

## **Introduction**

Since 1994 a view of God and divine providence known as the openness of God has caused a storm of controversy in conservative North American Christianity.<sup>1</sup> This has led to the production of a host of books and articles on the topic, some with ominous titles such as *The Battle for God*.<sup>2</sup> A tendency in this debate has been to speak as though there are only two views of providence on the market. Hence, it may be helpful at this juncture to by-pass the vitriolic rhetoric and take a look at some of the main views, showing areas of agreement and disagreement regarding the key issues. To date, there has not existed a concise summary of the primary positions in this debate to inform those who do not have the time to read all the literature. This paper will map the terrain of divine providence paying particular attention to the role different understandings of omniscience play in the contemporary discussion.

There are quite a number of perspectives on divine providence, unfortunately, so I have decided to focus on what I shall call “traditionalist” views that affirm strong understandings of omnipotence and divine involvement in the world. Before getting to these, however, I will briefly mention a number of views, which have been quite influential among scholars. Process theology affirms that God is concerned about and involved in the affairs of the world, but denies that God creates *ex nihilo* and holds that divine actions are limited to persuasion. Boston Personalism affirms *creatio ex nihilo* as well as God’s ongoing work with finite persons but posits a nonrational “given” in the nature of God such that the power of God is limited in overcoming evil by the divine nature itself. Both process theology and Boston Personalism hold that God does not foreknow the future actions of beings with libertarian freedom. Gordon Kaufman and Maurice Wiles are even more drastic in their revising of divine providence. For them God is the “master act” but does not “intervene” in the affairs of the world since such a deity

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<sup>1</sup> See the report of the attempt by leaders in the evangelical theological society to label open theism as outside the boundaries of evangelicalism in *Christianity Today* (January 7, 2002): 21.

<sup>2</sup> Norman Geisler and Wayne House, (Grand Rapids, Mich: Kregel, 2001).

would be a “spook” or a “magician.” Finally, there is the anti-realist perspective of D. Z. Phillips, Don Cupitt, and Gareth Moore for whom “God” is a lifestyle, a way of life such that God “exists” for the religious believer but does not exist as distinct being. All of the views mentioned so far take a strong stand for human freedom but put forth an understanding of the divine nature or divine providence which traditional theists find neither rationally or spiritually satisfying.

Before listing the major traditionalist models, let me point out that there is no single understanding of providence which may lay claim to the title “the traditional” notion of providence. Unfortunately, I have sometimes helped foster this error in my own writings by speaking of “the traditional view of God.”<sup>3</sup> A survey of the history of Christian thought, however, reveals that numerous views have been in vogue at one time or another competing for preeminence in Christendom. Two other qualifications need to be made. First, though we tend to focus on differences it should not be forgotten that these views share more in common with one another regarding the nature of God and God’s redemptive acts in history than they differ. They all affirm what may be termed theism simpliciter: God is a personal being, worthy of worship, self-existent, the free creator (ex nihilo) of all that is not God, is distinct from the world, who sustains the world, is continually active in it, and who is perfectly good, all-powerful, all-knowing, and eternal. Moreover, they each affirm what may be called “basic Christianity” as defined, for instance, in the Apostles’ Creed. Finally, please remember that these are general summaries and that each view has varieties since their proponents do not agree on all details.

## **Traditionalist Views**

### *1. Augustinian-Calvinism*

This long-standing tradition affirms that the divine will, which is absolutely unconditioned or influenced by creatures, efficaciously micromanages everything that

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<sup>3</sup> And this despite the fact that I surveyed the divergent positions on providence throughout church history! See my “Historical Considerations,” in Clark Pinnock, David Basinger, William Hasker, Richard Rice and John Sanders, *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1994).

happens down to the smallest detail.<sup>4</sup> God does not take risks in governing his creation and his will is never thwarted in any respect. As Augustine put it, “The will of the Omnipotent is always undefeated” and “God is the necessity of things.” By foreordaining all that comes to pass, God has eternally known all that will happen (i. e. God knows the future because God determines it). Though God is in complete control, humans are responsible for their actions. In order to keep God from being the author of moral evil, proponents usually affirm what is called compatibilistic freedom whereby humans are free so long as they act on what they desire. In order for God to meticulously control humans God ensures that we have the desires he decrees and then we freely act on those desires. Election to salvation is based solely on God’s decree and petitionary prayer is a means by which we serve to bring about God’s plans. Our prayers never affect God.

