New Blackfriars

DOI:10.1111/nbfr.12217

Does God have a plan?

Andrew Hayes

> *'The phrase, 'the will of God', is used so loosely, and the consequence of that looseness to our peace of mind is so serious that I want to spend some time thinking through with you the whole subject. There is nothing about which we ought to think more clearly, and yet, I sometimes think, there is nothing about which men and women are more confused.'*[1]

These words spoken by Leslie Weatherhead at the end of the Second World War are no less pertinent today. What do we mean by 'the will of God'? The least we can say is: 'God must have a hand in the world, directing its course according to a plan of God's own devising – that is the least one can say – if what Christians believe about Christ is true: Here, against all the forces of sin and death in the world, God fulfils and completes the covenant that God set up with Israel for all nations.'[2] As Christians we are bound to confess that God has a will. But what shape does this take?

For the early Fathers the conviction of the present reality of providence and God's overarching efficacious plan for salvation from sin are taken for granted as *realities of history* and therefore the nexus of Biblical interpretation.[3] They had to work hard to establish and defend the view that the Father cared for this world and was merciful towards it. In contrast to this the idea of providence in the modern period the often carries associations of determinism or an abstract God rather than a personal, caring and merciful God. Frequently God's guidance has been understood along the lines of instructions in relation to a divine plan, making the right choices, staying between the lines, emphasizing submission or be obedience as the ways to walk God's path rather than be transformation or reshaping. God's plan, a long, grand and complicated plan, better than any literature or drama we know. And being God's plan this is inscrutable and only known

[1] Leslie Weatherhead, *The Will of God* (London: Epworth Press, 1945), 7.

[2] Kathryn Tanner, 'Is God in Charge' in *Essentials of Christian Theology* ed. William C. Placher (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 117.

[3] Brian E. Daley SJ, 'Is Patristic Exegesis Still Usable', in *The Art of Reading Scripture* ed. Ellen F. Davis & Richard B. Hays (Michigan: Eerdmans, 2003), 60-88, 74.

© 2016 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12217 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to him; God has decided and that is that.[4] It is hard to avoid an air of arbitrariness when conceived in this manner. It appears that we are thrust into this with little or no say.[5] This might considered an instructivist conception of providence. It is not immediately obvious where its roots lie.[6] Ostensibly the evangelical emphasis on the sovereignty of God appears at the forefront but there is a considerable risk that this sovereignty been seen as a contrastive monocausation rather than a truly transcendent image of God who is within but not of creation. This is not the kind of providence, the kind of care and mercy the tradition wishes to speak of. A truly transcendent God works within rather above creation. At a less popular level providence, where it is not subsumed under the doctrine of creation, can very quickly turn to concerns over foreknowledge and the problem of evil. Consequently here too providence categorised as a doctrine requiring its own sphere tends towards be expressed in the form of a divine planning department. Neither of these alternatives is desirable or acceptable. In the former case it becomes a reified sphere parallel to other doctrines rather than as an essential feature of them all, Christology, pneumatology, reconciliation, eschatology and so on. In the later case the temptation to conceive God as arbitrary and distant is hard to avoid.

This article cannot attempt to repair these two problematic tendencies in the conception of providence. It can only modestly aim to recall from the tradition – Catholic and reformed – resources that might make thinking of human agency and divine agency in a less competitive manner in order to demonstrate God's will can never be about a single plan for each individual to discover and enact. That is not to say that God has no plans, no will. Rather it is to begin to suggest that a category error has been invited in and that human and divine freedom properly understood together allows each human individual the freedom to act without searching for divine minutiae instructions or being overruled by the divine will as a corrective. In order to do this God's non-creaturely *nature* must be insisted upon. Following this the category of divine *concursus* and the function of the *De Dicto/De Re* distinction will be helpful in highlighting God's agency. This agency does not control our and rather allows us to be ourselves, thinking, deciding beings, with God rather than over and

[4] Rowan Williams, *Ray of Darkness* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1995), 147-148.

[5] Ibid.

[6] I am hesitant to attach it too readily to Calvin and am minded to think it develops out of particular readings of the monarchical analogies for God in the Bible. The sovereignty of God is a respectable emphasis in the Reformed tradition but it is important that sovereignty when discussed in relation to God, as with all things, is not univocal with national or monarchical sovereignty. God does not need policies and coercion, God's total otherness and freedom secure that God's sovereignty is of another kind, a non-competitive kind. Cf. Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford, Blackwell, 2000), 69.

