



RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Confidence regained: Providence and prayer in the works of Catherine of Siena, Anne Conway and Simone Weil

Katrin Koenig 

University of Heidelberg Ecumenical Institute, Heidelberg, Germany  
Email: [katrin.koenig@oek.uni-heidelberg.de](mailto:katrin.koenig@oek.uni-heidelberg.de)

(Received 12 March 2024; revised 29 June 2024; accepted 2 July 2024)

## Abstract

In this article I explore three ways of reflecting on faith in God's providence and correlative understandings of prayer. My study suggests a praxeological understanding of the doctrine of providence as tacit knowledge. First, I present the soteriological dialogical approach of Catherine of Siena, from her late medieval *Dialogue* on providence. Secondly, I analyse the quietist vitalist approach of the early modern English philosopher Anne Conway in her *Principles of Philosophy*. Thirdly, I reflect on the critical, non-interventionist approach of the French philosopher and mystic Simone Weil. I conclude by discussing the interrelation between providence and prayer.

**Keywords:** Anne Conway; Catherine of Siena; prayer; providence; Simone Weil

In his 1927 novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, Thornton Wilder tells the story of the collapse of a huge rope bridge, and of the lives of five people who die in the tragic accident.<sup>1</sup> Through his story, Wilder addresses questions of divine providence and the meaning of life in the face of love and untimely death. The novel's main character, brother Juniper, a pious Franciscan friar, spends six years exploring the life and loves of the victims. He writes a book in order to remember their lives, and to discover traits of God's merciful providence despite and within their tragic untimely deaths. In the end, the book is judged to be heretical and burnt, except for one copy. The narrator remarks:

---

<sup>1</sup>This paper was originally written for the Christian Theology Seminar at the Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge, in the Lent Term of 2024. I would like to thank the Cambridge University Faculty of Divinity and Magdalene College, Cambridge, and all the people there, especially Professor David Fergusson with his 'polyphonic approach towards the providence of God', for the opportunity to join the Cambridge Faculty and Magdalene College as research scholar, for the rich research opportunities, and for the inspiring questions and conversations. Many thanks also to the Global Network for Theology and Religion for granting me the Karl Schlecht Stipend. I am especially grateful to Isabel Jahnke for her thorough proofreading and profound suggestions for the improvement of this article.

Some say that we shall never know, and that to the gods we are like the flies that the boys kill on a summer day, and some say, on the contrary, that the very sparrows do not lose a feather that has not been brushed away by the finger of God.<sup>2</sup>

The novel shows the impact and ambiguity of the doctrine of providence. It is fascinating to see how it can contribute to regaining confidence in God and to finding meaning in a short life. And it is troubling to find that people understand providence as preferential intervention for individual wellbeing (or the lack thereof), intermingled with the question of theodicy.<sup>3</sup> A look at scripture and tradition shows that the doctrine of providence, contrary to the question of theodicy, asks about the origin of good in the world, the purpose of life despite evil, and the reason for confidence in God despite affliction. Still, both questions – the origin of good and the problem of evil – are inextricably interrelated in modern thought.

In the following, I wish to have a closer look at three remarkable approaches towards God's providence and corresponding understandings of the practice of prayer. First, I will present the soteriological dialogical approach of Catherine of Siena in her late medieval *Dialogue* on providence.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, I will analyse the quietist vitalist approach of the early modern English philosopher Anne Conway in her *Principles of Philosophy*.<sup>5</sup> Thirdly, I will reflect on the critical, non-interventionist approach of the French philosopher and mystic Simone Weil in her last work *The Need for Roots*, and in her other writings.<sup>6</sup> Finally, I will discuss the interrelation between providence and prayer. I will argue that any form of prayer implies an at least fragmentary understanding of the providence of God, in order for the prayer to make sense. And faith in God's providential care provides the very reason for the meaningful practice of prayer.

### Catherine of Siena's dialogical, soteriological approach

Catherine of Siena (1347–1380) wrote her *Dialogue* in the context of plague, wars in northern Italy, and the crisis of inner rivalries in the western Catholic Church.<sup>7</sup> Catherine herself was not spared from misery. She died at the young age of 33. And she was compassionate about the afflictions of others. In 1348, the year after Catherine's birth, one

<sup>2</sup>Thornton Wilder, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 12.

<sup>3</sup>David Fergusson, *The Providence of God: A Polyphonic Approach* (Cambridge: CUP, 2018); John Swinton, 'Patience and Lament: Living Faithfully in the Presence of Suffering', in *The Providence of God* pp. 275–90; Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in the Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford: OUP, 2010); Katherine Sonderegger, 'The Doctrine of Providence', in *The Providence of God*, pp. 144–57; Johannes Gössel, 'Schöpfungsrisiko oder Erlösungsgewissheit. Theologische Herausforderungen analytischer Vorsehungskonzeptionen', in Simon Maria Kopf and Georg Essen (eds), *Vorsehung und Handeln Gottes: analytische und kontinentale Perspektiven im Dialog*, Bd. 331 (Freiburg/Basel/Wien: Herder, 2023), pp. 149–66.

<sup>4</sup>Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, trans. Suzanne Noffke (New York: Paulist Press, 1980).

<sup>5</sup>Anne Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, eds Allison P. Coudert and Taylor Corse (Cambridge: CUP, 1999).