## 2. Thomism

Although some key interpreters of Aquinas will disagree with my assessment, I believe Thomism arrives at many of the same conclusions as the Augustinian-Calvinist perspective, though it does so via a different route. “God’s knowledge is the cause of things” according to Thomas. Moreover, by one act of will God wills everything in his goodness and since the divine will is never caused or motivated by anything external to God, nothing happens except that which God explicitly desires to happen. As pure act God is never passive or reactive to anything humans do. Consequently, God’s providential control and predestinating power extend over every detail of the universe such that God never takes risks. This does not mean that God is the sole actor, however, since God works through intermediaries. Nor does it imply that God is responsible for human moral evil since God works concurrently with our good actions while withholding his concurrent activity from our evil actions. Election to salvation is based solely on the divine will, not on any foreknowledge of human actions. Petitionary prayer is a means by which God brings about what he desires. As *actus purus* our prayers never affect God.

## 3. Molinism

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<sup>4</sup> The best recent statement of this view is Paul Helm’s, *The Providence of God* (Downers Grove, ILL: InterVarsity Press, 1994).

Molinism (also called middle knowledge), along with the Augustinian and Thomistic models, affirms a risk free and meticulous providence in which everything that happens does so expressly because God wants it to happen. However, Molinists support a libertarian understanding of human freedom in which a person is free if the agent could have done otherwise than she did (i. e. it was within the agents power to perform or to refrain from the action). In order to harmonize these seemingly incompatible beliefs, Molinists appeal to what they call counterfactuals of freedom whereby God knows what any free agent would choose to do in any possible set of circumstances. For instance, God knows what you would do if you found a bag containing \$1,000 and your family was starving and what you would do if you found the same money but were financially well off. Furthermore, they distinguish between “possible” and “feasible” worlds. Possible worlds are those containing the various logically possible events while feasible worlds are those that contain what free creatures actually would do in various possible situations. For example, there are possible worlds in which free creatures never sin, but there may be no feasible worlds in which creatures are left free to sin but sin does not arise. Humans may suffer from “transworld depravity” in that we would actually choose to sin in all the worlds in which humans are created and left free to sin or to refrain from sinning.

Prior to God’s decision to create, God utilized his knowledge of all the feasible worlds—what would happen in each of these worlds—and selected the world which best suited his purposes. William Lane Craig writes: “Since God knows what any free creature would do in any situation, he can, by creating the appropriate situations, bring it about that creatures will achieve his ends and purposes and that they will do so *freely*.”<sup>5</sup> Another key difference between the Molinists and the other two traditional risk free models is that, according to the Molinists, the counterfactuals are not under God’s control. That is, what we freely decide to do in any specific situation is up to us, not God. This raises questions about God’s absolute independence since it seems to imply that God is, for some things, passive and dependent—an idea Augustinians and Thomists reject. Moreover, though Molinists hold that God takes no risks, the fact that God is not in control of the counterfactuals means that God may be *lucky* or *unlucky* regarding which

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<sup>5</sup> William Lane Craig, *The Only Wise God* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1987), p. 135.

feasible worlds are available for him to create. More will be said on this latter. In the past several years Molinists have applied their theory to issues of providence such as prayer, prophecy, and the destiny of those who die never hearing the gospel of Christ.<sup>6</sup>

#### 4. *Calvinistic-Molinism*

Recently, Terrance Tiessen has published a book on providence in which he combines Molinism and Calvinism in the hopes of overcoming some, of what he considers to be, problems in Calvinism.<sup>7</sup> However, unlike other molinists he rejects libertarian freedom in favor of compatibilistic freedom and affirms that the counterfactuals are fully under God's control. Since the counterfactuals are under God's control, not ours, it seems that middle knowledge is a superfluous element, adding nothing of importance to traditional Calvinism.

