

Eternity, History, and Divine Providence

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Commenting on Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, Russell Hittinger observes that John Paul considers the fundamental issue for moral theology to be the following: "Is the moral order a creature of divine providence, or does divine governance have to be added on to an already complete and autonomous human jurisdiction over morals?"¹ Since Hittinger's book focuses on natural law, he does not provide a detailed exposition of the doctrine of providence. When one explores the traditional doctrine of providence, however, one runs up against difficulties involving God's eternal knowledge and will. If God is provident from eternity, how can history—including God's historical action—truly be significant?

In pondering this question, this essay treats Aquinas's most philosophically rich and detailed exposition of the doctrine of providence, Book III of the *Summa contra gentiles*. Before turning to the *Summa contra gentiles*, however, I examine the Reformed theologian Hans Boersma's lucid concerns regarding the doctrine of election. These concerns will sharpen our focus upon the relationship of the temporal history of free creatures to God's eternal providence.

I. Hans Boersma: God's Historical Work

In an effort to develop a Reformed theology of election that does not fall victim to determinism or double predestination, Hans Boersma proposes "an understanding of election that is historical, corporate, and instrumental in character."² He draws this proposal largely from the book of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy, he argues, affirms God's sovereignty in choosing Israel but describes God's choosing in historical terms. With respect to God's sovereignty, God does not elect Israel because of Israel's particular goodness; God chooses Israel simply because of his sovereign will. Yet God elects Israel precisely as a historical people. In this regard Boersma cautions against the "timeless, individual, and futuristic reading of election that has dominated

¹ RUSSELL HITTINGER, *The First Grace: Rediscovering the Natural Law in a Post-Christian World* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2003), 26.

² HANS BOERSMA, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 76. I should note that although I do not take up the issue of predestination in the present essay, I discuss it in detail in my *Predestination: Biblical and Theological Paths* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

much of Western theologizing."³ As the election of a historical people, Israel's election is not the same as the predestination of individuals for eternal union with God. The purpose of election is not eternal union, but rather historical action: God aims at bringing about a bilateral covenantal relationship, in history, between human beings and God. God's historical action seeks to achieve holy human actions in history, and human holiness is to be corporate rather than merely individual. While Israel does not merit election by its prior holiness, election has the purpose of making Israel holy. Thus God's election, as a bilateral covenantal relationship, is conditional on Israel's response.

Indebted to the work of E. P. Sanders, Boersma emphasizes that election, while an act of God's sovereignty, involves human choice. Whereas eternal predestination focuses on God's eternal will to unite individual rational creatures to himself, Boersma highlights the bilateral and corporate character of historical, covenantal election. God's election requires Israel's free response. When Israel fails to respond adequately to election, the covenantal curses take effect. Like election, therefore, reprobation is historical in character. As Boersma puts it, "The hospitality of election notwithstanding, God warns that if Israel rejects his hospitality, it will face the violence of his reprobation."⁴ Understanding election and reprobation in historical terms allows one to avoid universalism without risking eternal divine determinism.

While God "does not force Israel's hand," nonetheless neither is God locked into history, as if God were temporal.⁵ As Deuteronomy suggests, God knows that Israel will undergo the covenantal curses—ultimately exile—due to its free failure to respond adequately by leading a corporate life of holiness. For Boersma, therefore, the history of human violence is the appropriate context in which to understand the election of Israel. Given a historical situation marked by rampant idolatry, God does not elect all nations or establish an *unconditional* covenantal relationship with Israel. To have done so would have been to "let human violence run amok," unpunished.⁶ Why then does God not elect the Israelites? Deuteronomy, Boersma suggests, indicates that God's choice had something to do with God's predilection for the weak and the poor: God seeks out the marginalized, who specially receive his "electing grace."⁷ The historical election of Israel reveals that the mighty are not necessarily the victors in history, despite appearances. Just as God cared for Israel in its weakness as a people, so

³ BOERSMA, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 76. For a forceful indictment of Augustine's theology on these grounds, see Donato Ogliaari, "The Role of Christ and of the Church in the Light of Augustine's Theory of Predestination," *Ephemerides theologicae Lovanienses* 79 (2003): 347-64.

⁴ BOERSMA, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 81.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁷ *Ibid.*

also Israel is to be hospitable to the marginalized. Election is God's "preferential hospitality" to Israel as a marginalized people; the outcome of election as divine hospitality depends upon whether or not it leads to Israel's "human hospitality."⁸

Far from referring to an eternal and ineluctable decree, therefore, God's election possesses a fully historical dynamic. Does this mean that the success of divine hospitality/election is determined by Israel's corporate response? The answer is that God does not envision election as unilateral. Rather, God always envisions election as requiring adequate human response: Israel cannot merely fall back upon her covenantal privileges as the elect people of God without acting as a holy people. In other words, against the notion of a people whose relationship with God does not depend upon anything it does in history (divine determinism), Boersma emphasizes in light of the biblical testimony that "Israel can never use her election to claim some kind of absolute and inviolable status with God."⁹ In history, Israel's turning away from God, and corresponding failure to fulfill the obligations of the covenant, involves God's turning away from Israel. As befits a historical relationship, the relationship is circular rather than determined fully either by God or by Israel. While the relationship is initiated and made possible by God's hospitality/election, nonetheless the relationship cannot be sustained without Israel's full response. Granting the circular relationship, however, does Israel's response arise fundamentally from human resources or from God's assistance?

Rather than answering this question more fully, Boersma turns his attention to a further problem. While God's choice of Israel has its roots in his love of Abraham, God elects Israel out of love for the entire human race. As Boersma says, "God's call of Abraham was an act of hospitality not just to his descendants but also to all other nations (Gen. 12:3)."¹⁰ Yet if this is true, why does God's election of Israel not only leave out other nations, at least at first, but also unleash punitive violence against them? The Amalekites undergo the violence of "the curse of destruction (*herem*)."¹¹ If election's historical shadow is terrible reprobation, is election in fact good news? Even when one interprets God's "curse of destruction" against the Amalekites as expressing not so much a divine approbation of *herem* as God's absolute repudiation of all that is violently idolatrous, the problem remains: Why is God's election not "pure hospitality"?¹² In other words, why does God permit any rational creatures to stand outside his hospitality? Why does not the hospitality revealed in Christ Jesus ensure that even the most inhospitable, violent rational creatures freely embrace God's love?

⁸ Ibid., 85.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 86.

¹¹ Ibid., 88.

¹² Ibid., 94.

