularism. Nor is it a choice between organized religion and spirituality, or even between Christianity and other religions. The choice is between seeing Jesus Christ or Caesar as the manifestation of God. The question is not whether or not it is absurd to claim that Jesus has *divine* status but whether it is absurd to claim that this *Jesus* could be divine. The question is not whether Jesus is like God but whether God is like Jesus.[85] The contrast is indeed stark: Caesar was the embodiment of imperial power, while Jesus died as a poor peasant, a construction worker, in a remote province, without children, possessions, writings, or even followers (except for his mother and a sex worker). For Rieger, this is a tension between a faith that is inclusive and life-giving for all, especially those who are marginalized by contemporary constellations of power, and a faith that is destructive for people and the Earth. In short, it is a matter of choosing the right God, a message that is indeed good news for people who are tired of serving the wrong God—as Rieger's subtitle claims. Imperial Christianity opted not to make such a choice and to reconcile the Christian message with imperial power. For Rieger, it matters how and where one sees God as active—or else one may end up seeing God as an elitist dictator, a heavenly bully, or a supernatural control freak.[86]

Nevertheless, I am not convinced that a Christian critique of idolatry is the appropriate response to the rise of Prometheus. A form of Christian self-critique may be more appropriate.[87] My sense is Jung Mo Sung is on the right track here. Following Franz Hinkelammert, he refers to the belief, deeply embedded in Orthodox forms of Christianity, that because God in

84. See Rieger, *Jesus vs. Caesar*.

85. Rieger, *Jesus vs. Caesar*, 20.

86. Rieger, *Jesus vs. Caesar*, 15.

87. For the suggestion that Christian ecotheology entails a dual critique, namely a Christian critique of ecological destruction and an ecological critique of Christianity, see my "The Four Tasks of Christian Ecotheology."

the incarnation of Christ became human, we humans can become divine.[88] For Hinkelammert, this process of divinization is indeed the foundational myth of the modern West: humans must become gods.[89] If the attempt to overcome human limits was previously regarded as hubris, in modernity it is regarded as a virtue, as there can be no limits to human development. Moreover, although modernity has rested upon the denial of divine transcendence, this has been expressed in terms of its inverse, namely the denial of human limitations, while the quest for the divinization of humans and the building of heaven on earth remains intact. The god of the Market cannot accept its ecological limits, either. It must expand endlessly.[90] For Sung, the underlying problem remains treating what is finite as infinite. He insists that God is not to be found in material objects or in temples and concludes that "we human beings cannot attain the infinite (to see God) but we are able to experience the presence of God among us, to find fulfilment of our infinite desires, as far as is possible, in relationships of love and solidarity."[91]

One may conclude that this becomes a matter not only of "playing God" but of replacing God, of becoming divine, with godlike attributes. The fall of humanity is treated as a necessary step "upwards," namely to become as God (*eritis sicut Deus*—Gen 3:5). Athanasian orthodoxy is radicalized: God in Jesus Christ became human so that we can become divine (instead). To gain human autonomy, it is not enough to imitate or abandon God; God must be executed, if necessary on a Roman cross, so that we can become divine. With the replacement of the Triune God by a deist Providence and eventually by *Homo deus*, the question is not whether God/god, or more specifically god-language, is employed—but which God we are talking about.

Whatever Happened to *Concursus* in the Process?

Such a displacement of God and the replacement of God by *Homo deus* clearly poses a challenge to any traditional view of God's interaction with creatures, including human beings. Given the way in which humans left their mark in the Earth's rock layers and in the composition of the atmosphere, not to underplay the loss of biodiversity and mass extinctions, a clear distinction between God's work of conservation in nature and God's

88. See Sung, "Greed, Desire and Theology."

89. See Sung, "Greed, Desire and Theology," 53. The reference is to Hinkelammert's *Hacia Una Critica de la Razón Mitica: El Laberinto de la Modernidad* (Mexico: Driada, 2008).

90. See also Cox, *The Market as God*, 21.

91. Sung, "Greed, Desire and Theology," 53.

governance in human history can no longer be maintained. Put bluntly, it now seems well-nigh impossible to retrieve any notion of *concursus* within the context of the doctrine of providence. Anything in planetary history that Christians may describe as God's work would readily be contested by others in terms of planetary processes or collective human endeavors. This is not by itself a disqualification: such *Anfechtung* is often the reverse side of the Christian faith. However, it has become ever harder to avoid the impression that confessions regarding divine action boil down to decorative redescriptions of events that would not survive Occam's razor. Can one make any room for divine agency?

