

# ETHICS IN CONVERSATION

FEBRUARY 2021 | 25.1

## *Providence Haunts*

Matthew Wiley

**Vernon White. *Purpose and Providence: Taking Soundings in Western Thought, Literature, and Theology*. New York: T&T Clark, 2015. 170 pp.**

Vernon White's first book on the doctrine of providence, *The Fall of a Sparrow*, was published in 1985. Thirty years later, he has returned to the doctrine, now taking a different approach. Rather than treating it primarily as an issue in philosophical theology, he sets it in the wider history of ideas in order to consider how we can actually identify divine purpose and continue to conceive of its possibility, despite the strong challenges and pressures set against it. The differences in the two volumes, White admits, are felt in their "overall texture, tone, priorities" (p. ix). Why would he come back to the doctrine after such a long time and try, again, to give an account of it?

Because, after all, providence haunts: "It stalks our literature, our philosophy and our religion" (p. 1). We sense that there is some purpose in the events of our lives, that someone or something is making this story make sense, which is simultaneously the meaning of providence and its most troublesome part. White traces the history of the doctrine, showing how it has been lost and found again—it is a persistent, resilient, even stubborn doctrine. The work is largely a mapping exercise, a critical charting of the character and conceivability of providence.

Chapter one, then, tries to get a hold of 'meaning' and 'purpose', which for White are "correlative terms" (p. 11). He recounts the modern turn to history, now conceived as a sort of linear progress and no longer considered in relation to eternity.



Caspar David Friedrich: *The Monk by the Sea*

This is paired, of course, with the turn to the self as the primary source of purpose in history.

Charles Taylor's work is in view as White speaks of transcendence and immanence, realism and nominalism. This intellectual history is not merely a subtraction story, as Taylor warns against, but rather a telling of how 'meaning' and 'purpose' continue to appear against the cross pressures that arise in modernity. The work of Michael Gillespie also features prominently and aids White in his quest to describe modern social imaginaries. Through it all, transcendent meaning and objective purpose are shown to be remarkably persistent, always slipping away from the lurking grasp of reductionistic accounts of life in the modern world.

Chapter two tells the same story by engaging Western literature, showing how some sense of purpose haunts us, "with or without a definite theistic frame" (p. 39). White has two authors in view here: Thomas Hardy and Julian Barnes. They are "exemplars of honesty, especially about the sense of loss and absence . . . who describe unflinchingly the texture of experience without belief in God or divine purpose" (p. 5). The former describes this from within the process of losing faith; the latter never had a faith to lose. Hardy wrote mostly in the late nineteenth century, when "science and rationality had disenchanted the world and faith was receding", yet before rationality itself had undergone the disenchantment it has today (p. 40). Barnes is more contemporary and describes the more radical and

internalized disenchantment that we experience today.

Hardy's basic and tragic pessimism is a result of his belief that an objectively meaningless world renders our actions, even our very lives, devoid of meaning. White points out, however, that Hardy's characters continue to matter, to have individual value and particular being. Readers of his novels rage against the suffering that Jude and Sue endure, and they find themselves hopeful because of the forceful appetite for joy which Tess and Clare maintain. This is because, against all odds, in the modern crucible of reductionism, the texture of Hardy's narratives still brims with life, rich and honest and unexpected life. The potent images of his poetry make clear that "what abides most in the mind is the value of what is lost, not the losing of it" (p. 48). This is the haunting of modern providence, a sense of absence that is itself overwhelmingly present. Disenchantment is full of cracks for other meaning to enter. Hardy's irony, unavoidable to his readers, conveys a sincere openness to reality, an unwillingness to finally shut the door on meaning.