© 2016 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12217 Published online by Cambridge University Press

against God.[7] It is hoped that consequently this might make it clear, as Jacques Pohier said, 'that God, because he is God, does not want to be and cannot be everything'[8] and that human agency is a gift rather than something to be overcome, therein God's plan for our lives is also our own living rather a set pathway.

God not a thing

The first step in this argument has to be to reiterate the classical view of God not being a thing. God's genuine and utter transcendence is a non-negotiable starting point. Any other starting point will necessitate a form of choice between human and divine agency. Only true otherness can sustain the reality and freedom of both in non-competitive terms.[9] The foundation of this position is that God is not just more powerfully and infinitely wise but that God is nothing like us. Even still God is not dissimilar in the sense of being another kind of spices; God has no species; God is no being. This is important because it allows us to appreciate that God's involvement is not like the involvement of things in the world. God does not interact with creatures in the way we do. We manipulate objects, we cause actions which have effects and further causes. God cannot share the world with us in the sense that he cannot be in it in the same way; God is not an inhabitant of the universe.[10]

This all sounds rather like God a distant force and an impersonal agent. This is an error. God is not a force like wind and waves, as McCabe says there is nothing in the thrashing around of wind and waves that could count as success.[11] They have no aims. God is not a natural cause chiefly because natural causes have no deliberate action, they are wholly determined by their circumstances and they can only produce things like themselves. They cannot create something truly other, their actions reflect what they are rather than what they know,

[7] It is not for this article to discuss but there is much of importance to be said about the ways humans are much more than thinking and deciding beings – more than intellects – and that God the image of God in humanity is not reducible to planning and choosing. Disability theology has much to say here about what the human person is and how he/she can relate to God in ways that are not confined to the intellectual sphere.

[8] Jacques Pohier, *God in Fragments*, (London: SMC Press, 1985), 266.

[9] The account I will offer of this is indebted to Herbert McCabe OP who so deeply understood the wisdom of and eloquently expressed God's not being a creature. McCabe wrote very little in which this topic does not emerge but his *God Matters* really takes the issue head on so I will rely on this text. Rupert Shortt's recent apologetical piece *God is no Thing* is also instructive in this regard.

[10] Herbert McCabe, *God Matters*, (London: Bloomsbury, 1999 14.

[11] McCabe, *God Matters*, 8.

© 2016 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12217 Published online by Cambridge University Press

that is they can only produce univocally.[12] The consequence of God's total otherness is not that he is remote but more present. By virtue of not being another kind of creaturely agent, in the same universal space of exchange God is free to be more intimately involved with his creatures than creatures could ever be to each other.[13]

Divine Concursus

The form of this indwelling is that God is so intimately involved with his creatures as to enact their activities simultaneously with them. That is to say that there is nothing in which God is not involved.[14] This is the classical conception of divine *concursus* or double-action. This received its fullest expression in Thomas but is also evident in the Reformed tradition. Calvin, frequently maligned and misunderstood for his views on providence, in an oft neglected work found just a position essential in order to avoid the insouciant mono-causation of those he calls the Libertines: 'But they [the Libertines] mean that everything in the world must be seen *directly* as His doing. In making this claim *they attribute nothing to the will of man*, no more than if he were a stone. And they cast aside every distinction between good and evil, since nothing can be badly made in their view, seeing that God is its author... If you concede this point, then we must either attribute sin to God or dissolve the world of sin, *inasmuch as God does everything*.'[15]

The people whom Calvin calls the Libertines are those who believe that for an action to be free it must be limited only to me as an agent, a simple either/or – mine or their action.[16] Clearly Calvin believes, just as much as Thomas, that for God to cause something does not mean creatures do not cause it as well. It is quite important here, in light of earlier comments, to note that this does not mean that God and creatures have two distinct contributions to make to acts in the world.[17] This is to mistake of God to be a thing again; another agent in this world. Rather 'Every action in the world is an action of God; not because it is not an action of a creature but because it is by God's

[12] Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), 73.

[13] Herbert McCabe puts across the sense of this beautifully against those who think that God's impassibility is an impediment to his compassion. *God Matters*, 44.

[14] Charles M. Wood, *The Question of Providence* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 84.

[15] Calvin, *Against the Libertines,* 13.