In this regard, Boersma emphasizes both that reprobation arises from the side of the creature, who freely chooses his or her own alienation, and that (following Romans 11:33) election is a mystery whose tensions we cannot solve. By entering into human history, God enters into the mystery of iniquity, filled with oppressors and victims, goats and sheep. Boersma finds that it is only by participating ever more deeply in God's love in the midst of human sin—by participating in his "absolute hospitality"—that we can come to appreciate also why this hospitality/election is conditional, dependent upon the historical response of human hospitality toward the marginalized. A full understanding of election, he concludes, awaits the eschatological revelation of the final consummation of God's historical work of election in Israel and Christ Jesus.

Since writing *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, Boersma has come to think that the problems that arise in the doctrine of election are not solved by opposing eternal election to historical election. Yet if God acts in history from all eternity—something possible because time is a created participation in eternity—how can we avoid seeming to dissolve history into eternity? If God knows the end toward which his causality eternally draws all creation, why do we need to undergo a painful historical path to arrive at this eternally known end? Would there not be a less messy way for God to share his goodness with us?

Regarding Augustine's theology of redemption, Eric Gregory observes, "Love (literally) takes time, an experience of time that makes nonpossessive love possible."¹³ Gregory goes on to argue that our vulnerability itself shapes the character of our love: "There is something important to our striving to make progress through such a journey, some kind of fitting relation between reconciliation and the birth of enjoying a different way of desiring in God through Christ. The confessions of a vulnerable creation on the way are the means to the end of this redemption."¹⁴ Since God has indeed willed a vulnerable creation, Gregory's hypothesis seems fitting. It follows that we should firmly retain "an understanding of election that is historical, corporate, and instrumental in character."¹⁵ Since the goal of this vulnerable creation is deification, however, we need ensure that God's eternal knowing and willing of our participation in his goodness grounds this historical and corporate understanding of election.

¹³ ERIC GREGORY, *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 382.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ BOERSMA, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 76.

II. Aquinas on Providence

Divine Eternity and Providence *in Summa contra gentiles*

Aquinas's theology of providence can fruitfully be read in light of Boersma's concern to avoid a "timeless, individual, and futuristic" account of God's election.¹⁶ In Book I of the *Summa contra gentiles*, Aquinas defines God's eternity immediately after demonstrating God's existence. Because God is pure actuality, his existence entails his eternity. As sheer actuality, he has "his whole being at once (totum esse suum simul habens)."¹⁷ Unlike created beings, sheer "I AM" (Exod 3:14) is not extended over space or time. He is the infinite perfection of act-of-being, with no before or after. This immutable eternity does not lock God within himself: God causes, in a manner beyond our comprehension, all finite being as created participations in his infinite Act.¹⁸ Since his creative causality expresses his infinite wisdom and goodness, God orders all things to his goodness. Citing John of Damascus, Aquinas observes that the visible world bears witness to God's providential guidance of all things toward this goal: "Contrary and discordant things cannot, always or for the most part, be parts of one order except under someone's government, which enables all and each to tend to a definite end. But in the world we find that things of diverse natures come together under one order, and this not rarely or by chance, but always or for the most part."¹⁹ Damascene's and

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ SCG I, ch. 15, § 3. Matthew Lamb observes that God's eternity "cannot be imagined; nor can it be understood and conceived, except by God. We can, however, affirm that God is eternal and understand analogically that affirmation" (Lamb, *Eternity, Time, and the Life of Wisdom* [Naples, FL: Sapientia Press, 2007], 37). See also BRIAN J. SHANLEY, O.P., "Eternal Knowledge of the Temporal in Aquinas," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 71 (1997): 197-224, indebted especially to John of St. Thomas. In this article and in "Aquinas on God's Causal Knowledge: A Reply to Stump and Kretzmann," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 72 (1998): 447-57, Shanley critiques Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann's position: see especially STUMP and KRETZMANN, "God's Knowledge and Its Causal Efficacy," in *The Rationality of Belief and the Plurality of Faith*, ed. Thomas D. Senor (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 94-124; Stump and Kretzmann, "Eternity and God's Knowledge: A Reply to Shanley," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 72 (1998): 439-45. For late medieval and Baroque scholastic debates on God's knowledge, focusing on the question of whether God knows things in themselves and not only in himself, see JACOB SCHMUTZ, "La crise de la science divine durant la scolastique moderne," in *Le contemplateur et les idées: Modèles de la science divine du néoplatonisme au XVIIe siècle*, ed. Olivier Boulnois, Jacob Schmutz, and Jean-Luc Solère (Paris: J. Vrin, 2002), 185-221. See also THOMAS M. OSBORNE, JR., "Augustine and Aquinas on Foreknowledge Through Causes," *Nova et Vetera* 6 (2008): 219-32.

¹⁸ SCG I, ch. 13, §§ 3, 9, 21, 28. For responses to the widespread misunderstandings of God's immutability see THOMAS G. WEINANDY, O.F.M. CAP., *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000); David Bentley Hart, "No Shadow of Turning: On Divine Impassibility," *Pro Ecclesia* 11 (2002): 184-206. One finds immutability confused with immobility in Bruce L. McCORMACK, "The Actuality of God: Karl Barth in Conversation with Open Theism," in *Engaging the Doctrine of God: Contemporary Protestant Perspectives*, ed. Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 185-242, at 231-38.

¹⁹ SCG I, ch. 13, § 35.

Aquinas's conclusion is that God is provident for creation: "There must therefore be some being by whose providence the world is governed. This we call God."²⁰

In Book III of the *Summa contra gentiles*, Aquinas takes up in earnest the topic of divine providence. Beginning from creatures, he demonstrates that rational agents act for an end or goal (final causality), that this goal is a good, and that all things are ordered toward God as the highest good. As the Creator, God's transcendence enables him to be causally present in the free causality of creatures; indeed without God's action creatures could not act, since created action, as created, cannot be autonomous. In creating from eternity, God ensures that "all things, whether made by Him immediately, or by means of secondary causes, are ordered to God as their end."²¹ Since all things are ordered to God, the ultimate end of all things is to become like God, insofar as their mode of being allows for such likeness. Rational creatures are likened to God through the dignity of rational causality.

Having shown that God is the end or goal of all things, Aquinas wishes to show that God providentially governs all things to their end.²² In so doing, he addresses a set of problems that bear upon the relationship of eternal action and historical action. These problems include, among others, how both God and the created agent cause the same effect; how evil arises; how God's activity does not exclude freedom of choice, fortune, chance, and contingency; how providential governance occurs through created causes, including free created causes; whether providence is the same as fate; how prayer works; whether the order of providence determines God's historical action; why God works miracles, and how these differ from magic; how God cares for individual rational creatures; what divine law is, and what its aim is; and how sacramental worship works. I will examine these topics one by one.