#### 5. *Freewill Theism*

Freewill theists believe that God can and does unilaterally intervene in human affairs but they deny that God controls every detail since he has granted humans libertarian freedom. It was God's sovereign decision to exercise general, rather than meticulous, providence. God has chosen to macromanage or be in general control. God set up the framework in which he would interact with human and there is considerable freedom within this framework. Thus what God would like to happen in some specific situations is not done—certain aspects of God's will can be thwarted. This is the basis for the freewill defense to the problem of evil: God cannot prevent us from doing evil without removing the very framework he established for the divine-human relationship. Freewill theism may be divided into two types.

##### 5. 1 Traditional Freewill Theism

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<sup>6</sup> In addition to Craig see Thomas P. Flint, *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998) and Edward Weirenga, *The Nature of God: An Inquiry into Divine Attributes* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> Terrance Tiessen, *Providence and Prayer: How Does God Work in the World?* (Downers Grove, ILL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

Pertaining to providence this view is variously known as simple foreknowledge, the eternity solution, or Arminianism.<sup>8</sup> It is probably the oldest Christian understanding of how omniscience applies to providence and it has remained popular through the centuries. It was the predominant view of the church fathers prior to Augustine and is represented today in the Eastern Orthodox, Arminian, Wesleyan, and Pentecostal traditions, to name but a few. According to this model God grants humans libertarian freedom and with it the possibility of going against the divine will. God timelessly previsioned our fall into sin and thus based his decision to provide redemption through Christ Jesus on this foreknowledge. In other words, God timelessly reacted to what he foresaw would come to be by formulating a plan to overcome our sinfulness. Moreover, God has elected individuals to salvation “before the foundations of the earth” by previsioning who would come to faith in Jesus (i. e. election is based on foreknowledge rather than foreordination). Hence, proponents of this view clearly believe that some of God’s knowledge is dependent upon the creatures. God is a responsive and reacting being, who, for some of his decisions, is conditioned by the decisions of his creatures.

## 5.2 Open freewill theism

The openness of God position is the “new kid on the block.”<sup>9</sup> Though it was promulgated as early as the fifth century by Calcidius and sporadically from 1550-1899 (primarily in Methodist circles), it was not until the latter part of the twentieth century that analytic philosophers, biblical scholars and theologians began to affirm it in significant numbers.<sup>10</sup> Openness agrees with traditional freewill theism regarding libertarian freedom, the rejection of meticulous providence, that some of God’s decisions are conditioned by what the creatures decide (e. g. conditional election), and that, at times,

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<sup>8</sup> See Jack Cottrell, *What the Bible Says About God the Ruler* (Joplin, Mo: College Press, 1984) and David Basinger, *The Case for Freewill Theism* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> For expositions of openness see our *The Openness of God*, William Hasker, *God, Time and Knowledge* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989); John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, ILL: InterVarsity Press, 1998); and Clark Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God’s Openness* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> On Calcidius see J. Den Boeft, *Calcidius on Fate: His Doctrine and Sources*, *Philosophia Antiqua* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1970), 52. For the history of the Methodist discussion see Randy Maddox, “Seeking a Response-able God: The Wesleyan Tradition and Process Theology,” in Bryan Stone and Thomas Oord eds., *Thy Nature and thy Name is Love: Wesleyan and Process Theologies in Dialogue* (Nashville, Tenn: Abingdon, 2001). For a list of proponents on the contemporary scene see my *The God Who Risks*, 162-4 and 324 no. 125.