Even if one can theoretically offer an account of divine action in the world as possible that would make philosophical and scientific sense (which I believe indeed can be done on the basis of notions of multiple levels of agency), the question remains whether God's governance in history is at all plausible. Here, the horrors of history return to raise insurmountable questions about any affirmation of God's providence, especially God's governance. The problem is not only one of plausibility but also whether it is bearable and consoling. From a Jewish perspective, Emil Fackenheim expresses the critique of God's providence starkly:

> At the present time we are told, at one extreme that Auschwitz is punishment for Jewish sins, and this is slander of more than a million innocent children in the abortive defense of God. At the opposite extreme, we are told that precisely because this slander is inadmissible the God of history is impossible: a God concerned with Auschwitz must have decreed Auschwitz, and such a God is dead.[92]

I believe that this leaves Christians at a dead end with reflection on *concursus* in the context of discourse on providence. There is an escape route, namely to shift the discussion to another level, namely to God's work of salvation in human, planetary, and cosmic history. If so, a clear distinction has to be made between what Christ has done for us and our salvation on behalf of us and without us (thus no *concursus*, even though Christ is fully human and therefore one of us) and the salvation that the Holy Spirit works in us and through us.[93] Whereas synergy is a Christological (Pelagian) heresy (we therefore do not need to be crucified as well, while Christ's resurrection is God's work alone), synergy is a Pneumatological necessity: we are saved through faith but (from a Reformed perspective) not on the basis of our faith. From a Pneumatological perspective, there is a need for what Van Ruler calls a "theonomous reciprocity."[94] A Christian understanding of *concursus* requires an emphasis on the inhabitation of the Holy Spirit.

92. See Fackenheim, *God's Presence in History*, 30.

93. See Van Ruler's essay on "Structural Differences Between Christology and Pneumatology."

94. Van Ruler, "Structural Differences Between Christology and Pneumatology," 34–35.

I will not enter into a discussion of salvation here. This requires a full treatment on its own.[95] I only need to warn that this raises the stakes. The question is, in a way, simple but profound. What difference does the work of Christ make to the salvation of the world if that world has now shifted into "Anthropocene" volatility? The answer is, of course, that it makes no difference whatsoever without the work of the Holy Spirit. But the question remains why the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ may be regarded as the hinge upon which history turns, especially if the history of the "fullness of time" is now overshadowed by what some describe as "the end of history."

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95. This sets the agenda for volume 5 of the series on "An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the 'Anthropocene' " to be co-edited by Hilda Koster. The title of that volume on Christian views of salvation will be "The Saving Grace of the Story?"

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Who Cares a Damn? On God's Care, Caring for God, and Taking a Next Step

The array of themes that have been explored in these essays are intimidating and indeed nerve-wracking given the challenges posed by the "Anthropocene," mind-boggling in complexity, theologically decisive, and riddled with dangers on all fronts and at all levels. Put differently, in the context of the "Anthropocene," discourse on God's providence is pushed to extremes that were hardly anticipated before. No wonder some would shift the focus away from providence towards salvation, church, ethics, discipleship, spirituality, or something like that. Many may prefer an apophatic response in order to acknowledge our human limitations to understand and respond to challenges of this order of magnitude. Yet the shift to the "Anthropocene" is also not one that can be ignored, as it will affect, by definition, the whole Earth System as such and therefore all human lives and every other form of life. Total silence is as inappropriate as predictive certainty.

As suggested in the preface, an appropriate image may be that of canoeing down a turbulent, broad river over hilly country, with many tributaries and diverging streams, where the decision which rivulet to select

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matters and where some decisions may well prove catastrophic. The shift to the "Anthropocene" is by now irreversible, even if it is not officially ratified by the International Union of Geological Sciences. There is no paddling back. One would need to explore the image of a canoe or kayak (*waka* in Māori) or lifeboat further, given that access to such floating devices is at stake. An apophatic silence may be appropriate as one needs to take a deep breath and hold one's breath in going down a rapid, but remaining static is not an option. Not making decisions, assuming that business as usual is possible, may be self-destructive.