History, Divine Causality, and Evil

When God creates from eternity, he does so for a goal, and he knows and wills the ordering of all things to this goal. Because God utterly transcends temporality,

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ SCG III, ch. 17, § 7. See JEAN-HERVÉ NICOLAS, O.P., "L'univers ordonné à Dieu par Dieu," *Revue Thomiste* 91 (1991): 357-76; JEAN-PIERRE TORRELL, O.P., "Dieu conduit toutes choses vers leur fin". Providence et gouvernement divin chez Thomas d'Aquin," in *Ende und Vollendung. Eschatologische Perspektiven im Mittelalter*, ed. J. A. Aertsen and M. Pickavé (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2002), 561-94, at 588-91. For insight into Aquinas's doctrine of creation, see LAWRENCE DEWAN, O.P., "What Does Createdness Look Like?," in *Divine Creation in Ancient, Medieval, and Early Modern Thought*, ed. Michael Treschow, Willimien Otten, and Walter Hannam (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 335-61, focusing on emanation doctrine as the key to understanding that creation is not a change; WAYNE J. HANKEY, "Ab Uno Simplici Non Est Nisi Unum: The Place of Natural and Necessary Emanation in Aquinas's Doctrine of Creation," in *Divine Creation in Ancient, Medieval, and Early Modern Thought*, 309-33. Hankey points out that "[f]rom the beginning of his writing Thomas attributes a doctrine of creation to Aristotle and, from the early 1260s, he also ascribes it to Plato and the *Platonici*" (332).

²² See SCG III, ch. 64 for the beginning of this discussion.

he eternally knows and wills the communication of goodness by which the whole of creation attains its end. As Aquinas says, since providence is “to move things toward an end through understanding,” it follows that God, who supremely understands all things, providentially governs everything toward the end for which he creates.²³ Aquinas emphasizes that God’s providence extends to all things rather than simply to individuals, because “the greatest good in caused things is the good of the order of the universe.”²⁴

Providence is not an extrinsic addition to fundamentally autonomous creatures. On the contrary, God’s transcendence enables him to be intimately present and active in all created being. Aquinas remarks in this regard that “the same principle must be the cause of a thing and of its preservation, for the preservation of a thing is nothing but the continuation of its being.”²⁵ Were God’s gifting to cease, our being and operation would cease. Created operation, like created being, requires God’s operation.²⁶ Along with preserving all things in being, God preserves their powers and is the source (as the first cause) of every created “application of power to operation.”²⁷ As Aquinas puts it, “wherever being is found, the divine presence is also there.”²⁸ Thus God’s eternity permits, rather than prohibits, God’s intimate activity in history. All creatures exist and move because God wills their participation in him, not because God engages autonomous creatures from outside.

Thanks to Maimonides, Aquinas is aware of the view of some Muslim thinkers that divine causality subsumes created causality, as in the view that “fire does not give heat, but God causes heat in the presence of fire.”²⁹ As Aquinas formulates the prob-

²³ SCG III, ch. 64, § 4.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, § 9. See OLIVA BLANCHETTE, *The Perfection of the Universe According to Aquinas: A Teleological Cosmology* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992).

²⁵ SCG III, ch. 65, § 3. Jean-Pierre Torrell notes that “God’s government of his creation” includes “conservation of things in the good and their *motion* toward the good.” See Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 2, *Spiritual Master*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 235. He adds, “This is merely to speak in a general way, for if we consider the effects of the divine guidance of the world from a particular point of view, then we would have to consider multitudinous effects—since God guides each creature to its perfection according to its own particular path” (*ibid.*).

²⁶ SCG III, ch. 65, § 5; see also ch. 67, §§ 4-6.

²⁷ SCG III, ch. 67, § 4.

²⁸ SCG III, ch. 68, § 4.

²⁹ SCG III, ch. 69, § 1. For discussion and critique of occasionalism in Muslim thought and in late-medieval and early modern Christian thought, see ALFRED J. FREDDOSO, “Medieval Aristotelianism and the Case against Secondary Causation in Nature,” in *Divine and Human Action: Essays in the Metaphysics of Theism*, ed. Thomas V. Morris (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 74-118. For Aquinas in relation to Muslim thought, see DAVID B. BURRELL, C.S.C., *Freedom and Creation in Three Traditions* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993); Burrell, *Faith and Freedom: An Interfaith Perspective* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004). See also THOMAS S. HIBBS, *Dialectic and Narrative in Aquinas: An Interpretation of the Summa Contra Gentiles* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 117-19, as well as my “Providence and Predestination in Al-Ghazali,” *New Blackfriars* 92 (2011): 55-70.

lem of determinism: "If all things that are done here below, even contingent events, are subject to divine providence, then, seemingly, either providence cannot be certain or else all things happen by necessity."³⁰ In response, he notes that creatures possess a substantial form through which they act; thus fire, not God, gives heat. Humans possess the spiritual soul as our substantial form, and so our actions are free. How can the rational creature's action be free if God acts in the creature's act? Since God's act is not on the same metaphysical level as the creature's act, the two do not compete: "the same effect is not attributed to a natural cause and to divine power in such a way that it is partly done by God, and partly by the natural agent; rather, it is wholly done by both."³¹ Aquinas goes on to explain that God's agency does not take away contingency, because God works through created things "according to their own mode"—the mode that he bestows upon them in creating their substantial form.³²

It follows that created causes truly bring about the unfolding of history. What then of God's eternal will? On the one hand, in a certain sense God does "determine" history. Providence means that God from eternity orders all things to the end for which he creates. No defect occurs without God's non-active permission, and God's providence encompasses each individual thing. As Aquinas states, God "must be the agent of providence for being, because he is being. Indeed, he does provide for things, because he is their cause. So, whatever a thing is, and whatever its mode of existing, it falls under his providence."³³ Yet on the other hand, God does not determine history. Many things happen that God does not directly will, although nothing happens that God does not permit.³⁴ Every sin rebels against the good order for which God cre-

³⁰ SCG III, ch. 94, § 1. For difficulties that arise for Aquinas's perspective in light of contemporary science, see MICHAEL A. HOONHOUT, "Thomas Aquinas and the Need for a Contemporary Theological Cosmology," *Nova et Vetera* 3 (2005): 737-59. Suggesting that the doctrine of creation deserves a central role, Hoonhout critiques the reliance of scholars such as Ian Barbour and John Haught upon process theology: see 743-46, 750-52. See also W. NORRIS CLARKE: "Causality and Time," in his *The Creative Retrieval of Saint Thomas Aquinas: Essays in Thomistic Philosophy, New and Old* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 27-38; Clarke, "Is a Natural Theology Still Viable Today?," in his *Explorations in Metaphysics: Being, God, Person* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 150-82, especially 170-77.