God's will is thwarted. Proponents of openness emphasize that God has chosen to establish reciprocal relationships with us based upon the eternal love shared by the Holy Trinity. There is genuine give-and-take with God. In love God takes risks that we will not respond appropriately to the divine love. Open theism agrees with traditional freewill theism on all but two points: the nature of the divine eternity and omniscience.<sup>11</sup> For open theism God is everlasting through time rather than timeless. This does not mean that God is "confined" by time, as if time was the container in which God exists. That God is temporal is simply to say that God experiences sequence—one thing after another. The divine consciousness experiences duration (before and after). Physical time, the measurement between objects, did not exist prior to creation. For open theists God's omniscience consists of knowledge of all necessary truths, all the past, present, and that which God has unilaterally decided to bring about in the future, but God does not have exhaustive definite knowledge of future contingent events.<sup>12</sup> God may have beliefs about what you will be doing a year from now, but God does not know with absolute certainty what you will be doing. Some of the future is definite and some of it is indefinite and God knows the indefinite future as it really is (i. e. indefinitely). The future is not a play already written but one that God co-creates with us. God is flexible, adaptable and wise enough to handle whatever we do. However, this does not mean that the being of God changes. God remains unchanging in his essence—his love, wisdom, faithful-freedom, and power—but God can and does change in his relationship towards us in regard to his thoughts, actions, and emotions.

## 6. *Mystery/Antinomy*

There is a venerable tradition that simply says that divine sovereignty and human freedom are both true, but that we are unable to rationally comprehend how this can be.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> This family squabble between traditional and open freewill theisms over timelessness and exhaustive foreknowledge is deemed necessary by proponents of openness in order to produce a more biblically faithful and coherent understanding of providence.

<sup>12</sup> Because of this similarity to process theism, many evangelical Calvinist critics of open theism classify it as process theology. This is grossly inaccurate given the manifold differences between the two views. For similarities and differences between process and open views see John Cobb and Clark Pinnock eds., *Searching for an Adequate God: A Dialogue Between Process and Free Will Theists* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> See J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1967), 18-29.

Though it is an antinomy (a contradiction) for us, it is not so for God. Proponents of this view tend to favor meticulous providence—God is in complete control—but it is not always clear which understanding of human freedom they espouse. In order to have a genuine contradiction they have to affirm both meticulous providence (God is in complete control, takes no risks) and libertarian freedom (God is not in complete control, takes risks). But if proponents of antinomy affirm compatibilistic freedom there is no mystery for it is quite understandable how God can be in total control while humans are compatibilistically free (see the Augustinian-Calvinist position). While I may have just settled that mystery, another one immediately arises when freewill theists ask why this does not render God responsible for moral evil—to which Calvinists typically appeal to mystery.<sup>14</sup>

### **Key Areas of Agreement and Disagreement**

Before delving into this subject, a reminder that all of these traditionalist views share both theism simpliciter and basic Christianity in common. Of course, these positions wrangle over some key issues and to these I now turn.

#### 1. *The nature of God*<sup>15</sup>

A wide array of questions arise regarding the divine nature and the stand one takes on them directly affects which views one finds plausible. Is God timeless? Does God respond or react to creatures? Does God grieve? Suffer? Can God change in any respect? The age-old discussions of divine impassibility, immutability, pure actuality, and simplicity all come into play. In my opinion, the watershed constellation of issues in the debate over divine providence is: (1) whether God has chosen to be, for some things, affected or conditioned by creatures; (2) whether God takes the risk that humans may do things that God does not want done; (3) whether God exercises meticulous or general

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<sup>14</sup> Zwingli “bit the bullet” and refused to appeal to mystery here. Paul Helm does pretty much the same with his use of *O felix culpa* (see his *Providence of God*, 213-5).

<sup>15</sup> Please note: this list it is not intended to convey that, in formulating our doctrines of providence, we actually follow this particular order. One may, for instance, be so moved by some of life's experiences (#5 below) that it leads one to rethink the nature of God. Actually, we draw upon all of these topics concurrently in developing our understandings of providence.

providential control; and (4) whether God has granted human beings libertarian or compatibilistic freedom.