If Hardy's writing makes us aware of something lost, Barnes's shows what it is like when that sense of meaning and purpose was never really known in the first place. There is less epistemological confidence available as he writes; he displays a "much

more radical unknowing" (p. 56). Much of his writing has no chronological sequence or obvious causal connections. Thus, he demonstrates in form and in content that order is imposed only by our perception. This projection "is an almost inevitable consequence of our uncertainty" (p. 58). Yet even here, White finds cracks for meaning to enter. He points out examples of Barnes creating characters with a displaced longing for transcendence, living in paradoxical certainty of their epistemological fragility. Love and truth are set beside one another in Barnes's thought, the prime connection that preserves the possibility of each. What arises in Barnes, as in Hardy, is a "narrative of mattering, of loving and being loved, however falteringly or fleetingly" (p. 68). This narrative generates purpose



Lorraine Rich: *Jacob's Ladder*



and meaning that, like a shadow, press their case on us and give us a sense of their presence.

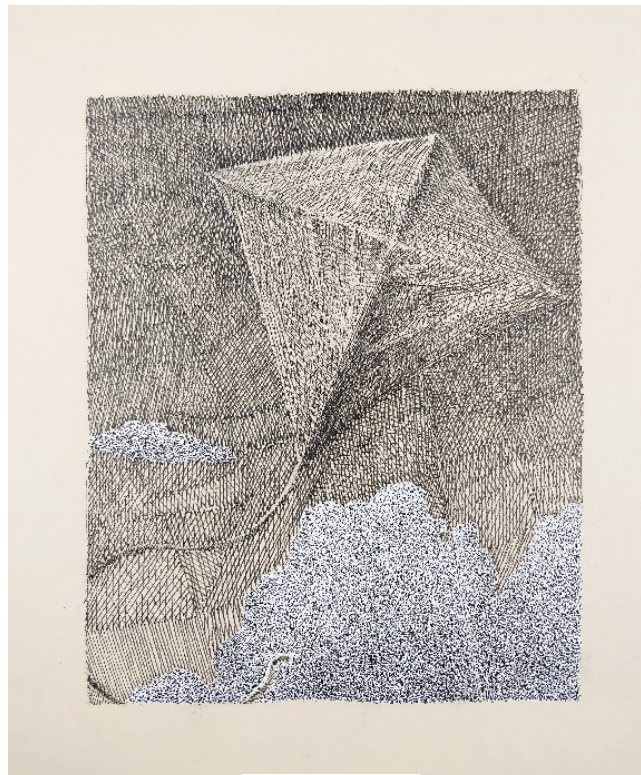
After this literary excursion, the third chapter establishes the theological roots and developments of the doctrine of providence. White first examines its foundations in Scripture, insisting that its narrative form “witnesses immediately to the idea of a personal and purposive God” (p. 72). The patterns of providence are shown in particular sub-narratives but also in the metanarrative of Scripture. And while counter narratives of Job and the lamenting Psalmists are not denied, “God’s good purpose still ultimately accommodates them all, in some way” (p. 74). White identifies Romans 9–11 as the *locus classicus* of Scripture’s own reflection on the pattern of providence and registers how pervasive it is, at least

in general terms. He then turns to traditional accounts of the doctrine in Western theology, incorporating the works of Justin, Augustine, Thomas, and Calvin. This section provides a masterful summary of Christian thought, clearly and concisely working through the contributions and nuances of these influential doctors of the sacred page. White then traces the modern shapes of providence, noting the travails of theological

liberalism. Barth is portrayed sympathetically, set forth as one who established a “fertile and new” trajectory (p. 102). The postliberals continue this trajectory forward to affirm that particular events can all bear meaning, “if only figurally” (p. 107).

Chapter four turns to new imaginings of providence. One pressure pressed against these re-imaginings has to do with conceptual credibility;

another is from the events of history themselves. In other words, the difficulties facing contemporary accounts of providence are grammatical and epistemological on the one hand, fleshly and moral on the other. What is meant by something like causality? What can we say about divine (in)action after the Holocaust? White groups contemporary accounts of providence



Walter Hayn: *Life*

into a spectrum of three theological approaches. The first is dogmatic, which hardly engages empirical, creaturely causality. The second is analytic, which is precise but often reductionist. The third is the kind of natural theology that often arises in the science and religion dialogue, which looks for an acceptable causal joint but risks slipping into absurdity.