Let me, then, mark a few pointers that can at least provide a response amid considerable trepidation. I will do so by commenting on each of the key phrases in the title above.

On Care

Mammals are by definition a class of animals that care for their young, where a female feeds her young on milk from her own body. This is epitomized by hominin species. Paleontologists such as Sarah Blaffer Hrdy highlight the significance of caring by "mothers and others" in early human communities.[1] It is compassion that made us human, argues Penny Spikins.[2] Social Darwinian notions such as the "survival of the fittest" or *homo lupus homini*, or a battle of all against all, are therefore serious distortions. Caring for one another may be a biblical injunction, but an "ethics of care" (Nel Noddings)[3] is also deeply ingrained in our species history. This is institutionalized in industrialized societies through the role of taxation, health care systems, various forms of therapy, pension funds, insurance policies, unemployment funds, and various safety nets, despite the many flaws associated with all of them. One may safely say that, for humans, the shift from the Holocene to the "Anthropocene" will depend on the quality of mutual care, of giving and receiving care.

It is important to stress the reciprocal nature of receiving, giving, and again receiving care. This applies to an individual's life cycle but is best understood in families and communities, including Christian communities of discipleship. This is one area where ancestral wisdom residual in Indigenous communities has something to teach others. There is a need to institutionalize care-giving, as Maina Talia maintains in his interpretation of the parable in Luke 10:25–37.[4] But giving care only becomes possible on the

1. See Hdry, *Mothers and Others*.

2. See Spikins, *How Compassion Made Us Human*.

3. See Noddings, *Caring*.

4. See Talia, "Am I not your Tuakoi?"

basis of being cared for. Caring is sharing. Giving outside the context of sharing (as is often the case with international aid programs where donor criteria override immediate needs of recipients) distorts relationships, harbors supremacist notions, and breeds dependency. It is the sharing of resources and skills that allows traditional communities to thrive.[5] Or, as Pope Francis has it, "Everything is connected" and "No one is saved alone."[6]

On God's Care

The Christian notion of providence has a deeply pastoral function. Where it is no longer experienced as such, something has gone awry. My sense is that things go wrong on the borderline between what is and what is not within one's locus of control. To speak of God's providence in relation to what is within one's locus of control is to risk the legitimation of one's own vested interests, claiming these as God's blessings. Alternatively, it risks intimidating human freedom through an emphasis on divine sovereignty. At worst, this yields a form of divine determinism that can scarcely be distinguished from a Stoic view of fate. Instead, God's providence is evoked precisely when things are not within one's locus of control, typically through experiences of adversity. These could be in the form of anxiety, struggling to cope with the demands of life, suffering (e.g., sickness, degeneration, approaching death), and especially in the form of experiences of injustice and oppression. In ordinary life, such experiences may be associated with the provision of food, weather patterns, harvests, health, security, and safety on a journey. Each of these has aspects that fall within one's locus of control so that God's involvement need not be evoked. But there are other aspects that do *not* fall within one's locus of control, and perhaps not that of any other human person, community, institution, or power.

Such experiences may evoke anger, anxiety, courage, excitement, frustration, gratitude, humility, patience, protest, serenity, worriedness, you name it. In such a context, trust in God's providence does have a pastoral function. It does not foster Stoic resignation or moral paralysis but elicits protest and resistance on the borderline between what is and what is not within one's locus of control. If everything is in the powerful yet loving hands of God, then humans can face any external calamity and internal

5. In *Vaa Fesokotaki*, Tafue Lusama speaks of interconnected relationships and collective relationalities to develop a notion of the space within the Triune God within which communities can thrive. Accordingly, God is understood as relational (*te Atua vaa fesokotaki*) instead of as judge (*te Atua faamasino*). *Vaa* is the dense relational space in between, perhaps symbolized by the umbilical cord that ties an unborn baby to its mother, while *fe* (a plurality of relations) plus *soko* (connectedness in terms of character traits) and *taki* (tightness) together suggest "joining people or other entities into a firmly knit connection of ongoing dialogue and mutual understanding" (101).

