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PROVIDENCE AND POLITICS IN CROMWELLIAN ENGLAND

Seventeenth-century Englishmen knew that God intervenes continually and continuously in the world He has made. His hand could be seen in every change of the weather or the wind; in every good crop and every bad one, in every sickness and recovery, in every misadventure of the traveller and his every safe return. Diaries, commonplace-books, public speeches, government declarations: all voluminously testify to the pervasiveness of the belief in providence, and to the anxious vigilance which attended the detection and interpretation of divine dispensations. So ubiquitous was providentialism indeed, and at times so repetitive and predictable in its expression, that our familiarity with it may breed, if not contempt, then at least neglect. Conventional providentialism belongs to conventional piety; and conventional piety, the bread and butter of so much seventeenth-century thinking, can easily be mistaken for mere literary decoration. It is a mistake to which the historian of politics may be especially prone. Searching his sources for the concrete and for the unexpected, he rarely permits allusions to the workings of God's providence to detain him. Yet providentialism is to be found at the centre of seventeenth-century political argument and decision-making.

That is evident even if we stay on the surface of events. The more spectacular and revolutionary the event, indeed, the more obvious is the influence which providentialism exerted. For did not Oliver Cromwell and his soldiers proclaim themselves "instruments of providence", "raised up" by God to re-enact the military history and to implement the political precepts of the Old Testament? Did they not execute Charles I "since providence and necessity had cast them upon it", and then abolish monarchy because "the providence of God has laid this title aside"?¹ When the Commonwealth regime split

¹ W. C. Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, 4 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1937-47), i, p. 719, and iv, p. 473. "Necessity" may have been "the tyrant's plea", but in the early modern period it retained reputable philosophical credentials as a branch of "providence": see, for example, Justus Lipsius, *Two Bookes of Constantie*, ed. R. Kirk (New Brunswick, 1939), ch. 15; Sir Philip Sidney, *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*, ed. M. Evans (Harmondsworth, 1977), pp. 489-90; Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, I. v. 25; Samuel Butler, *Prose Observations*, ed. H. de Quehen (Oxford, 1979), p. 14; *The Works of Tacitus*, trans. T. Gordon, 2 vols. (1728-31), i, p. 25. The
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the nation in the winter of 1649-50 by imposing an "engagement" of loyalty, the "straightforward invocation of providence", suggests Quentin Skinner, "remained the most basic argument in favour of 'engagement' throughout the ensuing controversy".² Cromwell, having turned out the Long Parliament in 1653, exercised "the power God had most providentially put into my hand".³ Time and again, in speeches which are veritable hymns to providence, he went over "the providences of God, how they have led us hitherto".⁴ His courtiers countered parliamentary criticism with the statement that "divine providence" had "set a stamp and seal upon this government",⁵ while his apologists published tracts "wherein is clearly demonstrated and proved that Oliver Cromwell is by the Providence of God Lord Protector of England, Scotland and Ireland".⁶ Cromwell asserted the right to "balance this providence, as in the sight of God, with any hereditary interest".⁷ After Oliver's death, his son Richard

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two terms, and ideas, were closely associated with each other in Puritan minds: Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, iii, pp. 60-1, 460, 590-1, and iv, pp. 261, 353; *Constitutional Documents of the Puritan Revolution*, ed. S. R. Gardiner (Oxford, 1889; repr. 1958), p. 403; *The English Banner of Truth Displayed* (London, 1650), pp. 7-8; John Dury, *Considerations concerning the Present Engagement* (London, 1650), pp. 13-14 (cf. *Two Treatises concerning the Matter of the Engagement* (London, 1650), p. 9); A. S. P. Woodhouse, *Puritanism and Liberty* (London, 1938; repr. 1974), p. 443; *Original Letters and Papers of State . . . Addressed to Oliver Cromwell*, ed. John Nickolls (London, 1743), p. 91; N. H. Keeble, *Richard Baxter, Puritan Man of Letters* (Oxford, 1982), pp. 3, 29; cf. J. A. Mazzeo, *Renaissance and Seventeenth-Century Studies* (London, 1964), p. 200.