<sup>6</sup>Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties towards Mankind* (London: Routledge, 2002); Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (London: Routledge, 2021);

<sup>7</sup>Giuliana Cavalli, *Catherine of Siena* (New York/London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1998), pp. 89–150; Suzanne Noffke, *Catherine of Siena. Vision Through a Distant Eye* (New York: Authors Choice Press, 2006), pp. 87–105, 154–232.

third of the population of Siena died of the plague. Catherine would later care for the sick and the poor, alongside her theological and political engagement.<sup>8</sup>

Catherine of Sienna's explorative approach towards divine providence shows traces of the classical western accounts of God's eternal foreknowledge, and specifically of the concept of double agency associated with Boethius, Augustine, Anselm of Canterbury and Thomas Aquinas.<sup>9</sup> But her approach also differs in important respects. Firstly, it is more deeply embedded in *scriptural* reasoning and less indebted to neo-Platonic and Stoic speculation on divine foreknowing. Secondly, providence, for Catherine, is not primarily linked to the doctrine of God and creation but follows her ecclesiological reflections about the church as the body of Christ; also, her reflections have a primarily soteriological focus. Thirdly (and perhaps most importantly), her doctrine of providence is grounded in and formed by prayer: a dialogue with God. For it is in prayer that Catherine describes the experience of being heard by God, who answers her petitions, lamentations, complaints and intercessions with loving care.<sup>10</sup> In consequence, Catherine's focus is not so much on God being eternally in control of all things, but on God caring with love for the salvation of all human beings.

### *Providence as a relational quality of God's charity*

For Catherine providence describes a quality by which God relates to creatures by creating, redeeming, and perfecting them. Providence, for her, means that God always cares with love for his creatures.<sup>11</sup> The divine interlocutor is portrayed by her as one who complains that people do not care about him in the same way that he cares about them.<sup>12</sup> In a trinitarian horizon, the divine acts of creation, incarnation and indwelling are taken to be examples of God's general and special providence in creation and renewal.

The key to discovering God's providence in creation for Catherine is not cosmological reflection on the wise order of natural laws in general, but particularly our anthropological self-understanding as being essentially created in the image of the triune God, with memory, understanding, and will enabling us to understand, enjoy and rejoice in God and his goodness.<sup>13</sup> Here traces of an Augustinian trinitarian anthropology are evident. In the room of prayer, Catherine discovers the reason for human humility and gratefulness in the *imago Trinitatis*:

It was with providence that I created you, and when I contemplated my creature in myself I fell in love with the beauty of my creation. It pleased me to create you in my image and likeness with great providence. I provided you with the *gift of memory* so that you might hold fast my benefits and be made a *sharer in my own, the*

<sup>8</sup>Cornelia Wild, *Göttliche Stimme, Irdische Schrift: Dante, Petrarca und Caterina da Siena* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2016), pp. 96–124.

<sup>9</sup>Cavallini, *Catherine of Siena*, pp.17–18.

<sup>10</sup>Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, pp. 277–326. See also Jane Tylus, 'Mystical Literacy: Writing and Religious Women in Late Medieval Italy', in Carolyn Muessig, George Ferzoco and Beverly M. Kienzle (eds), *A Companion to Catherine of Siena* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2012), pp. 155–84.

<sup>11</sup>Noffke, *Catherine of Siena*, pp. 11–22.

<sup>12</sup>Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, p. 277.

<sup>13</sup>Cavallini, *Catherine of Siena*, pp. 23–5; cf. pp. 43–5, where she points out: 'Knowledge of truth is then, the result of both knowledge of God and knowledge of self: the two are complementary and never to be separated.'

*eternal Father's power. I gave you understanding so that in the wisdom of my only-begotten Son you might comprehend and know what I, the eternal Father want, I who gave you graces with such burning love. I gave you a will to love, making you a sharer in the Holy Spirit's mercy, so that you love what your understanding sees and knows. All this my gentle providence did, only that you might be capable of understanding and enjoying me and rejoicing in my goodness by seeing me eternally.*<sup>14</sup>

Thereby she shows that God, in the act of creation, provides all that is required to reach the goal of eternal happiness in communion with him: being itself; the capacity to remember, understand and love him; and participation in his power, wisdom and mercy. This corresponds with an attitude of humility in the practice of prayer, asking for and receiving everything gratefully from God, while having nothing of oneself to be proud of.<sup>15</sup>

With regard to divine providence in the incarnation, Catherine argues that God 'could have used no greater prudence and providence' than having given his Word, his only begotten Son in the incarnation, to provide all that is needed for the redemption of the fallen sinful humanity.<sup>16</sup> The incarnation and redemptive suffering of Christ are regarded as the most obvious examples of the supreme providential care of God for humanity, as the best cure against despair, and as a source for faithful trust in God's mercy:

For I, in my providence had joined my Godhead, the divine nature, with your human nature to make satisfaction for the sin, that had been committed against me, infinite Goodness. [...] This was the work of my providence, that through a finite deed (for the Word's suffering on the cross was finite) you have received infinite fruit by the power of the Godhead.<sup>17</sup>

To describe the incarnation and redemption as a work of unsurpassable providence means to highlight the caring manner in which God relates wisely and mercifully to fallen humanity. In the charity of Christ, God provides for humanity like a wet nurse who nourishes and cures babies by drinking their bitter medicine herself, in order to then feed it to them with her milk.<sup>18</sup> Although humanity lives in contradiction to God's will, he provides for humanity. Christ, as wet nurse, gives to humanity all that is needed to be cured from despair by faith.<sup>19</sup>

Interestingly, participation in the benefits of Christ's redemptive work is also described as a providential act of God. Catherine notably uses metaphors which express God's ultimate concern with human neediness and welfare: I 'clothed you anew in innocence and grace',<sup>20</sup> 'washing away the stain of original sin' in baptism,<sup>21</sup> 'warm the

<sup>14</sup>Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, p. 277; Cavallini, *Catherine of Siena*, pp. 34–50.

<sup>15</sup>Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, p. 278. Cavallini, *Catherine of Siena*, pp. 5–7, 24–7.

<sup>16</sup>Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, p. 278. Cf. Cavallini, *Catherine of Siena*, pp. 4–5; Noffke, *Catherine of Siena*, pp. 38–53.

<sup>17</sup>Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, p. 279; Cavallini, *Catherine of Siena*, pp. 67–88.

<sup>18</sup>Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, p. 292; Noffke, *Catherine of Siena*, pp. 23–30.