6. Pope Francis, *Laudate Deum*, §19.

weakness with serenity, courage, and confidence.[7] Thus, one may be in prison like Paul but still rejoice by discerning what is truly important, that it is not Caesar who is Lord but the Lamb that was slain, that it is God who works in us to will and to act in order to fulfill God's good purpose (Phil 2:13). If, by contrast, we live in a world governed by either fate or pure randomness, we are driven to unrelieved despair. Calvin may have grasped this pastoral function better than most others. As paraphrased by Langdon Gilkey:

> In a world governed by the former [fate and chance] all happens blindly, with no meaning at all; here there is promise of neither liberation nor salvation. Since we are in such a world subjected to utterly senseless forces, all the miseries that these forces bestow on us, i.e. of failure, disease, bereavement, death, have no meaning vis-à-vis our own hopes and thus insofar as they are victorious—and they frequently are—they represent an unrelieved despair. Here, therefore, there is the possibility of neither serenity nor consolation and no ground for courage in facing life's inevitable trials. At best we can depend only on our own transient and fragile powers to elude the forces that menace us—and thus do we face the inner risk, if we succeed, of callous pride, and, if we fail, of utter despair.[8]

Or in the words of Question and Answer 27 of the Heidelberg Catechism: "Q. What do you understand by the providence of God? A. The almighty and ever present power of God by which God upholds, as with his hand, heaven and earth and all creatures, and so rules them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and lean years, food and drink, health and sickness, prosperity and poverty—all things, in fact, come to us not by chance but by his fatherly hand."[9]

On Caring for God[10]

"Caring for God" is used here paradoxically to refer to a discussion of the theodicy problem, namely the attempt to defend God against accusations that God is not responding to the suffering of creatures and to the presence of evil in the world. This includes social evil (e.g., murder, rape, assault, injustice, oppression, and tyranny), but also so-called "natural evil," that is, the suffering (of all sentient creatures) associated with gravity, natural selection, the limited life cycle of cells, predation, animal aggression and brutality, sickness, aging, and death.

7. See Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 177, drawing on John Calvin.

8. See Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 178–79.

9. For this translation of the Heidelberg Catechism, see https://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/confessions/heidelberg-catechism#toc-god-the-father [last accessed October 17, 2024].

10. Parts of this section are based on Ernst M. Conradie, "From Lisbon to Auschwitz and from Wuhan to Cape Town: COVID-19 as a Test Case for the Theodicy Problem." In *World Christianity and COVID-19: Looking Back and Looking Forward*, edited by Chammah Kaunda, 19–34. Berlin: Springer Nature, 2023.

The case against God is usually framed to suggest that God may not be able to do something about such suffering, that God does not really care about such suffering (or even takes sadistic pleasure from that), that God does not know about such suffering, or that God is too far removed from the world to do anything about that. At least since the days of Job, the theodicy problem has continuously attracted the attention of scholars seeking to find answers to such intriguing questions, but the problem almost necessarily remains unresolved. Not surprisingly, many have maintained that this is not an appropriate theological question and that God's care for us is abundantly clear from the biblical witnesses. The real problem lies with the inverse, namely the service that we owe to God.

As is well established, the theodicy problem emerges as a result of the tension between three propositions: (1) evil is present in the world and is the cause of much suffering, not only among humans; (2) the Christian notion of God assumes that God is a God of mercy and love, even for perpetrators, and would therefore presumably not want creatures to suffer more than they can bear (whether they are innocent or not); and (3) God is powerful (some would say omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient) and therefore presumably able to do something about suffering. Why, then is there so much suffering in the world, especially innocent suffering? Even if evil is the outcome of human sin, why does evil prevail? The term "theodicy" refers to Christian attempts to defend God, to justify God against accusations that (1) God does not exist, (2) is not really loving, or (3) is not able to address the evil causes of suffering.