² Quentin Skinner, "Conquest and Consent: Thomas Hobbes and the Engagement Controversy", in G. E. Aylmer (ed.), *The Interregnum: The Quest for Settlement, 1646-1660* (London, 1972), p. 86. (Skinner's essay is principally concerned with arguments other than providentialist ones.)

³ Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, iii, p. 454.

⁴ *Ibid.*, iv, p. 485.

⁵ *Diary of Thomas Burton*, ed. J. T. Rutt, 4 vols. (London, 1828), i, p. xxix.

⁶ George Smith, *God's Unchangeableness* (London, 1655), title-page and *passim*; E.M., *Protection Persuading Subjection* (London, 1653/4), esp. pp. 5-6; *Confusion Confounded* (London, 1654), pp. 20-1; *The Humble Representation and Address to His Highness of Several Churches and Christians in South-Wales* (London, 1656), p. 24. (Those pamphlets can be identified as semi-official publications by the names of their printers or booksellers.) See also William Kaye, *A Tripartite Remonstrance* (London, 1657), pp. 15, 23 ff.; William Medley, *A Standard Set Up* (London, 1657), pp. 1-7. The place of providentialism in Cromwell's thinking has been sympathetically studied by R. S. Paul, *The Lord Protector* (London, 1955); and there are able discussions in Christopher Hill, *God's Englishman* (London, 1970), ch. 9, "Providence and Oliver Cromwell"; Roger Crabtree, "The Idea of a Protestant Foreign Policy", in Ivan Roots (ed.), *Cromwell: A Profile* (London, 1973), pp. 160-89. If the full impact of Cromwell's providentialism remains unrecognized, that may be largely because the nineteenth-century historians who rediscovered Cromwell's religion were too little interested in the doctrine of providence. Carlyle, who liked the sound of Cromwell's providentialism, paid small attention to the substance. Gardiner viewed it with scepticism: see Hill, *God's Englishman*, p. 217.

⁷ Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, iii, p. 458.

declared himself successor “by the providence of God”, and in parliament Richard’s supporters proclaimed that he had been “set upon the pinnacle by providence”.⁸ When Richard fell from power, the Commonwealthmen vied with each other in hailing the restoration of the Rump as “this opportunity, which the wonderful, and, as they hope, the gracious providence of God hath held forth to them”.⁹

Even if we were to convince ourselves that the claims of the Cromwellians — and of their “Commonwealth” opponents — were purely cynical, we would still confront a sizeable historical problem. For a cynical appeal to providence can seem worth making only if its audience can be expected to take notice of it. Cromwell did not merely invoke providence as a sanction of his rule. He lectured parliament at length about the workings of providence on his soul. The spectacle is puzzling, until we reflect that the providentialist language which Cromwell spoke was a language readily intelligible to Puritan M.P.s, who themselves employed it habitually in their correspondence and their commonplace-books and indeed in their own parliamentary speeches. It was a language of everyday Puritan belief, a language which influenced private lives before public events, and which reinforced conventional authority more often than it subverted it. In his private life, as a landowner and as head of a family, Cromwell spoke of providence in terms which are indistinguishable from those used by countless country gentlemen who were politically neither active nor radical.¹⁰ His application of conventional

⁸ *Diary of Thomas Burton*, iii, pp. 8, 25, 116. Richard claimed in the same breath to have succeeded by “the disposition of the law”. Here he resembled his father, and others, in placing an appeal to the sanction of providence alongside more secular claims to authority, rather than integrating the religious with the secular arguments: see, for example, Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, iii, pp. 456-7; *Mercurius politicus*, 5-12 June 1651, p. 855 (where Marchamont Nedham tenuously connects an appeal to conquest theory with one to providence); *A Collection of Scarce and Valuable Tracts . . . of the Late Lord Somers*, ed. Sir Walter Scott, 13 vols. (London, 1809-15), vi, p. 480 (where Slingsby Bethel aligns the argument of providence with that of consent). For the relationship in seventeenth-century minds between providentialist and other forms of argument or explanation, see also, for example, *Diary of Thomas Burton*, iv, p. 179; *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ed. D. M. Wolfe et al., 8 vols. (New Haven, 1953-83), i, p. 751; *The Letter Books of Sir William Brereton*, ed. R. N. Dore, 1 (Record Society of Lancashire and Cheshire, cxxiii, 1984), p. 476; Andrew Marvell, *The Rehearsal Transpros’d*, ed. D. I. B. Smith (Oxford, 1971), p. 43.