³¹ SCG III, ch. 70, § 8; cf. ch. 89, where Aquinas discusses the influence of the stars.

³² SCG III, ch. 73, § 3; cf. ch. 92. On substantial form as a created participation in divine Act, see LAWRENCE DEWAN, O.P., *St. Thomas and Form as Something Divine in Things* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2007), indebted to Étienne Gilson, *From Aristotle to Darwin and Back Again: A Journey in Final Causality, Species, and Evolution*, trans. John Lyon (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984). See also Dewan's "St. Thomas and Creation: Does God Create 'Reality'?", *Science et Esprit* 51 (1999): 5-25.

³³ SCG III, ch. 75, § 13.

³⁴ Cf. *Summa theologiae* I, q. 19, aa. 6 and 9. See also BRIAN J. SHANLEY, O.P., "Divine Causation and Human Freedom in Aquinas," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 72 (1998): 99-122, at 117. For concerns regarding Domingo Bañez's understanding of God's permission of evil as rooted in God's withholding of good, see Jacob Schmutz, "Toute-puissance divine et loi permissive. Enquête

ated the universe; at this level, God's will (which is love, the communication of his goodness) is thwarted. If God directly willed everything that happens in history, history would not contain sin, because God cannot will evil and does not need evil to bring about good. The monstrous evils that arise in the course of history are not expressions of God's will. But God does not allow sin to have the last word, and so sin does not frustrate his providential ordering of all things.³⁵ Eternal providence ensures that the everyday history of individuals and of the human race has a purpose and a consummation.

When Aquinas argues that God is not the cause of moral defect in creatures, he gives various reasons for this position. These reasons include the analogy of a defective secondary cause (such as a twisted leg bone) not implicating the primary cause (a person's motive power) in the resulting limp; God's will that there be a diversity of degrees of goodness; God's allowing incompatible things to act according to their nature; the fact that every evil act aims at a good; the fact that good can arise out of evil; the good of the whole rather than of the part; and the fact that the presence of evil fosters desire for and love of the good. But his fundamental response hinges on the fact that evil is a privation, whereas God only causes being. Insofar as an evil action comes from a rational creature and is ordered to a good, it possesses "something of action and entity," for which it depends upon God.³⁶ But insofar as an evil action includes a privation of goodness, that privation flows not from God but from the defective creature.³⁷ Analogously, the motive power causes motion in the person who limps, even though the limp is not due to a defect in motive power.

Replying to the objection that the presence of evil suggests that God does not exist, Aquinas turns the objection on its head: "But it could be argued to the contrary: 'If evil exists, God exists.' For, there would be no evil if the order of good were taken away, since its privation is evil. But this order would not exist if there were no God."³⁸ In the historical order, the eternal Creator God is on the side of goodness and being. He is the cause, in and with created causes, of whatever in human action aims at goodness and being; and he aims at the final consummation of created participation in his goodness. Only the affirmation that God's gifting in history is an eternal gifting

sur un paradigme théologique-juridique oublié," in *Potentia Dei. L'onnipotenza divina nel pensiero dei secoli XVI e XVII*, ed. Guido Canziani, Miguel A. Granada, and Yves Charles Zarka (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2000), 215-36, at 229-30.

³⁵ See SCG III, ch. 90. See also MICHAEL A. HOONHOUT, "Grounding Providence in the Theology of the Creator: The Exemplarity of Thomas Aquinas," *Heythrop Journal* 43 (2002): 1-19, at 8, where Hoonhout emphasizes that "providence is not to be understood primarily in terms of God's power."

³⁶ SCG III, ch. 71, § 13.

³⁷ Cf. GREGORY M. REICHBERG, "Beyond Privation: Moral Evil in Aquinas's *De malo*," *Review of Metaphysics* 55 (2002): 751-84.

³⁸ SCG III, ch. 71, § 10.

inspires confidence that God can bring about, in and through the messiness of history, eternal union with God. Aquinas succinctly observes that “the participation of divine goodness by created things is accomplished by divine goodness.”³⁹ At the same time, history retains its full value as the drama of the mediation of God’s eternal gifting, a drama to which God is not extrinsic.

Historical Contingency, Divine Gifting, and Prayer

Even if God works through the contingent mode of contingent beings, can anything truly can be contingent if God from eternity knows the outcome? Was Jesus’ death on the Cross a contingent event—one that happened due to the historical convergence of actions on the part of free creatures—if God knows and wills the Cross from eternity? The problem consists in appreciating the transcendence of eternity vis-à-vis time. Considered in itself, the thing might or might not come to be, because contingent things do not come to be from necessity. But God eternally knows that this contingent thing contingently comes to be in time. As Aquinas states, “it is not possible for the order of providence to fail in regard to its coming into being contingently.”⁴⁰ Given God’s transcendence, his eternal knowledge and eternal will operate causally in things so as to create and sustain, not negate, the modes (including defectible modes) according to which things exist and possess their own causality.

But what use could prayer have if God is eternal? Aquinas notes that prayer does not aim at changing God’s eternal providence, since the historical action of prayer itself belongs within this eternal providence. What then does prayer seek? The goal of prayer, as Aquinas says, is “that a person may obtain from God the object which he desires.”⁴¹ Yet, why should we beg God for an object that God eternally either wills or does not will us to obtain? The answer is that God’s relationship with us is not eternal but historical. God works with us historically, in accord with the temporal character of our existence. Prayer exhibits the way in which God’s historical action relates to his eternity. Because God is eternal, he can fulfill the prayers that we offer in history. From eternity God wills to communicate his goodness to us, and he does so in history by fulfilling prayer and thereby fostering our growth in relationship to him. Prayer signals how God acts in history: not as another temporal bargaining partner, but as the one who, from eternity, gives gifts.

God gives his gifts “in accord with his goodness,” which means that he does not spurn good actions (flowing as they do from his gifts of creation and grace), but rather “fulfills the holy desires which are brought to completion by means of prayer.”⁴² These

³⁹ SCG III, ch. 75, § 14.

⁴⁰ SCG III, ch. 94, § 14.

⁴¹ SCG III, ch. 95, § 1.