Augustinian-Calvinism and Thomism have both traditionally affirmed “classical theism” which involves the doctrines of timelessness, impassibility, immutability and pure actuality, and simplicity.<sup>16</sup> For these views, God is unaffected by and absolutely independent of creatures. On the other side of the fence lie both traditional and openness freewill theisms which either reject or seriously qualify these doctrines. Freewill theists believe that God is affected by creatures in that God grieves and that some of God’s decisions are conditioned by creatures. Open theism, however, goes further than traditional freewill theism by rejecting divine timelessness. It is not easy to decide where to place Molinism in this spectrum since it denies God’s absolute independence (the counterfactuals are not under God’s control), yet many (all?) Molinists also affirm impassibility and immutability, seeming to reject any conditionality in God. I do wonder whether some Molinists, especially those in the evangelical tradition, would want to hold that God is affected by, for instance, our prayers. If humans have libertarian freedom is it consistent to also affirm robust understandings of impassibility and pure actuality? Is it possible that Molinists will need to modify more of the classical attributes than has hitherto been the case in order to avoid arriving at the same conclusions as Augustinianism and Thomism?

## 2. *Divine foreknowledge*

Does God have beliefs or only knowledge? Can God change his mind? Does divine omniscience include exhaustive definite foreknowledge (EDF) of future contingent events or does it only include present knowledge? That is, does God know with certainty all that you will do next year? If God has exhaustive definite foreknowledge, does God

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<sup>16</sup> Several contemporary Calvinists, however, attempt to retain God’s exhaustive control while revising or even rejecting impassibility, immutability and simplicity. Due to the interrelated nature of the divine attributes in classical theism, to be logically consistent these Calvinists will have to revise (*mutates mutandis*) much more of their view of God. See, for instance, Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 1994), 165-6 and Bruce Ware *God’s Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 2000), 64.

possess this knowledge because God foreordains all that will come to pass or because God simply "foresees" what will come to pass in some sort of timeless vision or because God simply knows his own essence or by middle knowledge?

All but one of the traditionalist views hold that God has exhaustive definite foreknowledge, but they do so for different reasons. According to the Augustinian-Calvinist, God knows the future because God foreordains what will come to pass. God's knowledge of our future is not contingent on creatures or passive in any respect. Thomism holds that God has exhaustive definite foreknowledge because God knows his own essence and the natures of all things reside in the divine mind. In Molinism God has exhaustive definite foreknowledge by knowledge of the counterfactuals of freedom together with God's knowledge of his own creative actions. Traditional freewill theists claim that God possesses exhaustive definite foreknowledge by simple foreknowledge or timeless knowledge whereby God "previsions" the actions of contingent beings. Hence, God's exhaustive definite foreknowledge is caused by and dependent upon the creatures. The openness of God view rejects exhaustive definite foreknowledge in favor of presentism. God has exhaustive knowledge of the past, present, and those future events that are causally determined to occur, but God does not know with absolute certainty the future decisions of beings with libertarian freedom. That God can change his mind, though not in a vacillating way, is affirmed by most proponents of openness as well as by some traditional freewill theists (though I do not see how a timeless being can be said to change his mind). However, it should be noted that, for openness, God can know in advance with certainty what he would do under certain conditions and it is consistent with openness, though not necessary, that God has already decided what he would do in all possible circumstances in which he might act.<sup>17</sup>

### 3. *Types of sovereignty*

Does God get precisely everything God desires? Can any of God's desires be thwarted in the least detail by creatures? Does God permit events to occur which he would rather not occur? Is providence risky or risk free? Does God have a definite will or intention for

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<sup>17</sup> Greg Boyd refers to this form of openness theology as "Neomolinism."

every specific event in human history? Does God sometimes alter his plans in light of what humans do? Is there ever a “plan B” with God?

The Augustinian-Calvinist position upholds specific sovereignty or meticulous providence whereby every detail that happens does so because God ordains it. Consequently, none of God’s desires are ever thwarted in the least detail, God never alters his plans, and providence is completely risk free. Traditional and openness freewill theisms take the opposite positions. For them, God exercises general sovereignty whereby God permits certain events to happen which God would rather not happen (e. g. moral evil) and so God takes risks. God definitely reacts to what humans do, altering his plans accordingly.