The theodicy problem is partially resolved when any one of these propositions is dropped. This comes in the form of, for example, (1) gnosticism (evil is only a matter of appearance); (2) atheism, deism, secularism, or fatalism (God either does not exist or there is another force that influences or even determines our lives, such as fate, luck, the Market, or the Party); or 3) Manicheism (matter is evil, suffering comes from our attachment to the material world). According to this last position, the universe is ruled by two co-original principles, God and Satan, locked in constant struggle for domination. If so, we need to muster the forces of goodness against evil in the hope that goodness will prevail. However, the presence of suffering should not surprise us. Another option, followed by the Marquis de Sade, is that God exists but is an utterly malevolent genius.[11]

All theodicies have to address three further tensions that result from the way in which the problem is posed: (1) some would tend to emphasize God's power more than God's love or the inverse; (2) some would emphasize God's responsibility to address suffering more than our human

11. See Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, 116.

responsibility to do so (leading to quietism) or the inverse (leading to an anxious, somewhat desperate activism); and (3) some would attempt to offer rational explanations (and become despondent when these inevitably fail), while others would in humility prefer to maintain a respectful apophatic silence amid suffering, not jumping to quick-fix solutions[12] (and may well fail to address the problem). These could be regarded as legitimate tensions: the question is how to do justice to the intuitions embedded in each of these polar opposites.[13]

My sense is therefore that the theodicy problem is an inevitable one. There is only one thing that is worse than addressing that—and that is *not* addressing it or pretending not to do so. However, it is best raised from the perspective of the victims of history, here especially the victims of ecological destruction and climate disruption. Often it is raised by those who speak on behalf of such victims, including nonhuman victims, but this has to be done with circumspection. The suspicion that there is a deep divide here between scholars from the Global North and the Global South does need to be addressed. It would be improper to raise the theodicy question from the perspective of the Global North if what is required is exactly the opposite, namely a prophetic (decolonial, subaltern) critique of, for example, historical carbon emissions and climate debt, but also a critique of efforts to ameliorate that through notions of sustainable development.

The same may apply to theological interest in the problem of natural evil vis-à-vis social evil. Again, natural evil is an unavoidable problem for any theological discourse on creation or evolution. However, there may well be a global divide here as well, especially if scholars from the Global North tend to focus on natural evil, while scholars from the Global South tend to focus on social evil.[14] As I have argued elsewhere, at least from an African perspective, "our primary problem is not vulnerability but rape, not service but slavery, not death but murder, not sickness but the spread of preventable diseases, not economic scarcity or even inequality but capitalism, not being ruled but Empire, not the evolution of species but the loss of biodiversity,

12. Recommended by N.T. Wright in *God and the Pandemic*, xi.

13. The last three paragraphs are based on teaching notes for second-year theology students at the University of the Western Cape as well as a recent essay entitled, "From Lisbon to Auschwitz and from Wuhan to Cape Town." In this essay, I contrast especially six approaches to the theodicy problem under the following rubrics: (1) "suffering is incomprehensible"; (2) "we need to offer protest before God about human suffering"; (3) "human suffering is the product of human sin and may be regarded as God's punishment or chastisement for sin"; (4) "God is teaching us a lesson through suffering"; (5) "God's power is a function of persuasive love"; and (6) "what is required is not passive acquiescence in suffering but courageous human participation in God's struggle against evil."

14. See my assessment of this debate in conversation with Christopher Southgate, "On Social Evil and Natural Evil"; also "The Project and Prospects of 'Redeeming Sin?'"

not an always changing climate but anthropogenic climate change, not hunger due to inadequate food production but due to its skewed distribution and/or the over-supply of fast food with high sugar and high fat contents."[15] Neither is it human anxiety but the arsenals built to alleviate but only aggravating such anxieties.

On Taking Steps

Migration is also deeply rooted in mammalian life and is epitomized by hominin species who may have been cave dwellers but for whom sustainability required adaptability, including the ability to adapt to changing conditions and to move from one place to another. Human locomotion itself has morphed from using one's own limbs to the use of animals, to using the wheel, to employing water and wind, to the use of steam on the basis of burning fossil fuels and eventually through nuclear and solar power.[16] A purely cyclical understanding of time therefore cannot do justice to the human condition. Narrative time assumes a directionality, but such direction can be captured neither in straight lines nor in the always upward curve of economic growth. It therefore comes as no surprise that the ecumenical root metaphor of the whole household of God (*oikos*) is supplemented by that of a journey or a pilgrimage (*hodos*).[17] This requires something like "a spirituality of the road" (David Bosch).[18]

For contemporary Christian ecotheology, there are especially two dangers for this journey. One is to claim to know the destination, the final goal of the journey, to have a clear roadmap and a timetable to get there, even to have foreknowledge of what will transpire. Modernism, fundamentalism, and transhumanism alike have wrecked such a journey. Augustine already maintained that the coming reign of God cannot be equated with secular dreams and aspirations (the city of Rome) and portrayed the city of God as an arc spanning history. The other danger is the postmodernist (for want of a better term) eschewing of any such directionality and sense of purpose, as if the struggles for freedom, equality, and solidarity and the quest for building a more humane society are not significant. At best, postmodern critiques may be helpful to deconstruct any easy, homogenizing responses to understanding history, but leaving such questions aside is born from a lazy and relaxed ennui, not responsibility.