<sup>19</sup>Noffke, *Catherine of Siena: An Anthology Vol. 2*, p. 672. Letter T369, to Stefano di Corrado Maconi, late December 1379. In this letter she writes that 'God's love for us was so unspcakably crazy that, when we had become enemies because of our sin, God wanted to make us friends.'

<sup>20</sup>Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, p. 279.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

frozen human heart',<sup>22</sup> 'when my only begotten Son revealed to you through his pierced body the fire of my charity hidden under the ashes of your humanity',<sup>23</sup> and, 'My providence has given you food to strengthen you ... the body and blood of Christ crucified.'<sup>24</sup> By using these metaphors of divine providential care, Catherine conveys that the means of salvation meet basic human needs. The major gift of God's special providence is therefore confidence regained. The renewal of hope through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is expressed in different forms and modes of prayer, especially those of intercession and charity as a form of active prayer.<sup>25</sup> It is noteworthy, in this context, that in Catherine of Siena's trinitarian horizon God's general providence in creation and God's special providence in the renewing indwelling of the Spirit are deeply intertwined. This becomes clear through her use of metaphor. In several letters, for example, she illustrates God's loving providential care with the image of 'not a leaf falls from a tree without God's providence'.<sup>26</sup>

### *Different modes of providence*

Within her trinitarian horizon, Catherine of Siena makes use of the principle of accommodation. She distinguishes between different modes of God's loving providential care in relation to the state of the creature and its relatively free will: liberating the sinful, sanctifying the justified and perfecting the holy.<sup>27</sup> Catherine argues that God's providence attempts to lead those back to grace who are in a state of deadly sin, who cannot will to act in any way other than selfishly contrary to the will of God.<sup>28</sup> One form of God's liberating mode of providence is to stir up the human conscience by torments. Catherine writes: 'But from this nothingness of sin, a thorn that pierces the soul, I pluck this rose to provide for your salvation.'<sup>29</sup> Catherine here alludes to prayers of repentance and confession.

A second mode of providence in Catherine's thought, beside the mode of liberating providence, is the sanctifying mode of providence, which relates in particular to justified imperfect believers. In invoking yet another metaphor, Catherine writes: 'I do not allow enemies to open this gate of the will, which is free... the guard that stands at this gate, free choice, I have made free to say yes or no as he pleases.'<sup>30</sup> Thereby free will is identified as an integral part of God's providence. The freedom of the will is the greater the more it coincides with God's holy will. Without free assent of the will, sin cannot enter and corrupt the will.<sup>31</sup> This relates to Catherine's understanding of prayer as the 'mother of virtues' and as a 'weapon' to withstand temptations and to fight against evil.<sup>32</sup> The prayer of imperfect believers for a 'good and holy will' does not lead to

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>Noffke, *Catherine of Siena: An Anthology Vol. 1*, p. 22, Letter T335, to Christofano, Cartusian, October or November 1377.

<sup>27</sup>Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, p. 297.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 299.

<sup>31</sup>Cavallini, *Catherine of Siena*, p. 37–8.

<sup>32</sup>Noffke, *Catherine of Siena: An Anthology Vol. 2*, pp. 683–4, 689.

passive acceptance of whatever happens but strengthens the will in its active struggle against injustice.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, the third mode of divine providence perfects in grace those who are holy in willing what God's holy will wills them to will for its own sake. In this case, providence can be said to purify and intensify patience, the fire of love and compassion. It leads to growing humility and a union in love (although God withdraws in feeling from time to time, he does not withdraw in grace).<sup>34</sup> The metaphor which Catherine uses to describe God's perfecting providential care is that of a well-sounding instrument, which brings about a symphony of good and holy works without any selfish love: 'The soul's movement, then, makes a jubilant sound, its chords tempered and harmonised with prudence and light, all of them melting into one sound, the glorification and praise of my name.'<sup>35</sup> The social impacts of this perfecting providence are, in Catherine's view, voluntary poverty, brotherly love and a special responsibility to care for the poor in conformity with Christ.<sup>36</sup> Perfecting providence also includes being united with God's loving providential care in continual prayer through contemplation and charity.

### *Prayer as source, medium and expression of providential faith*

An exploration of the interrelation between providence and prayer in Catherine of Siena's *Dialogue* shows that the practice of prayer is understood as source, medium and expression of providential faith. The *Dialogue* is composed in the form of a poetic prayer. It is noteworthy that the *Dialogue* starts with intercession, a petitionary prayer for Catherine herself, for the reform of the corrupted church, for the whole world, that it may find peace, and for a special case.<sup>37</sup> These petitions structure the whole work as shaped by divine answers. Giuliana Cavalli makes the following observation about Catherine's prayers: 'When praying, Catherine is never alone before God: the interests of the whole world are always present to her.'<sup>38</sup>

Catherine prays in the Spirit through the Son to God as the Father, which resonates with the trinitarian horizon of her concept of providence. In what is a kind of personal and dialogical prayer, she regains the confidence of being heard by God with loving providential care. She imagines God in conversation with her as complaining that people do not care about him in the same way that he cares about them. And by means of prayer she gets involved in caring about others by rediscovering how God cares about them. Finally, the trinitarian horizon of God's providential charity in creation, redemption and indwelling corresponds to the practice of humble, continual prayer for a faithful, good and holy will which regains confidence in communion with God.<sup>39</sup> The aim is not only to remember and to understand, but to fall in love with God's providential love. Drawing on her nuanced understanding of the accommodated modes of divine providence, Catherine emphasises 'continual spiritual prayer of holy true desire'<sup>40</sup> as a weapon against 'spiritual sleepiness',<sup>41</sup> and she distinguishes between vocal prayer,

<sup>33</sup>Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, p. 120.

<sup>34</sup>Noffke, *Catherine of Siena*, pp. 65–73.

<sup>35</sup>Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, p. 310; Cavallini, *Catherine of Siena*, p. 28.

<sup>36</sup>Cavallini, *Catherine of Siena*, pp. 6–8; Noffke, *Catherine of Siena*, pp. 74–105.

