

"If it isn't local it isn't real," I remember hearing WCC's Visser t'Hooft saying. On the street, on the phone, in meetings of all kinds, & in the local media (especially the newspapers, still), the **soul-&-society-shaping** conversations occur day by day. On Cape Cod, a tragic local accident has crowded out the wider news these past few days. The president of the Barnstable High senior class, a paragon, died in a 6 a.m. crash after the junior prom, to which the 17-year-old driver had invited him. Up all night, the girl fell asleep at the wheel. A stream of visitors said to her "It's not your fault; it could have happened to anybody." When an eminent journalist chimed in on the same note, it was--as you can see by my C.C.TIMES letter--just too much for me. It was like saying that the Holocaust was just one of those terrible things you can't explain. Only it was worse than that: Gauvin could & did explain it: "fate" was the "culprit." Gauvin's godless column, prominent on OpEd, undoubtedly satisfied many if not most of his readers--hungry for a secular reading, suspicious of religious readings.

1 If "the public square" does not hear godly interpretations of local & wider horrors, what happens to the biblical-pastoral claim that God is not only relevant, but central, "when [as the hymn says] we are in deep distress"? God becomes an optional, then an alternative, finally an embarrassing source of insight & wisdom & guidance. We may go to church, but we leave God inside when we leave. The price? If God is not struggled with & for outside the church, the meaning will leak out of him inside the church.

2 Things happen by (take your pick) chance or fate or Providence. Especially since Darwin, **chance**, the random concatenation of atoms-molecules-cells-environment, has been the minimal, least painful hypothesis for explaining good/bad "luck." Add the notion of predetermination, & chance yields to **fate**. Put the two together & you get Gauvin's "random selection" (an oxymoron, as is its parent, viz Darwin's "natural selection"). The mood this throws you into is not resolution but resignation, because whatever's going to happen will happen (*que sera, sera*). Most of the extant ancient Greek dramas are "tragedies" in that the doom denouement is unavoidable: not so much tough luck as destructive destiny, a goddess (Diké, "Justice") having been offended & another goddess (Moirá, "Fate") administering the punishment.

The Bible offers the third way, viz **Providence**. In explaining untowardnesses, begin your sentence with "God...." even when you don't know how you're going to manage to get to the period. This explicative paradigm would be smooth going if God hadn't granted the angels & human beings freedom. There would have been no righteousness (from accepting the responsibility implicit in freedom), only rightness in a clockwork-smooth cosmos without chaos. Job & Ecclesiastes counter the simple deuteronomistic faith that observably, the righteous are rewarded & the guilty punished. But the prophets used that faith in refined forms, teaching the people to say, when eg they were dragged to Babylon, "We must have been doing something wrong." That assumption makes for a profounder

Belief in fate cuts moral responsibility

In ancient Rome, Jews and Christians were persecuted for believing in God. Their pagan neighbors, and the government, believed in fate.

If he'd lived then and there, Paul Gauvin would not have been persecuted. His May 22 column, "The pain and blessing of fate," is a confession of belief in fate. Horrors happen, and he concludes that "fate is the real culprit."

First, that belief makes nonsense of the heart of the Jewish and Christian religions, which refuse to deny that God is the Lord of nature and history, the Sovereign over all that happens. Oddly and backhandedly, Gauvin expresses this faith in asking, "Why did sleepless providence (lower-case 'p') choose to take from us" Sean Breen? But tragedies are "preordained" by fate, says Gauvin.

Second, belief in fate cuts the nerve of moral responsibility. Monica Mullaly, so the press reported, was under a midnight parental curfew. Six hours in violation, she's to blame for Sean's death. But Gauvin blames fate.

The Bible teaches us the courage and wisdom to search for meaning in life's downs as well as ups and to believe that the center of the search is Providence (upper-case "P," as in Roger Williams' naming of the capital of Rhode Island), God as Lover-Creator-Redeemer. Gauvin bespeaks the diametrical of that faith when he agonizes "the inequity of fate's enigmatic process of random selection."