[16] Denys Turner, *Thomas Aquinas: A Portrait* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 157.

[17] *Summa Contra Gentiles* 3.70.8, *Summa Theologica* I.23.8.

© 2016 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12217 Published online by Cambridge University Press

action that the creature is *itself* and has its *own* activity.'[18] Divine *concursus* does not imply a predetermined path for us because of the kind of 'non-thing' God is. The lack of competitive relation between God and us means that God's will is a thing to be imagined above and imposed upon us but something within our life and actions. God is not trying to control, this is entirely unnecessary and ungodly, but rather to work with and within us.

Barth too made particular use of the category of divine *concursus*. He characterized it as divine accompanying, as a partnership between the creator and the creature. Like Calvin Barth was critical of any account of providence that suggested, explicitly or implicitly, that God's action overrules that of the creature. Barth is especially critical of the synergism he seems as a temptation in all theology, Evangelical and Catholic, though the Lutheran tradition is particularly singled out.[19] This synergism is the temptation to see the creature and creator as having two distinct contributions to the world: that an act of a creature could be their act alone. This undermines the sovereignty of God rather than giving it proper place because it collapses the qualitative distinction between creature and creator which is central to all providential understanding. For Barth the relationship of human and divine agency is not either/or.[20] God is sovereign and it is not possible to ascribe too much to God but it does not make sense to 'fear that little and ultimately nothing will be left for the nature and activity and freedom and responsibility of the creature.'[21] This is a mistake because God and humanity do not occupy the same space and God's sovereign omnipotence is not a force, external and competitive.[22] Both act according to different modes. Our action in the world is genuinely our action, our responsibility. That does not stop it being God's action also. This is only a contradiction if these two things act in exactly the same way – if they answer the same question. The qualitative distinction determines that they do not.[23] This is made clearer by employing a modal logic which demonstrates that two things can appear the same and yet be acting differently, or

[18] McCabe, *God Matters*, 7.

[19] CD III/3, 145-147.

[20] Denys Turner in his account of Thomas recalls a conversation with a friend who characterised Protestant theology in general as an 'either/or' relationship in contrast to Catholic 'both/and'. Turner does not rely on this but Barth suggests otherwise and Barth, though critical, is of rather than anomalous in his Reformed tradition. There are least suggests – on the libertines being one – that Calvin should not be considered an 'either/or' thinking primarily either. Christopher C. Green, *Doxological Theology*: *Karl Barth on Divine Providence, Evil and Angels* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 83. Turner, *Aquinas*, 153-54.

[21] Ibid, 149.

[22] Green, *Doxological Theology*, 85.

[23] CD III/3, 270.

© 2016 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12217 Published online by Cambridge University Press

can be present together but not as two parts of a whole. This modal difference will take up the rest of the essay.

So divine c*oncursus* allows us to be self-willed, allows us freedom, and makes sense of God not giving us a plan but still being with us and urging us to flourishing. Consequently Christians ought not expect to wait to be told what to do or expect specific and detailed instructions in the form of a biblical manual. The type of discernment spoken of in theologically shaped popular Christian spirituality literature looks for pattern, orientation, habit, rather than instruction. They tend to recognise the giftedness of human agency which is not to be overridden by God.[24] We ought not think of God as a powerful and distant planner, who might, if we do the right things, tell us what is lined up for us or what we are expected to do. *Concursus* helps us to see that God works in and through this world without competition, that the integrity of this world, for human agency to live freely, is part of not opposed to God's will.

De Dicto/De Re

That God acts in and with humanity in divine *concursus* is far too general to go unqualified however. One of the traditional ways of unpacking this relationship has been an appeal to the grammatical category of modality, specifically the distinction between *De Dicto* and *De Re*. Thomas made this appeal and we will now consider how this may be helpful in understanding the many ways in which God can have a will without controlling all the options for humanity.

The distinction between *De Dicto* and *De Re* is a notoriously tricky, and somewhat controversial, one. Furthermore there are numerous versions of it. In all versions the distinction revolves around the difference between modes of speaking (and meaning); what it is to speak propositionally, *De Dicto*, of the world, and what it is to speak of actual, specific things in the world, *De Re*.