15. See Conradie, *Redeeming Sin*, 110–11.

16. For a discussion on such mobility, see Clark and Szerszynski, *Planetary Social Thought*, 123–44.

17. See my "Rethinking Root Metaphors in Ecotheology."

18. See Bosch, *A Spirituality of the Road*.

On a Next Step

As I argued elsewhere,[19] the metaphor of the journey of doing ecotheology[20] has several attractions, especially if viewed as a journey through an unchartered landscape (or seascape) with companions, facing serious challenges ahead. Or, as I suggest, one may further explore the image of canoeing down a broad river over hilly terrain, with many tributaries, diversions, and confluences so that the decision which stream to follow may be critical. Then it is more apt to speak of the next paddle instead of the next step.

Although the route ahead is not clear, there is a clear sense of destination, perhaps a vision of *shalom*, where justice will prevail, of the coming reign of God. The aim of the journey is not merely to reach the destination; every step of the journey is important and has eschatological significance as stories are gathered along the way. The homecoming dinner, perhaps the feast of the Lamb that was slain, has its lure, but it is every stage of the journey that matters.

I suggest that this metaphor yields a clue to the knowledge of Godself, that is, knowing the identity and character of God and knowing what God may be up to. In the same way that one may see a path but cannot see an entire journey, that one may detect signs of love without seeing that love, God's presence and character can be discerned without being visible. Knowledge of God enables us liturgically to see the world in the light of the Light of the world. We cannot actually see that Light; we can only see things in that light. We do not look at the world from without but from within.[21] Accordingly, we do not see beauty but are seen by Beauty; in the light of such beauty, we see ourselves for what we are.[22] Or, in the often-cited words of C.S. Lewis, "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun

19. In this section, I am drawing on the conclusion to my essay "Some South African Perspectives About the Road of Doing Christian Ecotheology."

20. For "The Journey of Doing Ecotheology," see especially the collaborative document that resulted from a small colloquium held in San Francisco on "Christian Theology and the Earth" in November 2011. Under various rubrics, the collective and collaborative journey was described as being through an uncharted landscape (or seascape), as a journey from an unacceptable present with roots in Christianity itself, as a journey with a sense of destination, as drawing on various sources of inspiration (sources that can be analyzed hermeneutically, using various modes of transport, steering through various tensions), a journey situated within a larger cosmic journey, a journey where wagers of transcendence are entertained, and where various theological redescriptions of this journey are found. The metaphor of a journey is clearly helpful to allow both a temporal and a spatial axis. It is also apt given the methodological need to reflect on (*meta*) the logic (*logos*) of the road/path (*hodos*) along which this journey is situated. See Bauman, Conradie, and Eaton (eds.), "The Journey of Doing Ecotheology."

21. See also Pope Francis, *Laudate Deum*, §25.

22. See Hart, *You are Gods*, 50.

has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else."[23] One needs tools along the way, including a lantern or a torch, but one should not confuse the lantern with light. Put differently: one cannot actually see the sea as such, only a minute portion of it; but in looking at the sea, it is indeed the sea that one sees.[24]

The metaphor of a journey does yield some remarkable insights on what may and what may not be expected of God. Given this metaphor, the question what God may be up to sounds awkward. It is not as if one could expect God to pave the way, to provide rescue operations, to carry creatures all the way, or to show the way by offering directions (as an omniscient director who knows every way in advance) that one then has to follow robotically. Even the image of following in the footsteps of Jesus, as if one does not need to think about the route oneself, seems inappropriate. It is also not as if it is God who puts the challenges ahead in place like an obstacle course for training endurance. These challenges (e.g., those associated with the "Anthropocene") may be self-inflicted or not, but they should not be regarded as divine punishment for human folly. It is not as if the Creator controls the forces unleashed in the "Anthropocene" and can choreograph what human agents are to do next. One may say that being the Creator implies self-limitation from God's side, allowing creatures to be and to evolve without preplanning and predetermining every step of the way. Human parents who engineer and then micromanage the lives of their children (selecting their genes and talents, deciding on schools, sports, careers, marriages, grandchildren, and even their eventual deaths in advance) would be diabolic. The motherly care provided by God implies the need to make room within Godself for creatures to be, to evolve, to make mistakes, to cope with challenges, to mature, and hopefully to flourish.

