

CHAPTER 6

Providence and Culture

Originally, most cultures were penetrated by the sacred to the point that everything had a religious meaning. It was felt that the law of the human was also the law of divine Providence. Biblical tradition could bind culture to religion very closely by confessing the lordship of God over the cosmos and over people, placing everything under direct relatedness to God. Throughout Sacred Scripture the relationship between Creator and every creature is made clear: God initiates the relationship but often invites our active collaboration, e.g. plants grow at the command of God but require human work to provide sustenance. Exactly how God acts with us and through us is embedded in the mystery of Providence, and can only be perceived through a glass darkly.

Some influential authors have identified certain cultures as naturally fatalistic. Here, people see themselves so dependent on an all-powerful God that they feel their status in life is predetermined and they need not take any responsibility for their society, and sin some cases, for their personal lives. Consequently, they cannot be expected to take an active role in the processes of change. At the other end of the spectrum are cultures whose initiatives have brought them so much success that they feel justified in claiming full credit for their achievements. Serious reflection should help us clarify whether it is God's will that people should involve themselves in national and international issues and whether God has given to each country and person a role in shaping its life and influencing that of others.

Jesus manifests a great sensitivity to the social conditions of the Palestine of his time. Yet his teachings know no cultural boundaries. He even chides those who, by refusing to relate to other nationalities (e.g. the Samaritans), delay their own enrichment in their would-be concern to guard the Torah against all intrusions. When discussing Providence with Hellenistic Judaism, Matthew uses a vocabulary suited to that nation's manner of expressing its relationship to the divine.

Whether the first non-Jewish converts could retain their Greek culture was a matter left for Peter and Paul to discuss. In Paul's eyes every human being has a spiritual existence as a result of our common dependence on a Provident God. To summarize Paul's often-stated position: Sound spirituality requires that we experience all living beings as receiving life from God. Each is a part answering to the same Source, and as a part, remaining dependent not only on this Source but on the other parts as well. It dies if it tries to become too independent, like a finger severed from the hand in the hope of becoming a whole in itself. People's efforts to express this dependence on Providence in the manner of their respective cultures can only enhance all of humanity's inherited dynamism of spirit. Life and spirituality are integrated and all cultures share this communality.

Social rearrangements have influenced the genuine notion of collaborating with Providence. We know from history that many cultural fields such as art and music, which were closely related to Christianity at the outset, have in some cases, freed themselves from it. The global village in which we now live continues to raise our awareness that there flows from each culture a unique way of acknowledging a divine presence in its midst. There are not different divine presences; it is just that we all speak under the limitations of our situations. The Spirit brings no new revelation but rather takes the message of the Word made flesh and declares it anew, in a manner meaningful to each milieu.

Missionaries tell us that for the First Nations People of North America, to know is to have experienced. What counts for them is not so much doctrine or content as the process toward concrete appropriation of the gospel message. They know intimately the Great Mystery we call Providence through personal or collective experience, and they visualize the mystery as the very core of their own being and of the entire universe. They are convinced that no human person can achieve anything without the assistance of the Great Mystery and its surrounding powers. They want to be attentive to its presence, when and where it manifests itself. They want to connect with the Great Mystery in order to receive the vision, which determines one's unique place in a

universe where all things are interrelated. They focus on history mainly as transmitted by their elders who exhibit a mystical capacity and a love for cosmic sacramentality. These deep cultural differences affect religions and religious language.

We are experiencing an attempt to recover aboriginal symbols in the liturgy (e.g. the Great Spirit), which may or may not reflect the words of Jesus in the Gospel but contain fundamental truths which extol the beauties of nature and give credit to what we mean by the Providence of God. The language of faith is already there and demands our attention. Words which speak of Providence are carriers, like other words, of experience, emotions, feelings, and outlooks, all of which reflect a given culture but enable us to come together to pray, as in the liturgy of the hours: "Direct our thoughts, feelings, and actions this day. Help us to follow your providential guidance".

With the continuing influx of immigrants into our continent, we North Americans will continue to experience various ways of manifesting Providence both privately and publicly. The inculturation process that we see is not entirely new. It has been carried out through the centuries by people of mixed races, namely the mestizos, and it has offered a contribution to social and spiritual transformation. We have come to realize and reflect on the deep human desire to be persons of faith within authentic yet different cultural paths and in common praise for the gift of life.

In South America, many forms of Christianity are manifested in religious practices and spirituality. Here the cycle of life is very meaningful for the individual and for the family. Faith in the Providence of God is not expressed in dogmatic terms or in the language of systematic theology but in vernacular words and gestures. Small communities gather to discuss prayerfully not esoteric theological issues but what constitutes the ebb and flow of their daily faith life. Their "popular religion" with its colourful displays and pageantry is an authentic manifestation of the life and wisdom of the people. Others learn from it by entering into the perspectives of the people to see and feel, as they do, the sources of their identity and strength. Andean people have a concrete and mystical bond with "Mother Earth" and they adhere to Catholic ritual.

In many cultures the physical and social sciences have adopted a reductionist language which seems to dissolve reality into elements which they are capable of handling. This often excludes faith language and therefore language about the Providence of God. And yet, so deep and real is the historical and social location of faith that every culture seeks and can find a way of expressing it in keeping with its mode of action, its way of living, its way of manifesting.

The close link between language and culture and its effect on religious expression is being felt increasingly in the church. In order to reach different cultures recourse must be had to translations. But as one moves from one language to another one soon becomes aware that something cultural is lost in every translation. Words clothe values and outlooks peculiar to each region. For years the Catholic Church has clung to Latin at mass in order to protect the authentic meaning of biblical passages in use in the liturgy. With the introduction of the vernacular Rome is preoccupied as to whether translations faithfully transmit the content of the Latin prayers of the Roman Rite, because those prayers are her own heritage, and her gift to each new generation of the faithful. We are warned against the myth of creative spontaneity, which could alter the meaning of words like "Providence".

Today's culture is secular, and our view of the self and of the universe is often secular. Researchers like Austin and Gilkey see four reasons why our modernity does not always see Providence as "the rule of God over the events that make up the course of both nature and history": (1) a vivid and massive awareness of evil; (2) a rejection of natural theology; (3) an insistence on human freedom; (4) a belief in an autonomous and deterministic natural order.

It can be more challenging to manifest Providence in a capitalist and materialistic culture than in one that is deeply spiritual, one that honours humility, simplicity, and charity. If we live within a culture where truth is being replaced by value, and no truth is acknowledged apart from science, such a transcendent and symbolic word as "Providence" has an unfamiliar ring. Humility is ever the foundation upon which faith

can build and acknowledge that what we have is a gift of the Providence of God. If we see this in ourselves before we see it around us, we will trust in Providence for what lies ahead.



GOD TRANSCENDS ALL THESE

I glimpse your beauty in each gorgeous rainbow
And feel your presence near each fragrant rose;
I hear your voice re-echo in the woodland
And discern your touch in every breeze that blows.

Your radiant face I find in crimson sunsets,
Your perfection shines down on moonlit streams,
Your majesty's portrayed by purple mountains
And from stars your love comes down in silvery beams.

I sense your grace in every dewdrop,
Your glory in glistening snow upon the trees,
Your PROVIDENCE feeds birds and clothes the lilies
God, how wonderful your love transcends all these!

- Mary Gemma Brunke