A quick example; if Susan says she wishes to learn guitar from the fastest guitarist in Scotland then we face an ambiguity. Does she mean who ever happens to be the fastest guitarist or does she mean Alan, whom she believes to be the fastest? The first sense is propositional or descriptive, *De Dicto*, the latter is referring to a specific person or thing in the world, *De Re*. If Alan were no longer to be the fastest and Susan still wanted lessons from him then we could be sure she meant her wish *De Re*; it was Alan she was concerned with. If not then she meant it *De Dicto*, concerning whomever the proposition fits.

[24] I am thinking here of Dallas Wilard and Gary Friesen. David Runcorn also sits quite well in this company.

© 2016 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12217 Published online by Cambridge University Press

What does this have to do with the will of God? The power of the distinction is that it allows us to see how God could will in a propositional sense without making God responsible for any and every specific *De Re* expression of this will. So, if God wills is that you love your neighbour that is a propositional, *De Dicto*, will. This is God's will but you are responsible for the varied ways in which it might be expressed in the world, *De Re*. There could be ambiguity here; as the expert in the Law in Luke 10 asked Jesus, "Who is my Neighbour?". The command could mean 'love Sheona'. She lives next door. She is your neighbour. This would be *De Re*. If Shona moves away you would stay in touch, do all you can for her. But as for your new next door neighbour then they are on their own. This gets you off the hook somewhat in terms of community engagement. Now if it was meant propositionally, *De Dicto*, then the application could be quite wide and varied and it is down to you to interpret what will constitute loving your neighbour. That is, love your neighbour as God's command is descriptive and propositional, it doesn't necessarily pertain to any particular individual in the world – it could attach to anyone anywhere. We, the readers of Scripture, read the descriptive command and in order to live it, to give it expression we must find a *De Re* interpretation for it, we must read through the description to objects in the world. We do not substitute one for the other – the command does not become limited and specific but we give it particular expression. These two modes of expression allow for a distinction between the content of God's will and its expression in the world, for divine and human agency in a non-competitive relation.[25]

So we can begin to see how God can care for us, have a will for humanity, and yet not be a divine planner determining for us how that will find expression. The *De Dicto/De Re* distinction allows that we in our creaturely environment determine our actions but not over and against God – rather in a different mode. Another way, similar but different, of expressing our freedom within this will is a parental will for their children. A parent may wish their children to play but have not determinative plan for what might formally constitute this playing. Whether the children are in the back garden, on the swings, happily eating together in the kitchen could all count as play and are all determined by the children.[26] Insofar as each action can be characterised by the adjective playful the children have not made a wrong choice, have not misinterpreted the parents plan. This is different from the *De Dicto/De Re* distinction in not turning on any referential

[25] Tanner, *Creation*, 73.

[26] This example is adapted from one by the late American phenomenologist and popular Christian writer Dallas Wilard: Dallas Willard, *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God* (Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1999), 10-11.

© 2016 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12217 Published online by Cambridge University Press

opacity. The referential opacity in modal logic turns on the confusion when two terms, which ought to refer to the same thing, can be substituted for one another and produce different or false meanings. Simply put if Ziggy Stardust were to be substituted for David Bowie in the sentence 'David Bowie was born on the 8th January 1947' it would be a false statement. Ziggy Stardust may point to the same object in the world as David Bowie (also a stage name incidentally) but these cannot be substituted without changing the sense. Likewise if David believes someone is after him 'Someone' might refer to a particular unnamed individual – *De Re* – or to a belief that some unknown person or persons is after him – *De Dicto*. These are transferable but mean different things. In the parental example play could not be confused with a non-identical substitution because there is no object in the world that could be point out by play in the way that David Bowie is an object in the world. There is still a degree of ambiguity however because what counts as play is indeterminate yet clearly not infinite. A number of different actions could count as play – could have the adjective playful attached to them – and would not contradict the parental will. Some of the very same actions could be characterised at other times as something other than play. The ambiguity turns not on the action but the manner in which it is performed.

Another way of considering the *De Dicto/De Re* distinction is the distinction between an author and the characters/world they create. This gets at the two ways in which necessity functions in this distinction. Everything an author wishes to happen to characters happens of necessity but this bears no relation to the necessity or contingency of particular actions within their world.[27] The author is not part of the character's world, she is not a character in it, just the same as God is not part of world in the way we creatures are.[28] Everything that happens in the character's world can be taken as the will of the author in a propositional sense, as being true as a description of the authors point of view, *De Dicto.* But the actions of the characters are particulars in their world rather than propositional; they are *De Re*. They emerge within their context by the action of characters and have integrity therein. This is to say that *De Dicto* what the characters do is of necessity the authors will but *De Re* their particular actions are not necessary to them. The character/creature then determines what they do but in a non-competitive, non-contrastive, manner with their author/creator in different modes of discourse because they do not share space and time together. The characters are responsible within

[27] Ibid, 76.