⁴² SCG III, ch. 95, § 2.

holy desires have to do, at root, with our longing to participate more deeply in God's goodness. For rational creatures, who draw close to God by means of knowing and loving, prayer functions analogously to the natural inclinations of irrational creatures; having given rational creatures a rational inclination toward the divine goodness, it befits God to fulfill the prayerful expression of this rational inclination. God's eternal gifting thus takes a fitting historical shape in our lives. As Aquinas puts it, "it is the same thing to say that we should not pray in order to obtain something from God, because the order of his providence is immutable, as to say that we should not walk in order to get to a place, or eat to be nourished; all of which are clearly absurd."⁴³

The gifting God may still sound a little cold; his gifting may seem to be based simply on an orderly calculus. Aquinas averts this situation by placing the discussion in the context of friendship. God "wishes the good and the perfect for the beloved."⁴⁴ We are the beloved, and in history God draws us, through his eternal gifting, into an ever closer union of love with his eternal Trinitarian life. When in prayer we seek a union of will with God, we share more deeply in his eternal gifting. As Aquinas states, "His will is perfective in regard to things; indeed, he is the cause of things through his will....Therefore, it is appropriate to divine providence for him to fulfill the desires of a rational creature when they are presented to him through prayer."⁴⁵ Furthermore, not only is God the lover who bestows gifts upon his friends, but also he is a generous and merciful giver. If even humans grant favors to those who ask uprightly, God does so superabundantly.

It may be useful, before proceeding, to comment on Aquinas's practice of including biblical texts within his philosophical reasoning in the *Summa contra gentiles*. These biblical texts often appear in the final paragraph of a chapter so as to suggest how his philosophical reasoning illumines scriptural reasoning.⁴⁶ Regarding prayer, he cites Psalm 145:19, which in the Vulgate reads "Voluntatem timentium se faciet et deprecationem eorum exaudiet et salvos faciet eos" (RSV: "He fulfils the desire of all who fear him, he also hears their cry, and saves them").⁴⁷ The psalm reveals a God who acts in history to share his eternal goodness, and who has the power to hear and to act in a way that transcends historical limitations. In the same place Aquinas cites Matthew 7:8, where Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount says, "For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened." Recall Jesus' comparison here of God with a human father: "Or what man of you, if

⁴³ SCG III, ch. 96, § 8.

⁴⁴ SCG III, ch. 95, § 5.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ See BRIAN LEFTOW, "Jesus and Aquinas," in *Jesus and Philosophy: New Essays*, ed. Paul K. Moser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 124-46, at 129-30.

⁴⁷ SCG III, ch. 95, § 7.

his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone?...If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" (Mt 7:9, 11). Aquinas's discussion of prayer, which has to do with the gifting of our "Father who is in heaven," aims to penetrate into the reality that Jesus reveals.

If God's providential gifting is so great, however, why do prayers often appear to go unanswered? Is not one of the fears regarding the affirmation of God's eternity precisely the fact that God so often does not seem to act in history? Aware of the urgency of this question, Aquinas answers by quoting Scripture more than he does in any other chapter of Book III of the *Summa contra gentiles*. Among the reasons why God might not grant the good that one seeks by prayer, Aquinas suggests the possibility that the good is not a true one but only an apparent one; the possibility that the person's prayer faltered rather than remaining constant; the possibility that the person prays with arrogance rather than with faith and humility; the possibility that one is praying for another person who has turned away from God and who freely refuses to be reconciled; and the possibility that one is praying for something that the divine physician knows would not actually be for one's good. For each of these reasons why a person might not attain what he or she asks for in prayer, Aquinas cites supportive biblical texts.

When ancient philosophers denied or distorted God's providence (Aquinas mentions Epicureans, Peripatetics, and Stoics), the result was to undercut prayer and thereby to undercut human participation in God's providential gifting. As Aquinas notes, the prophet Malachi decries the same error that plagued these ancient philosophies: "You have said, 'It is vain to serve God. What is the good of our keeping his charge or of walking as in mourning before the Lord of hosts? Henceforth we deem the arrogant blessed; evildoers not only prosper but when they put God to the test they escape'" (Malachi 3:14-15).⁴⁸ From eternity, God providentially cares for us in history by means of our prayer, because it is in this way that we participate ever more deeply in his eternal goodness.

When humans conceive of God not as eternal but as a being among beings, humans attempt to change God's will in hopes of gaining certain temporal goods. Thus Aquinas comments that "the Egyptians said that fate was subject to change by prayers and by means of certain idols, incensings, or incantations."⁴⁹ If one supposes that God is merely a historical agent, or that only historical forces (such as fate) are in play, then prayers become not a manifestation of our desire for communion in the eternal God, but rather simply a manifestation of our desire for temporal goods. On the other hand, Aquinas is aware that some biblical texts appear to give credence to this view of God as a being among beings, who is subject to the same historicity

⁴⁸ SCG III, ch. 96, § 9 (Aquinas does not quote verse 15).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, § 10.

that we experience. Among these biblical texts, Aquinas mentions Isaiah 38:1-5, where the prophet Isaiah, speaking on behalf of the Lord, first tells King Hezekiah that he (Hezekiah) will die, and then tells him that he will live after all. The Lord suggests that he has changed his mind due to Hezekiah's sincere prayers and tears.⁵⁰ Aquinas also mentions Jeremiah 18:7-8, where God says through the prophet Jeremiah, "If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will repent of the evil that I intended to do to it."⁵¹ Does Israel's God improvise his historical actions in the same way that humans improvise?

Aquinas argues in response that God is the Creator of time, not bound by time or responsive to creatures *from within* the temporal continuum. He first sets forth other biblical texts that distinguish God from changeable creatures. Among these texts are Numbers 23:19, where the prophet Balaam tells Balak, "God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should repent. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?"; and Malachi 3:6, "For I the Lord do not change."⁵² Recognizing that these texts, in themselves, do not resolve the tension in the biblical portrait of God, he proposes that both sets of texts be read in light of a distinction "between universal and particular order."⁵³ As regards particular causes, the order of effects can be changed. Viewed strictly in terms of the temporal order of cause and effect, prayer can change the order of events. Drawing upon Gregory the Great, Aquinas states in this respect that "in so far as something in the order of inferior causes established by God is changed through prayer, God is said *to turn* or *to repent*; not in the sense that his eternal disposition is changed, but that some effect of his is changed."⁵⁴

While the particular order can be changed by prayer, the universal order cannot. What is the universal order? Empirically and historically we can know only the particular order; the universal order is God's eternal plan for guiding creation to its ultimate end. Aquinas explains that God is the cause of all created being, and so "the

⁵⁰ Brevard S. Childs notes that "the problem of contingent events....emerges in several places in the commentary on Isaiah, but especially in chapter 38. Did the prophet speak falsely when he said of King Hezekiah, 'You shall die, you shall not recover' (38:2), only later to rescind the judgment? In order to respond to this problem, Thomas develops his philosophical hypothesis of a twofold form of knowledge—absolute and contingent—which exists simultaneously in the divine mind, but not in prophetic revelation (cf. *Summa Theologiae* 2a.2ae.176.6). The philosophical strength of Thomas's argument in accord with his larger theological understanding of God is apparent. However, it would seem useful from the perspective of biblical theology to recognize that the problem was indeed occasionally recognized from within the Old Testament (2 Sam. 24:16; Jer. 26:19; Jon. 3:10)" (Childs, *The Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004], 161-62).