Kevin Vanhoozer is then set forth as someone who tries to combine these approaches in his communicative model of divine action. Models such as his creatively account for divine agency and causality and there are “significant conceptual and imaginative resources to support it” (p. 118). The problem of identification persists, however, and for that White turns to the figural approaches of Barth and Frei. They echo Auerbach even as they add their Christological spin, resisting the false dichotomy between purely immanent, historical accounts of meaning and transcendent but wholly a-historical ones. Because all events have ambiguity, there is often a sharp cynicism about providential interpretation. Figural understandings of the events of history are valuable, then, in that they can remain committed to universal providence even while its specific judgments are only relative.

There is still the challenge of imagining transcendence, which is not always taken up specifically by theologians—this is frustratingly the case with Barth. Classical theism denotes a very radical otherness in the being of God. Scotus’s univocity, however, opened a door to speak of God more directly, such that in modernity transcendence has been used mostly in contrast to the notion of immanence. Thus, it has come to be that God’s transcendence is now conceived of “in the same overall order of being because it draws meaning in relation to that order, if only a relation of contrast and difference” (p. 130). Figures like Moltmann are discussed alongside critics like Paul Fletcher and Miroslav Volf as White tries to find a

way of imagining events to have meaning beyond what we impose on them ourselves.

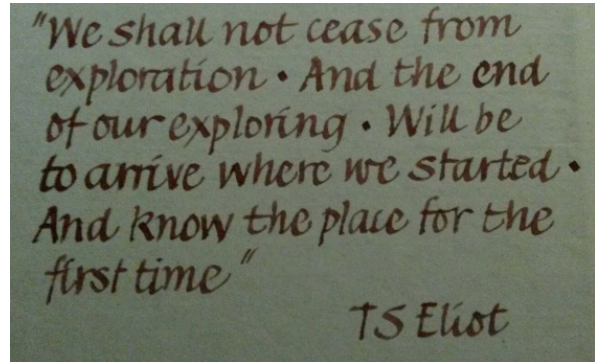
But these new imaginings of meaning, purpose, and providence must be tested. The final chapter sets criteria to measure articulations of the doctrine. White insists that there must be credibility in Scripture, experience, and practice. Does the emerging shape of providence hold up against these three judges? This chapter is mature and measured, as White proves himself capable of knowing when he’s reached a limit. He acknowledges the mystery of Scripture, the extremes of experience, and the difficulty of prayer. Nonetheless, a Christ-shaped, figural account of providence comes out on the other end, chastened yet discernable.

The strengths of the book are many. It is written in compelling and lucid prose; White’s style is worthy of his subject. It is at once an ambitious project and a reasonable one. Though it might seem counterintuitive for a theologian to engage literature as part of his dogmatic proposal, White shows his pastoral instincts are correct in thinking that narrative helpfully elucidates some of the issues at hand. For all its range and complexity, it is not an overly long book. In this, it seems very much like a book written by someone who has been thinking about a doctrine for thirty years and beyond. He knows what he set out to do, and he accomplishes it through subtle and intuitive observations. In this sense, it is an excellent model of contextual theology. It does not overstate its case, nor does it shy away from pressing into difficult territory.

At first, I thought the even-handedness of the book was almost a weakness. After all, I found myself frustrated at times as White would wonderfully describe possible ways forward only to quickly note the challenges set against each. I wanted him to be more forceful, decisive, dogmatic. Upon reflection, my mind changed. His gentleness is exactly the point, a virtue and not a vice, weakness turned into strength.

Providence haunts. It lingers in our literature and poetry. When we look back, it stalks our very lives. However, the pressures at work in our imaginations, social and personal, will continue to make it difficult to identify the hand of God. Easy articulations of meaning and purpose will keep slipping away, lost in this secular and scientific age. But providence persists in stubborn and perplexing

ways. White's chastened account of the doctrine allows us to avoid the twin evils of over-interpretation and reductionism. Providence "reconfigured from loss is surely stronger" (p. 165). Such providence will never let us go, precisely because it can be lost and found again and yet again.



Calligraphy by Glyn Hewson

**Matthew Wiley**  
**Trinity Evangelical Divinity School**