[28] Ric S. Machuga, *Three Theological Mistakes*: How to Correct Enlightenment Assumptions about God, Miracles, and Free Will (Cambridge: James Clark & Co, 2015), 190-191.

© 2016 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12217 Published online by Cambridge University Press

their world and this is no diminishment of the Author's freedom because they are modally distinct. This again is the point that Calvin drives against the Libertines. They collapse the distinction between the 'creaturely and the heavenly', seeing causation as univocal and therefore contrastive.[29]

With this distinction in place we can see that when thinking of God's will the Christian cannot abdicate responsibility and await God's instruction. The communication of God in this world must always be in ways appropriate to the creature, natural to the kinds of the beings the characters/creatures are; thinking, feeling, sensing, trusting, asking, acting beings. We have to act, we can't just pause for instruction most of the time. God wants us to act, that is the kind of beings we are – we are not trees. This was Calvin's point against the Libertines, that rather than God acting upon us as if we were inanimate objects God has given us a nature, among others things as thinking creatures, and we act according to it.[30] This is what *concursus* aims to safeguard in Christian doctrine and life. That It is because, rather than in spite of, God works in and with creatures that creatures are free to be creatures, responsible within our own world.[31]

What is the Christian to do knowing that God will not give a detailed specific instruction limited to that time and place on any given subject? Act. Act as a Christian. We are beings made for action, we must act. Even reflection is a form of action. God does not give us detailed cheat guides like googling a walk through guide for a computer game, there is no rule book and no access to a divine chess plays – that would evacuate the creaturely/character freedom by direct appeal outside of this world.[32] Here we enter territory of patterns of behaviour, practices, character, storied formed life; they will have to act in whatever manner feels most naturally Christian. We learn these through revelation, through Christ and Scripture. These do not determine options (predetermined choices) but patterns, reveal ways of life, schools of wisdom, what matters; love, humility, friendship.[33] These are patterns not rules. They do not tell you specifically how to

[29] Calvin, *Against the Libertines*, 14.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Green, *Doxological Theology*, 85-6.

[32] This raises the pertinent question of the role of prayer with reference to providence. This is a very important area and was given a great deal of attention by Barth in CDIII/3 as part of the doctrine of providence. This is notoriously one of the most difficult sections of CD to contextualise because this is a very subtle yet significant question. Suffice to say for now that the modal distinction is operative here as elsewhere. Prayer might not be best thought of as appeal outside of the world but as an address to God as God meets us in this world, appropriate to our creaturely experience. See Ashley Cocksworth, *Karl Barth on Prayer* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

[33] Turner, *Aquinas*, 167-68.

© 2016 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12217 Published online by Cambridge University Press

be loving, humble and friendly in all given situations. We learn that, not over and against God but with God, in the world God has made and by the revelation God has given and we freely form and express ourselves but not by excluding God.

Conclusion

So does God have a plan? Necessarily yes – God is outside of creation like an author is outside of her fiction. Does God force the plan arbitrarily on creatures? No. No because God's action and our own are not in a competitive relation. Our actions in this world can be accounted for by the circumstances of this world and our choices within them. God is not another one of these circumstances. Therefore Christians should not wait for God to give them 'the plan'. God is already involved with us and what we do; we do not need to wait for specific instructions. This is what divine *concursus* aims to secure. 'The plan' is for us to be ourselves, to live as human beings, and get on with doing that in appropriate ways. There are better and worse forms of this living however. Again God will not give specific and detailed instruction on what might constitute this in every instance – not least because a number of different courses might constitute it – but God has given revelation which puts forth a pattern for living rather than a plan. This is not arbitrary, we make choices, we decide, insofar as circumstances limit us, what we do. This is not over and against God. It is required of Christians that we find expression of God's commands, that is, we understand the pattern of a Christ-like life enough to be able to create particular instances of those commandments in the world.

Andrew Hayes
a.hayes@queens.ac.uk

© 2016 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12217 Published online by Cambridge University Press