This does not mean that the divine parent is absent from the lives and the journeys of beloved creatures. Whenever God acts, it is through creatures, involving a paradox of multiple agencies at different levels.[25] How, then, does God interact with (human) creatures? How would we know what God is up to in this sense? According to the Christian confession, this

23. This famous quote from C.S. Lewis comes from a paper given to the Oxford Socratic Club entitled, "Is Theology Poetry?" Lewis addressed the question: "Is the imagination of followers of Jesus so aroused and satisfied by the poetry of the Gospel message that they have mistaken intellectual assent for mere aesthetic enjoyment?" See https://www.cslewisinstitute.org/resources/reflections-december-2013/ [last accessed October 17, 2024].

24. See Van Ruler, *This Earthly Life Matters*, 70.

25. The notion of a "paradox of double agency" is widely discussed in discourse on divine action in the world. An action may be ascribed to an agent at one level and to another agent at a higher level. For a discussion, see the essay on *concursus* in this volume, also my *The Earth in God's Economy*, 175–220.

is not an unfathomable mystery that would take an intellectual *tour de force* to reach the answer. The identity and character of this God has been disclosed to us in Jesus Christ and through the Spirit. Such identity and character cannot be captured under any one formula and has been contested throughout the Jewish-Christian tradition in conversation with other religions and philosophies, but it is also not as if anything goes, as if one may construct for oneself a god in one's own imagination. As the theological critique of apartheid in South Africa suggests, it is possible to identify and resist heresy and to find a "moment of truth."[26]

Given the metaphor of a journey and a Trinitarian intuition, one may provisionally say that God's presence and interaction with creatures take the shape of (1) parental guidance (in broad parameters) like any loving parent who finds joy in their adult children, providing some light so that one may see for oneself; (2) helping those who have lost their way completely to find the Way again; and (3) a comforting presence along the way (or the Wind in one's sails) throughout the journey, especially when times get rough.

Given these suggestions, there may indeed be a need for something like a "spirituality of the road," to borrow a phrase from the South African missiologist David Bosch.[27] Such a spirituality may be shaped by a life of prayer, but then the question has to be what we are praying for. What is needed for the journey of doing ecotheology is not any ABC, a method with a few easy steps. The notion of a journey requires a balancing of the temporal tensions between past, present, and future. To live in the moment, with a vision towards the future and on the basis of a memory of the past is demanding.[28] A prerequisite of such a spirituality is to "come into step." To be in step is to appreciate the moment in between footsteps, the moment just before the next foot touches down. It does not help to linger in the past. One has to shift one's body weight with the necessary courage. It also does not help to hasten the movement. This will soon lead to exhaustion. One has to be willing to linger for a moment in the air, in anticipation of touching down and feeling the earth under one's feet anew. Only in

26. *A Moment of Truth* is the title of a volume on the Belhar Confession, edited by Daan Cloete and Dirk Smit.

27. See Bosch, *A Spirituality of the Road*. My reflections on what this entails may also be found in several previous publications, for example already in *Hope for the Earth*.

28. Blaise Pascal comments on the malaise of temporality in this way: "We do not rest satisfied with the present. We anticipate the future as too slow in coming as if in order to hasten its course; or we recall the past, to stop its too rapid flight. So imprudent are we that we wander in the times that are not ours, and do not think of the only one which belongs to us; and so idle are we that we dream of those times which are no more and thoughtlessly overlook that which alone exists. For the present is generally painful to us. [...] So we never live, but we hope to live; and as we are always preparing to be happy, it is inevitable we should never be so." See his *Pensées*, 172.

this moment of lingering, only through a "rediscovery of slowness" (Stan Nadolny), instead of an ever-faster pace, will time be experienced and not merely measured. This may indeed help us to experience the merciful presence of the eternal God in the moment.[29]

My sense is that "a spirituality of the road" is therefore best portrayed in terms of a journey with some sense of purpose and direction but taking place through an uncharted landscape or seascape with some companions, tools, and means of sustenance, with no guarantees of reaching or even knowing the final destination. The next step of the journey for humanity as a whole will be the transition to the "Anthropocene," which will be more like rafting down rapids than crossing a next hurdle in an obstacle course, or white water races down a river in flood.