⁵¹ Aquinas quotes these texts in SCG III, ch. 96, § 11.

⁵² Aquinas quotes these texts in *ibid.*, § 13.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, § 14. See also SCG III, ch. 98, § 1.

⁵⁴ SCG III, ch. 96, § 15.

order stemming from the universal cause which is God must embrace all things."⁵⁵ He observes that the Stoics were right to hold that the universal order cannot be changed, but they were wrong to conclude from this that prayer is useless. After all, prayers are included in the universal order, since God transcends the historical continuum that he causes to be.

Historical Disorder, Divine Order, and Miracles

Yet, can this talk of a "universal order" be persuasive to those acquainted with the actual historical order? Malachi's prophecy provides a good example of the problem. When God (through the prophet Malachi) states that he does not change, he warns at the same time that otherwise he would have "consumed" the people of Israel for their faithlessness (Malachi 3:6). God tells the people of Israel, "From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them" (Mal 3:7). If even Israel has been so faithless despite God's gifts, no wonder the history of individuals and nations is strewn with such horrific violence and sin. Could it be, Aquinas asks, that providence involves solely God's sheer will (thereby avoiding the need to ascribe wisdom to the ordering of all things) or that the actual ordering of things has a necessity (thereby absolving God from blame)?

Aquinas responds to these possibilities in light of his affirmation that God created historical things so that they might share in God's eternal goodness. On this basis, he asks why God allows for any diversity at all, let alone sin. Would it not have been wiser for God to have made everything to share equally in his goodness to the highest degree possible? In reply, Aquinas suggests that no one kind of creature could suffice to represent God's goodness. The glory of the infinite God cannot be adequately expressed even by myriad created participations of his goodness. In his wise providence, therefore, God creates not one kind of creature, but an amazing diversity of creatures "so that what could not be perfectly represented by one thing might be, in a more perfect fashion, represented by a variety of things in different ways."⁵⁶ But perhaps God could have ensured that all these things would be equal in perfection despite the different way in which they reflected his infinite glory? Aquinas points out that the diversity of things hinges upon diversity in being; things image God more or less perfectly depending upon the degree to which they participate (in finite modes) in God's being. It follows that diversity truly requires different grades of perfection, and so the inequality of things counts as evidence for, rather than against, God's wise providence. Providence consists in a wise ordering of the tremen-

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, § 14. On the universality of God's providence—in opposition to various ancient philosophers and to Maimonides's view that God is provident only for humans—see Torrell, "Dieu conduit toutes choses vers leur fin," 569-74.

⁵⁶ SCG III, ch. 97, § 2.

dous diversity of all aspects of created being, including “the diversity of forms and matters and agents” as well as the “diversity of properties and accidents.”⁵⁷ Aquinas adds that providence is like practical reasoning, in that “the fact that God loves his goodness is necessary, but the fact that it is represented by means of creatures is not necessary.”⁵⁸ History expresses the sheer generosity of the eternal will of God, who loves all things that are into existence.

Could God, however, do other than he wills? Aquinas asks in this regard whether God could have sent the “twelve legions of angels” that Jesus speaks about in Matthew 26:53.⁵⁹ In terms of God’s freedom and power, God could have done sent the angels; strictly speaking, it was not necessary that things be as they are. What about miracles? If history is already subject to God’s providence, why would God “intervene” in history by causing something directly? Having shown that the diversity of causes and effects is a finite reflection of God’s glory, Aquinas seeks to show that God need not work through these created causes. While the order of created causality—despite the defects engendered therein—participates in God’s goodness, no finite order can fully reflect God’s goodness. Therefore God can work “apart from the order implanted in natural things” in order to achieve an effect, as happens in miracles.⁶⁰ Aquinas compares God to an artist whose artwork the universe is; in creating this artwork, the artist is not limited to only one means of artistry. The artist may choose to move his “instruments” directly.⁶¹

Only God’s power can work miracles in history, because only the eternal God transcends the order of finite causes and can therefore operate outside this order: as Psalm 136:4 says, God “alone does great wonders.”⁶² Likewise miracles, which God accomplishes either directly or through created agents,⁶³ have their historical meaning inasmuch as they lead humans to a deeper participation in God’s eternal goodness. By contrast, if magicians have any power, it must come from invoking a higher created intelligence who is able to cause an effect.⁶⁴ These higher intelligences, Aquinas shows, must be the fallen angels, inasmuch as magic does not have as its goal the true and the good. Fallen angels have refused to have their “will ruled by a higher one.”⁶⁵ They have thereby rejected eternal communion with the source of all goodness. The resulting deprivation and punishment is evident in human history as well.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, § 9.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, § 13.

⁵⁹ SCG III, ch. 98, § 4.

⁶⁰ SCG III, ch. 99, § 9.

⁶¹ See SCG III, ch. 100, §§ 3, 6.

⁶² SCG III, ch. 102, § 9, cf. § 8.

⁶³ See SCG III, ch. 103, § 7.

⁶⁴ See SCG III, ch. 105, § 7.

⁶⁵ SCG III, ch. 109, § 8.

Historical Participation in God's Law

Aquinas explores human participation in providence by observing the difference between rational animals and the rest of material creation. Human beings, because of their rationality, govern their own actions and can attain to "the very ultimate end of the whole of things," namely, "the knowing and loving of God."⁶⁶ God creates non-rational creatures so as to foster the development of rational creatures who can enter into communion with God; God gives rational creatures an immortal soul, while non-rational creatures do not endure. God's providence must take into account these differences. Aquinas observes that "intellectual creatures are governed by divine providence for their own sakes, while all others are for the intellectual ones."⁶⁷ Aquinas emphasizes that the claim that God governs humans "for their own sake" does not mean that we are the center of reality; on the contrary, we find our ultimate end not in ourselves, but in union with God. Even in union with God, we do not slough off the material creation. Rather our union with God involves the perfection of the whole universe.⁶⁸ As biblical evidence for his view, Aquinas cites a variety of texts, including Deuteronomy 4:19, which warns us against worshipping things that God created for the service of humans.

But if God's providence is simply his eternal ordering of temporal causes (whether necessary or contingent causes) toward the end for which he creates, why would the necessity or contingency of these temporal causes require that God order these causes differently? The answer is that God's providence is his eternal plan for the fulfillment of creation, and rational and non-rational creatures participate in this plan differently. God does not have two plans; rather the kinds of creatures he creates bring about two modes of his providential governance. As Aquinas says, "God takes care of each nature according to its capacity."⁶⁹

⁶⁶ SCG III, ch. 111, § 1. See the superb discussion in JOHN RZIHA, *Perfecting Human Actions: St. Thomas Aquinas on Human Participation in Eternal Law* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2009).