<sup>37</sup>Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, 25–27; cf. Cavallini, *Catherine of Siena*, p. 3, 131–2.

<sup>38</sup>Cavallini, *Catherine of Siena*, p. 16.

<sup>39</sup>Noffke, *Catherine of Siena: An Anthology Vol. 2*, pp. 672–3.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 670 (Letter T301).

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 669.

which should not be abandoned, and mental prayer, which should be aimed at.<sup>42</sup> She finally understands prayer as participation in God's providential charity. In this sense, prayer nourishes responsible charity and 'loving charity is continual prayer'.<sup>43</sup>

### The quietist metaphysical approach of Anne Conway

In the early modern period, after the Copernican revolution and during the rise of science, traditional ways of reflecting about divine providence were challenged by the philosophical currents of atheist materialism, naturalist pantheism and religious deism.<sup>44</sup> A milestone to rethink providence philosophically in the face of these challenges was developed in the environment of philosophers who would later be referred to as the 'Cambridge Platonists'.<sup>45</sup> Anne Conway (1631–1679), in conversation with Henry More's (1614–1687) rational moral providentialism, developed the concept of the intrinsic providential presence of the transcendent Creator in the gradually ordered nexus of all living creatures.<sup>46</sup> In comparison to the work of Catherine of Siena, this new apologetic situation gave rise to a 'vitalist turn' from a soteriological concern about the human soul to a holistic metaphysical interest in the universal providence of God in all living creatures over against atheist critiques of providential patterns of thought. This is reflected in Conway's providential metaphysics, which focuses on the themes of human autonomy and religious tolerance.

Through the apologetic approach she adopts in *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, Anne Conway develops a vitalist reinterpretation of God's providential omnipresence in nature.<sup>47</sup> Thereby she formulates a critique of Descartes' dualism, Hobbes' materialism and Spinoza's pantheism.<sup>48</sup> In addition, she shares More's libertarian critique of the Calvinist predestinarian account of providence. Furthermore, over against a mere Deism, she draws on Jewish and Christian mystical traditions of the Kabbalah, in conversation with Franciscus Mercurius van Helmont, to demonstrate God's intrinsic presence.<sup>49</sup> Ultimately, between 1675 and 1677, she converted (despite More's objections) to the non-conformist movement of the Quakers and invited William Penn, George Keith and others to meet in her home, Ragley Hall.<sup>50</sup> It is also interesting to note that Conway's metaphysical reinterpretation of the intrinsic

<sup>42</sup>Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, pp. 122–4; Noffke, *Catherine of Siena: An Anthology Vol. 2*, pp. 691–4.

<sup>43</sup>Noffke, *Catherine of Siena: An Anthology Vol. 2*, p. 671. Noffke quotes Letter T91, to Agnesa di Francesco Pipino, written circa February 1379.

<sup>44</sup>See Fergusson, *The Providence of God*, pp. 13–19.

<sup>45</sup>Anne Conway, et al., *The Conway Letters*, p. 17; Douglas Hedley, David Leech (eds.), *Revisioning Cambridge Platonism: Sources and Legacy* (Cham: Springer, 2019), pp. 1–11; Douglas Hedley, and Christian Hengstermann (eds.), *An Anthology of the Cambridge Platonists: Sources and Commentary* (New York: Routledge, 2024).

<sup>46</sup>Fergusson, *The Providence of God*, p. 114.

<sup>47</sup>Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*.

<sup>48</sup>See also Carol Wayne White, *The Legacy of Anne Conway (1631–1679): Reverberations from a Mystical Naturalism* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2008), pp. 4–9, 25–6.

<sup>49</sup>See Sarah Hutton, *Anne Conway: A Woman Philosopher* (Cambridge: CUP, 2004), pp. 156–76.

<sup>50</sup>Anne Conway, et al., *The Conway Letters the Correspondence of Anne Viscountess Conway, Henry More, and Their Friends, 1642–1684*, ed. Sarah Hutton (Oxford/New York: Clarendon Press, 2004), p. viii; White, *The Legacy of Anne Conway (1631–1679)*, p. 22; Jonathan Head, 'Anne Conway and George Keith on the "Christ within"', *Quaker Studies* 23/2 (2018), pp. 161–77.

providential presence of the living God in nature resonates with the Quaker practice of silent prayer as meditation on 'Christ within' as the transformative inner light in creation.

### *Providence as the intrinsically mediated transformative presence of God*

A systematic analysis of Anne Conway's account of divine providence reveals that it is entailed in the mode of divine presence through Christ in all living creatures: To begin with, Conway understands providence as the vitalising mode of God's creative omnipresence. She holds that 'God is spirit, light and life, infinitely wise, good, just, strong, all-knowing, all-present, all-powerful, the creator and maker of all things visible and invisible.'<sup>51</sup> Over against an atheist materialistic denial of God's creative presence, she emphasises that '[c]reatures have their essences and existence purely from him because God, whose will agrees with his most infinite knowledge, wishes them to exist.'<sup>52</sup> Accordingly, the providence of the living God gives and sustains, multiplies and transforms the life of his creatures. Over against a deistic scepticism, Conway argues that God is 'immediately present in all things and immediately fills all things. In fact, he works immediately in everything in his own way.'<sup>53</sup> And 'wherever he is, he works'.<sup>54</sup> Consequently, there is no genuine absence of God in creation, but an active creative providential omnipresence in the nexus of all living creatures.<sup>55</sup>

Conway develops a rational trinitarian interpretation of God's intrinsic providential presence, similar to that of Ralph Cudworth.<sup>56</sup> She argues against a voluntaristic account: 'God is a most free agent and a most necessary one, so that he must do whatever he does to and for his creatures since his infinite wisdom, goodness and justice are a law to him which cannot be superseded.'<sup>57</sup> As the most perfect living God, the triune Creator does not act arbitrarily without sufficient reason, like a tyrant, or in contradiction to the goodness and wisdom of his triune being.<sup>58</sup> In accordance with this position, Conway adheres (as would Leibniz at a later point) to the principles of sufficient reason and non-contradiction: in relation to God nothing happens without reason and reality can be understood reasonably.<sup>59</sup>

Beside this theological foundation of her understanding of divine providence, Conway argues over against Spinoza's pantheism that God's providence cannot be identified with nature itself, or with the laws of nature, but is mediated by Christ as the creative Word of God. In the horizon of a trinitarian pantheism, she holds that God's providential omnipresence is at the same time a most transcendent and most immanent mediated presence.