Who Cares a Damn?

This may sound like a desperate or cynical way of phrasing the question about God's providence. In common usage, the phrase "don't care a damn" is a way of saying that you "do not care about something, especially the annoying things that someone else is doing or saying."[30] This is hardly appropriate when confronted with the immense range of challenges associated with the "Anthropocene." It can be taken as a critique of the affluent parts of the global human population who are not changing their ways, for example, to bend the curve of carbon emissions. It may well seem that they "don't care a damn" about what such critics are saying or what the long-term impact of their "affluenza" may be. But if that refers to the victims of climate injustice, humankind or otherkind, this would be immoral. Nevertheless, it can also be used as a colloquial expression of the theodicy problem. Does *God* care a damn about the mess that we find ourselves in?

The flippancy of such a question aside, this does raise thorny questions about God's punishment in general and the proverbial "hell and damnation" in particular. While references to God's punishment reverberate throughout the biblical witnesses, it seems that only some "fire and brimstone" preachers (but virtually no one in the field of academic theology) are willing to go there. Instead, the emphasis is on God's love, compassion, mercy, and justice for the victims. And rightly so. But is there then no punishment? No damnation? No hell for climate denialists or unrepentant oil magnates? These are eschatological questions that cannot be addressed within the context of a volume of essays on God's providence. They therefore

29. See Moltmann, Wolterstorff, and Charry, *A Passion for God's Reign*, 41.

30. See https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/not-give-care-a-damn [last accessed October 17, 2024].

have to be left open—and that may well be the appropriate pastoral response—illustrated by Abraham's plea for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18).

I may conclude with one comment as a "beneficiary" of apartheid, that is, as one who was born in 1962 and who benefited (but then ambiguously so) from colonial conquest and apartheid policies, especially through education opportunities. Dispensations, generations, and civilizations do not last forever. Neither does anyone's lifetime. This is not a matter of damnation, but there is a need for an older generation to make way for a newer generation, even though this is far from easy and even though this comes with a sense of trepidation over what may be lost in the process.

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Index

This book offers a compelling read. Central to the book are the concepts of *conservatio*, *gubernatio*, and *concursus*—the ideas of preservation, guidance, and collaboration. Conradie uses these themes to explore how humanity navigates the balance between past, present, and future, preserving what is valuable (*conservatio*), seeking direction in a rapidly changing world (*gubernatio*), and the importance of causal relations between divine action and human actions (*concursus*). As humanity faces the transition into the "Anthropocene", he likens this journey to rafting down unpredictable rapids, where spiritual and ecological insight are crucial. This book offers deep reflections on how we can navigate a future defined by societal transformation.

Kuzipa Nalwamba, Programme Director for Unity and Mission, and Ecumenical Formation, World Council of Churches

This unique publication addresses the unnerving question of what God is up to as we live through this magnitude of irreversible destruction to our Faletele, our Great House. It articulates the irreparable disruption to what indigenous dirt communities call "indeterminate harmony", one that provides patterns and symbols of resilience as guides in the path of the possessive determinism of our time. Amid the "Anthropocene", the volume calls for a theological restorying beyond the usual God-providence talk, recognizing new ethical shifts and an alternative array of responses from around the world to articulate God's care. A must read!

Upolu Lumā Vaai, Principal, Pacific Theological College

Ernst Conradie continues to write frenetically on the current ecological predicament, as if his life is at stake—which it actually is, along with all life on Earth. Revisiting the classical doctrine of divine providence, in this new publication he probes how the story of God's conservation and governance of the world might continue now that the planet transitions from a relatively stable Holocene into a much more precarious "Anthropocene". Conradie raises many pertinent and disconcerting questions rather than offering easy (or not so easy) answers—but his writing is pervaded by a profoundly Christian sense of hope amid today's planetary distress.

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