We should not be surprised at America's rising faith in fate. The public schools do not teach faith in God, so what else is there?

& more productive reading of history than do views that see only negativity in guilt & shame, those inner-life pains signaling that we've used our freedom irresponsibly. By contrast, as this Thinksheet's subtitle states, "in the court of fate, none are guilty." As for the title, the biblical "metaphysical underpinnings for moral responsibility" are the nature & will of the biblical God. This will is torah-taught (revelation) & conscience-reinforced (Kant's "the moral law within").

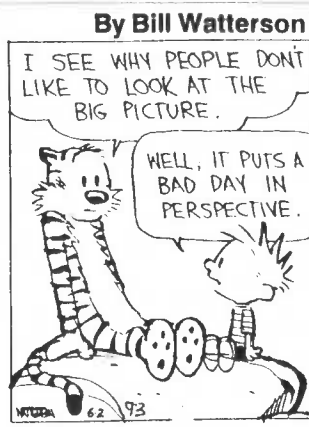
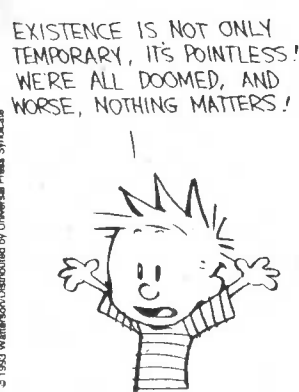
3 "What do we understand by the providence of God?" asks the Heidelberg Catechism. Answer: "...the almighty and ever-present power of God whereby he still upholds...heaven and earth...and rules in such a way that leaves and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and unfruitful years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, and everything else, come to us not by chance but by his fatherly hand." The answer assumes a society whose sanctions derive from torah-&-conscience & whose institutions, family & wider, act on the sanctions to reward & to punish. (To this year's Harv. Law School graduates, Attorney General Janet Reno said that rewards/punishments should be so clear & instant that every child understands them by age three. I agree, but it's a tough sell in a society that believes more in fate than in providence & disbelieves in pedagogical punishment. But hope: A recent RNR release says American "teens overwhelmingly believe that God loves them, watches them and will reward and punish their actions.")

Providential rewards/punishments do occur in this world, but not so neatly as to be under the control of our calculation of the future or interpretation of the past. Emphasis on "control": we are free, but not free to manipulate God, who works his purposes out beyond as well as within our powers of knowing & predicting. As for the afterlife as the ultimate sphere for the resolution of justice & therefore for our present calculation of consequences, it has some force in Judaism, more in Christianity, & most in Islam (the Quran being heavily laden with vivid pictures of afterlife luxuries for the rewarded & horrors for the punished).

4 Christian ethics combines chance, fate, & Providence thus: God provides us with all we need to "do everything for the glory of God" (1Cor.10.31 NRSV) with everything we're given (fate) & everything that comes at us (chance). In that sentence, "fate" & "chance" are transformed, domesticated, baptized (as ancient rival deities were demoted to angels under YHWH). We have many maxims for this. Eg: (1) Do the best you can with the hand you're dealt. (2) You're not responsible for what comes at you, but you are responsible for naming it. (3) God will ask not what happened to you but how did you take it.

I must stress the captivity of fate & chance to providence, if "fate" & "chance" are to be used at all by Christians. The Bible realistically deals with the fact of the variety of "fortunes" in human life & the inevitability of death, but it does not come out where Calvin does:

CALVIN AND HOBBS



No Greek *moira* or Muslim *kismet*, no fatalism, but God rules the world personally & directly, determining all destinies (Is.45.1-8, Amos 3.6, Mt.10.29-30, L.12.24-28), yet making space for our freedom-responsibility-accountability & granting us grace (He.4.14-16)....N. Gottwald ended his SBL presidential address thus: "What begins as fate becomes ultimately a gift" (JBL Spr/93, p.22).