<sup>51</sup>Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, p. 9.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 10.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 18.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., 25.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 18.

<sup>56</sup>Jaqueline Broad, ed., *Women Philosophers of Seventeenth-Century England: Selected Correspondence* (Oxford: OUP, 2019), pp. 86–8.

<sup>57</sup>Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, p. 16.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 10. Since she is mindful of Jewish and Islamic faith traditions as well, Conway prefers to speak about the Word and Spirit in God, rather than about 'persons'. For a further investigation about her complex, unorthodox trinitarian theology, see Jonathan Head, *The Philosophy of Anne Conway: God, Creation and the Nature of Time* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), pp. 115–28.

<sup>59</sup>Compare Gottfried W. Leibniz, *Confessio philosophi. Das Glaubensbekenntnis des Philosophen* (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1994), pp. 41–4.



[T]his must be understood in respect to that union and communication which creatures have with God so that although God works immediately in everything... yet he nevertheless uses this same mediator as an instrument through which he works together with creatures, since that instrument is by its own nature closer to them.<sup>60</sup>

And subsequently:

It follows, that the Son himself is immediately present in all creatures so that he may bless and benefit them. And since he is the true mediator between God and his creatures, it follows, since he exists among them, that he raises them by his action to union with God.<sup>61</sup>

Conway interprets the neo-Platonic concept of mediation christologically. She argues that Christ is the perfect mediator, because he shares both in the immutability and eternity of God, and in the mutability and temporality of creatures.<sup>62</sup> Whereas God is immutably most perfect, creatures, due to their free will, can change towards good or bad, and Christ can change from the good to the better.

This leads us to a third feature of Conway's providential metaphysics: the process of an infinite moral progress towards the 'spiritual purpose' of creation.<sup>63</sup> Over against the abandonment of teleology in nature in Descartes' dualistic mechanistic philosophy, Conway argues that God relates to creation in a providential way: he transforms it towards infinite perfection through the 'principle of justice'.<sup>64</sup> She writes: 'This happens through the same process and order of that divine operation which God gave to all things as law or justice. For in his divine wisdom, he decided to reward every creature according to its works.'<sup>65</sup> In this sense, Conway's spiritual monism implies a non-dualistic, cooperative, and integrative understanding of God's progressive providential perfection of creation.<sup>66</sup> It includes all of creation, since there is no dead matter, and it leaves room for the moral progress of human free will in a libertarian sense through the providential law of justice.

### *Quiet forms of embodying prayer in life*

A close look at Conway's works reveals three quietist forms of embodying prayer in life, which correspond to her vitalist reinterpretation of providence. Firstly, creaturely life as such is considered as embodied gratitude and praise of God. Conway writes with regard to the great variety of creatures: 'All these things especially praise and commend the great power and goodness of God because his infinity shines forth in the works of his hands, indeed in every creature he has made.'<sup>67</sup> Conway assumes in a very general sense that creaturely life embodies worship. Even matter participates in the life given by God.

<sup>60</sup>Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, p. 25.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>62</sup>See Broad, *Women Philosophers of Seventeenth-Century England*, pp. 70–2.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>64</sup>Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, p. 35.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>66</sup>Broad, *Women Philosophers of Seventeenth-Century England*, p. 89; Head, *The Philosophy of Anne Conway*, pp. 133–50.

<sup>67</sup>Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, p. 17.

Therefore, all living creatures praise their Creator with their lives even without words (Ps. 19). The greater the number and diversity of creatures, the greater the praise of the creator.

Secondly, Conway the 'Quaker Lady' emphasises the voluntary practice of silent prayer, the meditation of 'Christ within' as a transformative inner light.<sup>68</sup> Christ draws creatures into a union with God and raises them to taste a state of 'perfect tranquility'.<sup>69</sup> Conway notes: '[S]o that he may raise the souls of men above time and corruption up to himself, in whom they receive blessing and in whom they grow by degrees in goodness, virtue and holiness forever.'<sup>70</sup> Finally, prayer is regarded as a means of moral self-transformation, towards a growing assent to God's providential presence in whatever happens, rather than as a means of changing the process of events or leading God to intervene. Silent prayer aims at a moral self-perfection which involves caring with love and justice for fellow creatures and becoming more grateful, patient, humble and confident when experiencing afflictions.<sup>71</sup>

### The critical, non-interventionist approach of Simone Weil

In the first half of the twentieth century, the French philosopher, activist and mystic Simone Weil (1909–1943) developed a critical reinterpretation of providence in the context of social injustice, war and crimes against humanity. In contrast to the early modern optimism in the providential thought of Anne Conway, Simone Weil approaches providential faith apophatically, using *via negativa* in her journals, essays, and in her book *The Need for Roots*. The latter, which would become her last work, was published posthumously by Albert Camus after Weil's untimely death in 1943, in Ashford near London at the young age of 33.<sup>72</sup> In her writings, we find a philosophical critique of the misuse of providential thought in secular ideologies such as imperialism, Marxism, and National Socialism, and of the loss of modern confidence in progress. How can we reflect on the providence of God in the face of real evil in nature and in history? How can we distinguish the notion of God's providence from superstitious concepts of good fortune?<sup>73</sup> And how can the promissory aspect of providential faith be rediscovered in a broken world, which is not yet whole again?