Again, Molinism is an odd duck since it leans towards the specific sovereignty, no risk side, yet, it affirms libertarian freedom and contains the element of God being lucky or unlucky (fortunate or unfortunate) since God is not in control of the counterfactuals of freedom. That is, when God examined the warehouse of feasible worlds to create, though God is in control of which, if any, world he will bring into existence, God is dependent upon what the creatures do in those worlds. Hence, God may be lucky in that there is a feasible world in the warehouse in which God gets most of what he wants, say 90%. Or God may, like Old Mother Hubbard, find the cupboard quite bare and have to settle for creating a world in which God is satisfied with only 51% of what occurs. It all depends upon what humans do in those worlds and God is either lucky that much of what he wants does occur or unlucky in that much of what he wants does not occur. If transworld sin is exceedingly robust, then God may be quite unfortunate that the only feasible worlds he can create are ones with which he has a low degree of satisfaction. However, Molinists often give the impression that God gets pretty much everything he desires until it comes to questions such as the eternal destiny of those who have never heard the gospel of Jesus. Since God desires all to benefit from the redemption in Jesus, why did God create a world in which the vast majority of those who have lived on this planet have died never hearing the gospel? The answer of William Craig is that all those who die unevangelized suffer from transworld anti-gospel depravity—in every feasible world

such people *always* reject Jesus.<sup>18</sup> In which case, God is quite unfortunate that, though he desires all to be saved, the best world available for God to create was one in which the vast majority of people are damned. If this is the case, then Molinists need to tone down their degree of confidence regarding God's ability to use his knowledge of the counterfactuals to obtain most of what God wants. However, nothing in Molinism requires following Craig's pessimism regarding salvation for other leading Molinists, such as Alvin Plantinga and Thomas Flint, take a more optimistic stance.<sup>19</sup>

#### 4. *The nature of human freedom:*

The primary division here is between those who affirm libertarian freedom and those who maintain compatibilistic freedom. The Augustinian-Calvinists typically utilize compatibilism while Molinists, traditional freewill theists, and open theists affirm libertarianism.

#### 5. *Our knowledge of God*

From whence do we derive our knowledge of God? Do we use scripture or natural theology or both? If both, what role should natural theology play in our reading of scripture? Do biblical metaphors really describe the way God is? Is the distinction between metaphorical and literal language about God in scripture useful? If so, how do we identify what is literal language in scripture? What are anthropomorphisms? From what source of knowledge of God do we know what God is really like so that we can identify anthropomorphic language? What role should church tradition play in our determination of the divine nature and providence?

Generally speaking, there is no easy way to distinguish the views on these topics and there is much work yet to be done regarding these questions. Nevertheless, I shall hazard to suggest that Augustinian-Calvinists find it relatively straight-forward to distinguish the metaphorical and anthropomorphic depictions of God in scripture from the literal or exact

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<sup>18</sup> See William Lane Craig, "No Other Name: A Middle Knowledge Perspective on the Exclusivity of Salvation Through Christ," *Faith and Philosophy* 6/2 (April 1989): 172-188.

<sup>19</sup> Plantinga hopes that universalism is correct. Flint suggests that "consistent libertarian universalists, it seems to me, are all but sure to be friends of middle knowledge." See his *Divine Providence*, 105 no. 55.

descriptions.<sup>20</sup> Proponents of openness, on the other hand, believe that many traditional readings of scripture have miscategorized some important biblical texts and thus missed some significant teachings about the nature of God and the divine-human relationship. As for the place natural theology and church tradition should play in our thinking, I see nothing in the positions themselves that necessitates a particular stance. One's views on these matters will be decided by one's epistemology, church affiliation and view of revelation.

### 5. *Life applications*

How are we to understand the functioning of divine providence in our lives? How do we explain the work of salvation? Election? What approach do we take to the problems of evil and suffering? What counsel do we give grieving parents when a young child dies? What sort of wisdom do we dispense regarding divine guidance? Does God have a “blueprint” for our lives? What is the nature of petitionary prayer? Do our prayers ever have an effect on or influence God? Are any of God's actions ever dependent on our prayers? What do we mean by a “personal relationship” with God? Is our relationship with God a genuinely reciprocal one? Not only will our views on the nature of God shape our lives of piety, but our piety will also shape our understanding of the nature of God. The Fifth century Pope Celestine I put it thus: *lex orandi est lex credendi* (the rule of prayer is the rule of belief).