⁶⁷ SCG III, ch. 111, § 4. Cf. TORRELL, *Spiritual Master*, 312.

⁶⁸ See SCG III, ch. 112, § 10. As Aquinas understands this perfection, it does not need to include the full array of vegetable and animal life or the continuance of the motion of the universe. Francisco Benzoni notes that for Aquinas "human beings are to seek the good of other creatures in those instances where doing so enhances the human good, making this pursuit conditional and instrumental to the human good rather than a universal moral injunction" (BENZONI, "Thomas Aquinas and Environmental Ethics: A Reconsideration of Providence and Salvation," *Journal of Religion* 85 [2005]: 446-76, at 475). Benzoni opposes Aquinas's position on the grounds that every creature contributes to building up the divine goodness: "If all creatures contribute to the divine good, then all creatures share the same telos, which consists in making a real contribution to the richness of the divine experience" (476). For Benzoni, this "richness of the divine experience" is presently under siege from "our present experience in which human activity threatens the well-being of so many species and ecosystems" (ibid.). For a more appreciative and philosophically more erudite presentation of Aquinas's position, see BLANCHETTE, *The Perfection of the Universe According to Aquinas*, 296-319.

⁶⁹ SCG III, ch. 113, § 4. See TORRELL, "Dieu conduit toutes choses vers leur fin," 577-81.

But if rational creatures enjoy a special providence, why do we behave so badly? Perhaps given the terrible disorder that one finds in human history, God either providentially governs the whole human race (rather than descending to the messiness of individual lives) or else governs only individuals. Aquinas argues, on the contrary, that the entire human race, and each individual human being, participates in God's providence.⁷⁰ Certain ends properly pertain to human nature—self-preservation, life in community, and so forth—and humans know their proper ends and thereby participate rationally in God's providential plan for the ordering of humans to their ultimate end. This is what is meant by natural law, which God imprints in human nature and which humans understand via practical reasoning.

In his discussion in Book III of the *Summa contra gentiles*, however, Aquinas focuses on "divine law."⁷¹ He contrasts God with human leaders: "the leader of an army intends victory and the ruler of a state intends peace. But the end which God intends is God himself. Therefore, the divine law principally looks to the ordering of man toward God."⁷² In his active lawgiving, God from eternity aims to draw human beings to himself. He is able to do so because he himself is not in the temporal continuum, and therefore he can make us historically into the people of God.

But does anyone follow God's law in history? What kind of law is God's law? Aquinas has in view Moses' exhortation to the people of Israel, "And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the Lord, which I command you this day for your good?" (Deut 10:12-13).⁷³ To follow God's law means to serve God with one's entire rational being, "with all your heart and with all your soul." Aquinas states that "the intention of divine law is primarily ordered to an act of love."⁷⁴ All law aims to make humans good, and God's law aims to make us good by perfecting our will in "the love of the highest good, namely, God."⁷⁵ In the New Law of Christ, consisting in the grace of the Holy Spirit, God transforms us into self-giving lovers. This love makes us partakers of the eternal communion of the Trinity: history meets eternity. From eternity God acts in history to draw us into a participation in his own eternal life.

Is providence then most fully expressed in the individual's communion with God, despite the prevalence of human wickedness? Aquinas emphasizes that law,

⁷⁰ See SCG III, ch. 121, § 2.

⁷¹ For discussion see my *Biblical Natural Law: A Theocentric and Teleological Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), chapter four.

⁷² SCG III, ch. 115, § 2.

⁷³ Aquinas cites Deuteronomy 10:12 in *ibid.*, § 6.

⁷⁴ SCG III, ch. 116, § 1, cf. § 2.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, § 3.

including divine law, is given not to individuals but to peoples. God gives his law to Israel, and in Christ Jesus to the entire human race (even those who lived before Jesus). All human beings are potentially members of Christ's Body; no one lies outside the reach of the grace of the Holy Spirit. The communion that the law of love establishes is primarily with God but it is also with neighbor. For one thing, as Aquinas says, "whoever loves a person must, as a consequence, also love those loved by that person and those related to him."⁷⁶ In the same act of loving God, we must also love all human beings. Following Aristotle and Augustine, Aquinas points out that we are by nature social animals, in the sense that each individual person "needs to be helped by other men in order to attain his own end" and that we naturally help each other.⁷⁷ Thus it befits us to love one another in communion, so as to reach our end through mutual help. Aquinas adds that if we are actively opposed by others in a situation of strife, we cannot have the peace that is so necessary for attending to God. Not individualistic love of God, but love of God inseparable from love of neighbor, is taught by Jesus as law for the people of God: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."⁷⁸

Providence, then, is not a "timeless" or "individual" or even "futuristic" reality for Aquinas, even though providence has to do with God's eternity, individual salvation, and God's plan for the fulfillment of all things in the eschatological future. Rather, the eternal God historically accomplishes his providence for humans by giving an interior law in Christ and the Holy Spirit. Since a full accounting of our historicity requires a communion with God that is not solely interior but also bodily, the visible communion of charity depends upon Eucharistic upbuilding. Aquinas comments, "Since it is connatural for man to receive knowledge through his senses, and since it is very difficult to transcend sensible objects, divine provision has been made for man so that a reminder of divine things might be made for him, even in the order of sensible things."⁷⁹ This divine provision consists in the sacraments of the people of God.

In sacramental worship, humans as body-soul unities offer sacrifice and receive "blessings using sensible things...whereby man is washed, or anointed, or fed, or given drink, along with the expression of sensible words."⁸⁰ We need such bodily worship in order to be rightly related as historical creatures to the eternal God. Aquinas thus describes with approval the "prostrations, genuflections, vocal ejaculations, and hymns" that characterize worship of God and that serve to raise our mind and will

⁷⁶ SCG III, ch. 117, § 3.

⁷⁷ Ibid., § 4, cf. § 6.

⁷⁸ Aquinas quotes this biblical text, among others, in *ibid.*, § 7.

⁷⁹ SCG III, ch. 119, § 1.

⁸⁰ Ibid., § 3. See HIBBS, *Dialectic and Narrative in Aquinas*, 123; cf. my *Sacrifice and Community: Jewish Offering and Christian Eucharist* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

to God.⁸¹ He criticizes those who suppose either that such bodily worship is not needed or that such bodily worship changes the eternal God. It is we who, in history, are changed so as to be configured to the eternal gifting God, the God who is infinite wisdom and love. If God were not eternal, but instead were part of history, he would not be deserving of worship.⁸²

For Aquinas in the *Summa contra gentiles*, in short, providence is the eternal God's plan for bringing about historical worship that leads into the eternal Trinitarian life, the heavenly banquet.