Simone Weil was born into a secular Jewish family. A distinctive feature of her personal development is her transition from secular agnosticism to Christian mysticism. In *The Need for Roots*, which she wrote during her last years in London (where she had fled from the persecution by the Nazis and worked for the French Resistance), Weil develops a sharp critique of the belief in personal providence, which she describes as a ridiculous and superstitious absurdity.<sup>74</sup> In a context where 'the spirit of truth is almost absent',<sup>75</sup> Weil suggests an alternative and quite paradoxical form of belief in

<sup>68</sup>White, *The Legacy of Anne Conway (1631–1679)*, p. 23.

<sup>69</sup>Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, p. 27. See also Head, 'Anne Conway and George Keith', pp. 161–3; Hutton, *Anne Conway*, pp. 177–219; Head, *The Philosophy of Anne Conway*, pp. 21–44, 115–23.

<sup>70</sup>Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, p. 27.

<sup>71</sup>White, *The Legacy of Anne Conway (1631–1679)*, pp. 29, 20.

<sup>72</sup>Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots*, trans. Ros Schwartz (Dublin: Penguin, 2023), pp. 200–35.

<sup>73</sup>David Tracy, *Filaments: Theological Profiles*, vol. 2 of *Selected Essays* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2020), p. 376.

<sup>74</sup>Weil, *The Need for Roots*, pp. 216–8.

<sup>75</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 201.

impersonal divine providence and supernatural grace. This is a belief in spite of the hiddenness of God's presence in creation,<sup>76</sup> in spite of the human experience of God's absence in affliction,<sup>77</sup> and in spite of the merely indirect presence of God's love in the beauty of the order of the world, in true love of the neighbour, and in religious ceremonies like prayer.<sup>78</sup> Such a critical reinterpretation of divine providence as the spiritual presence of divine truth and love corresponds to a contemplative understanding of prayer as the highest form of attention.<sup>79</sup> The attentive contemplation of prayers such as the Lord's Prayer gains new relevance in this late modern recovery of confidence in the hidden impersonal providence of God despite and within affliction, tragedy and uprootedness.<sup>80</sup>

### *Non-preferential providence as hiddenly present love of God*

In the writings of Simone Weil, we find an ambivalent attitude towards divine providence. In the last chapter of *The Need for Roots*, Weil formulates a sharp critique of an interventionist account of personal providence. She rejects what she considers to be the imaginary concept of particular 'personal intervention by God in the world to adjust certain means for specific ends' as 'blatantly absurd'.<sup>81</sup> She judges providential explanations of history to be 'appalling and stupid, equally distasteful to the mind and the heart' and regards providential interpretations of good fortune in private life as 'ridiculous'.<sup>82</sup> According to Weil, '[t]he absurd conception of providence as personal and particular intervention by God for specific ends is incompatible with true faith... It is incompatible with the scientific conception of the world'.<sup>83</sup> This is because it divides the spirit 'into two completely separate compartments: one for the scientific conception of the world, and the other for the conception of the world as a domain where God's personal providence is at work'.<sup>84</sup> This leads to a loss of both science and faith. Furthermore, Weil argues that

it is not possible to extricate from the space-time continuum an event that would be like an atom... The sum of God's particular intentions is the universe itself. Only that which is evil is excluded... insofar as it is evil. In all other respects it corresponds to the will of God.<sup>85</sup>

Accordingly, God's providence should not be imagined as the personal arbitrary rule of a slaveholder. It can rather be symbolised impersonally by perfect 'poetic inspiration'.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>76</sup>Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 1–3.

<sup>77</sup>Simone Weil, 'The Love of God and Affliction', in Malcolm Muggeridge (ed.), *Simone Weil, Waiting for God* (London/New York: Routledge, 2021), pp. 71–88.

<sup>78</sup>Simone Weil, 'Forms of the Implicit Love of God', in *Simone Weil, Waiting for God*, pp. 89–155.

<sup>79</sup>Simone Weil, 'Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God', in *Simone Weil, Waiting for God*, pp. 61–70.

<sup>80</sup>Simone Weil, 'Spiritual Autobiography', in *Simone Weil, Waiting for God*, pp. 29–30; Simone Weil, 'Concerning the "Our Father"', in *Simone Weil, Waiting for God*, pp. 156–66.

<sup>81</sup>Weil, *The Need for Roots*, p. 216; Gustave Thibon, 'Introduction', in *Simone Weil, Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr (London/New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. xxi, xxxiv–xxxv.

<sup>82</sup>Weil, *The Need for Roots*, p. 218.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid., pp. 216–8.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., p. 219.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid., pp. 219–20.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid., p. 22.

In this sense, Weil embraces the 'duty of acceptance in all that concerns the will of God'.<sup>87</sup> This leads her to a non-interventionist concept of non-preferential providence, as the promise of a universal divine covenant,<sup>88</sup> which includes and limits the natural mechanical force of 'gravity' in a sinful natural world and society,<sup>89</sup> and works just by the supernatural mechanism of 'grace', which is expressed in the parables of the kingdom of God in the Gospels, as well as in other philosophical, cultural and religious traditions.<sup>90</sup> She writes:

All the parables about the seed echo the idea of an impersonal providence. Grace descends from God into all beings. What it becomes there depends on what they are. Where it truly enters, the fruits it bears are the result of a process similar to a mechanism, and which, like a mechanism, takes place over time. The virtue of patience, or... of *attente immobile* (motionless waiting) relates to this necessity of duration... Faith in providence consists of being certain that the universe in its totality is in conformity with the will of God.<sup>91</sup>

To believe in the conformity of the network of all events with the will of God, for Weil, means to love the *truth* of reality. The conformity or non-conformity of human acts with the will of God depends thereby on the moral quality of their loving of the good, despite evil.<sup>92</sup> Finally, it is remarkable how Weil underlines the paradoxical cruciform pattern of providence. With regard to the notion of the supernatural use of suffering, she emphasises that God's loving providence is most hiddenly present in the crucified love of Christ on the cross and in all those who continue to love into the void despite of affliction.<sup>93</sup>

### *Contemplative prayer as attention for God*

In her spiritual autobiography, Simone Weil writes about her late discovery of prayer: 'Until last September I had never once prayed in all my life, at least not in the literal sense of the word. I have never said any words to God either loud or mentally. I had never pronounced a liturgical prayer.'<sup>94</sup> Weil discovered the practice of prayer through the poem *Love* by the English metaphysical poet George Herbert.<sup>95</sup> She relates that she subsequently learnt the Lord's Prayer by heart and recited it every morning with full attention before starting to work in the vineyard. And she notes: 'Sometimes, also, during this recitation or at other moments, Christ is present with me in person.'<sup>96</sup>

In Weil's view, this practice of contemplative prayer, despite the individual religious experience of the personal presence of Christ, has something impersonal or

<sup>87</sup>Weil, 'Spiritual Autobiography', p. 27.