The Augustinian-Calvinist will typically assert belief in unconditional election, irresistible (efficacious) grace, and that each instance of suffering has been specifically ordained for the benefit of God's glory. In fact, everything in our lives is working out precisely as God's blueprint has ordained. If my child is raped, murdered and discarded in a dumpster, it is because God will bring about a greater good—for someone, not necessarily me. There is no pointless evil. God has a blueprint for my life and divine guidance guarantees that I follow whatever God has eternally ordained for me. Petitionary prayer is seen as a means to accomplish what God has already ordained—God

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<sup>20</sup> See for instance, Helm, *The Providence of God*, 51-2, where he utilizes the following criterion: any biblical statement that reduces God to human proportions is anthropomorphic. Using this same criterion, John Hick and Gordon Kaufman claim that even Helm reduces God to human proportions.

is never dependent upon or influenced by our prayers. However, contemporary Calvinists like to say that God “responds” to our prayers but they do not mean this in its usual sense. Rather, God had foreordained that we would pray a specific request at a particular time and God “responds” to that request by bringing about whatever he foreordained to do after the request. Our request is simply the divine instrument whereby God brings about whatever he eternally ordained—our request never influences what God decides to do.

Both traditional and open freewill theists, on the other hand, affirm some form of conditional election (whether one is saved depends, in part, on the human decision) and grace that enables us to exercise faith, but is resistible. Most freewill theists also believe that, for some things, God has sovereignly decided to be dependent upon our prayers of petition such that God may not do something God would like to do because we have not prayed. Our prayers may influence what God decides to do—you have not because you ask not (James 4:2). Hence, they understand a personal relationship with God to be genuinely reciprocal or give-and-take. Many traditional Arminians accept, while open theists reject, the notion that God has a blueprint for our lives that we are to follow. Though open theists believe that God may have specific intentions for us at specific times, generally, there is no single “best” way to go. Rather, God invites us to collaborate with God in determining what the future will be. Many Arminians believe that any suffering we endure is for our benefit because God knows what will happen to us in the future. In this case, it is doubtful that there is pointless evil. Proponents of openness disagree. For them, there is gratuitous evil: evil that does not lead to a greater good. God does not intend for my child to be raped and murdered. God is absolutely opposed to such sin and is grieved by it. However, God is not passive in the face of evil for God works to redeem it—attempting to bring something good even out of evil. But since we have libertarian freedom God cannot guarantee that we will actually benefit from our suffering for we may refuse his help. God takes genuine risks.

When it comes to Molinism things are not so clear. It seems its proponents would adhere to conditional election and enabling grace, but at least some would also wish to say that every instance of suffering is specifically intended by God for our benefit. God uses his

middle knowledge to place us in situations of suffering which he knows we will respond appropriately and grow in faith. Of course, this all depends upon how lucky God is that there is a feasible world in which we respond in faith rather than turning away from God. I am not sure whether Molinists accept or reject the idea that our prayers affect God—that God is in any respect dependent upon our asking. It seems to me that those Molinists in the Roman Catholic tradition would reject this, but those in the evangelical tradition might be inclined to affirm it.

### **Conclusion**

It is my hope that this brief survey of traditionalist views of providence has clarified the main perspectives as well as highlighted key areas of agreement and disagreement. In particular, I hope that the role foreknowledge plays in divine providence has been elucidated. Again, all the traditionalist models agree on theism simpliciter respecting the divine nature and they agree on basic Christianity. Although the majority of Christians have agreed on these important points, the history of thought on divine providence reveals that we should be cautious of speaking of “the tradition” as though it was singular. Regarding the divine nature and the type of providence God exercises, traditionalist Christians continue to disagree.