III. Concluding Reflections

David Fergusson criticizes Thomas Aquinas (and John Calvin) for leaving the Holy Spirit out of the doctrine of providence. Fergusson states,

“In Aquinas and Calvin, it is surely significant that there is little discussion within the doctrine of providence of the sustained action of the Holy Spirit in bringing creation to perfection. The inward groaning of creation for redemption is closely linked to the work of the Spirit in Romans 8:22-25, yet this aspect of divine involvement is articulated neither in Aquinas's discussion of world government nor in Calvin's standard presentation of providence in the *Institutes*.”⁸³

Fergusson's purpose is not to excite (or incite) experts on Aquinas. Indeed, Fergusson earlier challenges Keith Ward's criticisms of Aquinas's doctrine of the providential God on the grounds that Ward ignores the *tertia pars* of the *Summa theologiae*, where Aquinas develops his Christology.⁸⁴ Fergusson recognizes that Aquinas's theology of providence achieves “a degree of mutuality,” especially with respect to Aquinas's insistence on charity as friendship with God.⁸⁵

Fergusson's point is to urge contemporary theologians to go beyond Aquinas and Calvin by focusing on “creation as a project or a site under construction rather than as a perfect expression of the divine scheme. By treating this pneumatologically, one can avoid a breach between the rule of God and the autonomy of the world.”⁸⁶ He suggests that emphasis on the Holy Spirit's free action in history helps avoid a

⁸¹ SCG III, ch. 119, § 4, cf. § 5.

⁸² See SCG III, q. 120, §§ 11-16.

⁸³ DAVID FERGUSSON, “Divine Providence and Action,” in *God's Life in Trinity*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Michael Welker (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006), 153-65, at 164.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 164.

deterministic account of providence, in which the course of history is entirely willed by God.⁸⁷ The Holy Spirit moves “the world to its *telos* (end)” not as the immutable and omniscient God whose will for history is never frustrated, but as the agent of God’s ongoing covenantal relationship to the world.⁸⁸

As we saw, Boersma’s concern is similar with regard to what he calls “[t]he timeless, individual, and futuristic reading of election that has dominated much of Western theologizing” and that arises, as Boersma notes, in part from the “Greek philosophical heritage.”⁸⁹ Can the eternal God of Aquinas’s doctrine of providence also be the God who, in Christ and the Holy Spirit, historically heals and elevates a rebellious world? Both Boersma and Fergusson affirm the eschatological victory of God, but given the course of human history and the stubborn rejection of some rational creatures to reciprocate God’s love, both of them suggest that God’s eternal knowledge and will, as the doctrine of God has traditionally been understood, pose a significant problem as regards the reality of God’s historical action for our salvation. For Boersma, as we have seen, the answer is not to deny God’s eternity, but rather to insist upon conceiving election strictly historically—what Fergusson likewise has in view when he calls for revising the doctrine of providence so as to emphasize the free action of the Holy Spirit.

In Book III of the *Summa contra gentiles*, Aquinas’s way of addressing the difficulties raised by Boersma (and Fergusson) begins with an account of rational agency, focusing on being and goodness. All things seek God’s goodness and God providentially governs all created being toward the end of his goodness. On the level of particular causes, humans can and do frustrate God’s will by sinful actions, but since God transcends the level of particular causes, God’s will is not overwhelmed by our rebellion. Second, Aquinas explores how God’s eternity to bring historical creatures to a deeper participation in his eternal life. If the God who acts in history were not the

⁸⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, 162. Fergusson fears that “all theories of double agency” (God’s and ours) “slide inexorably into determinism. If contingent causes include scope for human freedom, then the effects cannot be sufficiently determined by anything other than acts of freedom. Yet if these acts themselves, along with everything that happens, are foreordained (or timelessly ordained), then from God’s perspective the outcome of our choices was necessarily and sufficiently determined, in which case freedom is not what we intuitively take it to be. On this reading, secondary causes, including free acts, are merely the instruments by which the primary cause is executed” (163). The problem here is what for Fergusson “God’s perspective” is; Fergusson seems to implicate God in foreseeing a future “outcome,” thus inscribing God’s perspective within temporality. Fergusson grants that “[t]he classical model in Aquinas and Calvin requires its distinction from the rationalism of Leibniz by the presence of biblical themes that testify to divine struggle and victory” (*ibid.*).

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁸⁹ BOERSMA, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 76. Boersma’s more recent work fruitfully affirms the neo-Platonic Greek philosophical heritage as found in the Fathers and in the *nouvelle théologie*, while retaining some of the *nouvelle théologie*’s concerns about Aristotle: see HANS BOERSMA, *Nouvelle Theologie and Sacramental Ontology: A Return to Mystery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

eternal God, then he could not bring humans to the eschatological good that we seek. Our historical configuration to the eternal gifting God makes it possible for us to share in his eternal communion of wisdom and love.

But why should God bother with historical action, including his own, if from eternity God's wisdom and will encompasses history? The answer is that history has meaning for historical creatures; God creates us to be in history and he loves us as such. History's meaning for God is that historical creatures, by his free eternal gifting in history, come to share in his eternal Trinitarian life through the incarnation of the Son and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Does this meaning pay sufficient attention to the horrors of history? In history, the eternal God works against the horrors caused by and faced by his rebellious rational creatures. Without undermining the seriousness of history—indeed even permanent rebellion is permitted⁹⁰—God does not abandon history. Only the eternal God could bring history to the consummation of eternal life in Trinitarian communion. At the source and goal of all things is the mystery of the eternal gifting God. As Aquinas fittingly concludes Book III of the *Summa contra gentiles* with the doxology of Romans 11:35-36, “‘For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?’ ‘Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?’ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory for ever. Amen.”

⁹⁰ See SCG III, ch. 159, § 2, where Aquinas remarks that “since this ability to impede or not to impede the reception of divine grace is within the scope of free choice, not undeservedly is responsibility for the fault imputed to him who offers an impediment to the reception of grace. In fact, as far as he is concerned, God is ready to give grace to all; ‘indeed he wills all men to be saved, and to come to the knowledge of the truth,’ as is said in 1 Timothy (2:4). But those alone are deprived of grace who offer an obstacle within themselves to grace; just as, while the sun is shining on the world, the man who keeps his eyes closed is held responsible for his fault, if as a result some evil follows, even though he could not see unless he were provided in advance with light from the sun.” See HIBBS, *Dialectic and Narrative in Aquinas*, 129, 133.