<sup>88</sup>Weil, *The Need for Roots*, pp. 221–3.

<sup>89</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 209.

<sup>90</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 222–5.

<sup>91</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 203 (cf. Mark 4.26–29); Thibon, 'Introduction', p. xxii.

<sup>92</sup>Weil, *The Need for Roots*, p. 209.

<sup>93</sup>Simone Weil, 'The love of God and affliction', in *Simone Weil, Waiting for God*, p. 78–87. I am especially grateful to George Newlands for hinting at the relevance of the *theologia crucis* for providential thought.

<sup>94</sup>Weil, 'Spiritual Autobiography', p. 31.

<sup>95</sup>David Pollard, *The Continuing Legacy of Simone Weil* (Lanham: Hamilton Books, 2015), p. 27.

<sup>96</sup>Weil, 'Spiritual Autobiography', p. 32.

transpersonal – as does providence. In the practice of contemplative prayer, the soul waits attentively for God to reveal Godself as present, despite God’s fundamental hiddenness, but it does not enter into a dialogue.<sup>97</sup> ‘Prayer consists in attention. It is the orientation of all attention of which the soul is capable towards God. The quality of the attention counts for much in the quality of prayer.’<sup>98</sup> And: ‘Attention consists of suspending our thought... Above all our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object...’<sup>99</sup>

In a very broad sense, all subjects of study, geometry as well as languages, aim at developing the faculty of attention. Therefore, education and prayer go hand in hand in the formation of the attentive attitude of waiting for God to reveal Godself. For Weil, this form of contemplative prayer is not restricted to Christianity, but also found in eastern religions, especially in the Bhagavad Gita, which she read and translated in 1940.<sup>100</sup> The emphasis on the transpersonal aspect of attention in the practice of contemplative prayer correlates with her apophatic account of impersonal providence. In her remarkable interpretation of the Lord’s Prayer, she understands the petitions as acceptance of the perfectly good will of God, and actualising his kingdom and will on earth as in heaven through the praying people.<sup>101</sup> Weil writes:

The Our Father contains all possible petitions; we cannot conceive of any prayer which is not already contained in it. It is to prayer what Christ is to humanity. It is impossible to say it once through, giving the fullest attention to each word, without change, infinitesimal perhaps but real, taking place in the soul.<sup>102</sup>

In this sense, contemplation becomes the form of prayer which, in attentive love, can bear the hiddenness of God’s universal providence.

### Conclusion: the interrelation of providence and prayer

I hope to have shown with regard to the approaches of Catherine of Siena, Anne Conway and Simone Weil the close interrelation between reflections on divine providence on the one hand, and practices of prayer on the other. In turning now to more current debates, I wish to conclude by suggesting that any form of prayer (e.g., petitionary prayer, thanksgiving, contemplation) implies an at least fragmentary understanding of the providence of God in order to make sense.<sup>103</sup> In accordance with this position, premature practices of prayer correspond to premature accounts of divine providence and vice versa. Since providential faith provides reason and orientation for the practice of prayer, it is important to reflect on any praying person’s doctrine of divine providence thoroughly.

Furthermore, I hope to have shown that providential thought can be interpreted as tacit knowledge, which is entailed in the practice of prayer. This praxeological

<sup>97</sup>Pollard, *The Continuing Legacy of Simone Weil*, p. 40: ‘Repeatedly Weil insisted that the action involved in prayer was attention and attention was waiting. At the heart of the love of God was this attention and waiting and it was the quality which was also at the heart of the love of neighbor.’

<sup>98</sup>Weil, ‘Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies’, p. 61.

<sup>99</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>100</sup>Weil, ‘Spiritual Autobiography’, p. 31.

<sup>101</sup>Weil, ‘Concerning the “Our Father”’, pp. 156–7.

<sup>102</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 165–6.

<sup>103</sup>Fergusson, *The Providence of God*, pp. 11–12, 297–305.

understanding of the doctrine of providence admits honestly that while several approaches exist, no one perfectly coherent account of providence is possible.<sup>104</sup> Rather any account always entails tensions. The reason for this, beside compelling logical objections to ambiguities in common concepts of divine providence, is the epistemic imperfection of any attempt to explain completely tacit knowledge which is acquired through practice. I hope that these observations and reflections will lead to further investigations of the practice of prayer as source, medium and expression of providential faith.

The traditional, early modern and late modern approaches of Catherine of Siena, Anne Conway and Simone Weil vary, in the first instance, with regard to their respective preferences of dialogical, quietist, or contemplative forms of prayer. Secondly, they vary with regard to the characteristics of a soteriological, metaphysical, and an apophatic concept of divine providence, and with regard to their respective forms of reasoning: Catherine of Siena's metaphorical imagination, Anne Conway's rational arguments, and Simone Weil's contemplation of paradoxes.

This leads me to the suggestion, that there are remarkable affinities between certain modes of prayer and certain patterns of providential thought. Prayers of repentance and intercession are rooted in the traditional dialogical concept of providence. The practices of confession and petitionary prayer rely on the conviction that God acts in the world and cares with providential charity for the salvation of his creatures.<sup>105</sup> Prayers of thanksgiving and praise or lament and complaint resonate with the early modern reinterpretations of providence. In praise we express gratitude for the Creator's good and wise providential ordering of the world, and in lament we express grief and mourning about the evil of afflictions.<sup>106</sup> Finally, contemplation bears the late modern paradoxical notion of the hiddenness of God's providential presence.<sup>107</sup> In contemplative prayer, we can regain even in affliction, as described in Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, the confidence that God's providential love is hiddenly present in all of reality.

I wish to suggest an integral vision of the different modes of verbal liturgical prayer and silent contemplative prayer. They emphasise different aspects of trust in God's providential care and offer different ways to deal with the experience that providential faith can be scattered in the experience of suffering and affliction. They enrich and correct each other.

The liturgically shaped mode prayer helps to express gratefulness, guilt, grief, adoration and concerns *coram Deo* in an articulate and communal way. It is nourished by the narratives and poetics of scripture and tradition and shared in communion with other people. Thereby the confidence in God's providential care is articulated in a consciously shaped way. The strength of this verbal mode of prayer is that the individual person's confidence can grow in the communion of believers to become more articulate. It is possible to participate in other believers' experiences and verbal and embodied articulations of thanksgiving, repentance and petition.<sup>108</sup> The individual person thereby

<sup>104</sup>Christoph Ernst, and Heike Paul (eds.), *Präsenz und implizites Wissen. Zur Interdependenz zweier Schlüsselbegriffe der Kultur- und Sozialwissenschaften* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2013), pp. 9–34.

<sup>105</sup>Fergusson, *The Providence of God*, pp. 322–30.

<sup>106</sup>Sonderegger, 'The Doctrine of Providence', pp. 144–57.

<sup>107</sup>Stump, *Wandering in the Darkness*; Swinton, 'Patience and Lament', pp. 275–90; Simon Peng-Keller, *Geistbestimmtes Leben. Spiritualität (3. Aufl.)* (Zürich: TVZ, 2018); Simon Peng-Keller, *Überhelle Präsenz, Kontemplation als Gabe, Praxis und Lebensform (2. Aufl.)* (Würzburg: Echter, 2021).

<sup>108</sup>Swinton, 'Patience and Lament', pp. 275–80.

transcends the limits of their own language. When a person prays in communion with others in a verbally articulate way, prayer becomes less self-centred or even a service to others. This communal verbal mode of praying is especially important if someone's confidence in God's providential care has been impacted by the experience of severe suffering. It is a relief for the afflicted person to be aware that others will intercede for her, if she cannot pray herself. This resonates with the promise Christ gave to Peter: 'But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not' (Luke 22:32). The afflicted are carried through the dark night of the soul through Christ and other people's intercessory prayers and concrete care. Therefore, intercession and petitionary prayers are a basic service of the church together with concrete social care; through these forms of prayer people are transformed into a caring community. When the church embodies visibly a caring community by prayer and exhibiting loving care, it conforms to what Christ called in the Lord's Prayer the will of the heavenly Father. By this practice the community of believers becomes a transparent sign that God cares with love for each creature despite suffering and evil. But if members of Christian communities oppress, violate, abuse or neglect the needs of the needy the practice of petitionary prayer loses its credibility. Similarly, a prayer of repentance which addresses God's mercy in Christ calls for authentic renewal to conform to God's providential care as embodied in the way Christ cared about those who are physically and spiritually in need.

By contrast, the practices of contemplative prayer and silent meditation focus more on the individual person's relation to God and all of creation (rather than on the *communio sanctorum*) and proceeds in a more simplistic, intuitive, precognitive (rather than verbally articulate) mode.<sup>109</sup> Therefore it tends to be a more individualistic and experiential. This spiritual focus can be recognised in all three approaches examined in this essay. Contemplative prayer is thus simply being present in the presence of Christ. It is without any effort, as depicted in the story of Mary just sitting close to Jesus with attention, listening to what he said (Luke 10:38–42). Silent prayer expresses confidence in God's providence as a gift of grace, which transforms the emotions of the contemplating person to will what God wills her to will. Contemplative prayer is furthermore especially aware of the ineffability of God's providence. It nourishes a deep and even paradoxical confidence, despite a non-understanding of the ways of God in the face of tragic suffering and horrendous evil. In the practice of contemplative prayer, people even bear the experience of the hiddenness of God's presence and waiting in the void silently for God to reveal God's providential care in the dark night. Contemplative prayer deals with the lack of adequate words in the face both of deep mourning and of amazing bliss. It draws on what the apostle Paul calls the 'groaning of the spirit', which helps if one does not know what to pray (Rom 8:26–27). In the way the contemplative mode of prayer relies on the Holy Spirit as comforter, which Christ has promised and given. In contemplative prayer confidence is regained in the presence the Holy Spirit by the gift of God's providential, saving and transformative love in Christ.

This leads to the suggestion that the communal, articulate practice of liturgical, verbal prayer, like the Lord's Prayer, follows and deepens a christological pattern of struggling confidently with the providence of God, as embodied in Jesus Christ interceding and caring for all he loves. In comparison, the personal, experiential practice of contemplative prayer and silent mediation follows and deepens a

<sup>109</sup>Peng-Keller, *Überhelle Präsenz*, pp. 47ff.

pneumatological pattern of struggle, which reflects the ineffability of the providential care of God. Thereby the Holy Spirit is acknowledged as giver of the gift of confidence in God's providential care for all in God's creation, despite all brokenness and mourning. In the context of a trinitarian Christian spirituality both basic modes of prayer can therefore be integrated theologically and practically when people are groaning in the Holy Spirit and praying in the name of Jesus to God, the heavenly Father of all. In a trinitarian perspective confidence in the just and merciful providence of God can thus be regained in multiple ways.

---

**Cite this article:** Koenig K (2024). Confidence regained: Providence and prayer in the works of Catherine of Siena, Anne Conway and Simone Weil. *Scottish Journal of Theology* 77, 346–361. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930624000553>