⁹ *The Parliamentary or Constitutional History of England*, 21 vols. (London, 1751-62), xxi, p. 380. Cf. *ibid.*, xxi, pp. 368, 400-1, 415; *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, vii, p. 67; H. F. Russell Smith, *Harrington and his Oceana* (Cambridge, 1914), p. 88.

¹⁰ Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, i, pp. 585, 590, 592, and ii, pp. 8-9, 28, 39, 50, 598, 601-2; cf., for example, *Barrington Family Letters, 1628-1632*, ed. Arthur Searle (Camden Soc., 4th ser., xxviii, London, 1983), pp. 87-8, 106.

providentialism to radical politics might arouse anger and provoke logical objections; yet in the arguments between the Cromwellians and their Puritan opponents — and even their Cavalier ones — about the place of providence in politics, the common ground was broader than the areas of dispute. Beneath that ground were layers of belief and mental habit without an awareness of which the character and the course of Puritan politics are not properly intelligible. The aim of this essay will be to convey, by example and quotation, something of the character of Puritan providentialism and of the influence which it exerted on Puritan politics. We must begin with the language in which Puritan providentialism was conventionally expressed, and with the system of ideas which that language reported.

I

The greatest work of Puritan literature begins with Milton's resolve to "assert eternal providence", and ends with the withdrawal of our first parents from Paradise with "providence their guide". But just as Milton's mind and imagination roam beyond Puritanism and across the spectrum of Christian and pagan literature, so there is of course nothing peculiarly Puritan or even peculiarly Christian — and nothing peculiar to the seventeenth century — about the human propensity to interpret successes and calamities as manifestations of divine intervention and divine order and divine justice. Sometimes we may wonder where, in practice, the difference can have lain between Puritan providentialism and Catholic and pagan beliefs which Puritans scorned as superstitious. Sometimes; but not always. Protestantism, which expelled the intermediaries between God and the soul, and which contrived at once to make God more awesomely distant and to bring Him more awesomely close, placed a novel emphasis on providence as the exercise of His power. The Reformation, as Keith Thomas has suggested in his magisterial account of early modern providentialism, brought "a new insistence upon God's sovereignty".¹¹ That insistence grew with the advances of zealous Prot-

¹¹ Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London, 1971), p. 79. That historians are now more sensitive to providentialism than they recently were reflects the influence of Thomas's book, esp. ch. 4, "Providence". There is helpful material on providentialism too in C. A. Patrides, *Milton and the Christian Tradition* (Oxford, 1966), pp. 51-9 and ch. 8; P. A. Slack, "Some Aspects of Epidemics in England, 1485-1640" (Univ. of Oxford D.Phil. thesis, 1972), ch. 6; Anthony Fletcher, *A County Community in Peace and War: Sussex, 1600-1660* (London, 1975), pp. 66-9; Michael McKeon, *Poetry and Politics in Restoration England* (Cambridge, Mass., 1975), pp. 63-8, 139-40, 158-62; Mervyn James, *English Politics and the Concept of Honour, 1485-*
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estantism, and lessened with its eventual retreat. The rise, and the decline, of Puritan providentialism are large and vexing questions which lie beyond our present purpose. But while the belief in providence is an essential and prominent feature of the intellectual map both before 1620 and after 1660, the providentialism of the period which falls approximately between those dates does seem distinguishable by the frequency and by the intensity of its expression. In those decades the small print of the Protestant doctrine of providence is given more consistently close attention. The Great Rebellion, it seems safe to suggest, is the time when Puritan providentialism enjoys its most widespread influence.¹²

(n. 11 cont.)

1642 (Past and Present Supplement no. 3, Oxford, 1978), esp. pp. 47 ff.; Barbara Donagan, "Providence, Chance and Explanation: Some Paradoxical Aspects of Puritan Views on Causation", *Jl. Religious Hist.*, ix (1981), pp. 385-403; Barbara Donagan, "Godly Choice: Puritan Decision-Making in Seventeenth-Century England", forthcoming in *Harvard Theol. Rev.*; Keeble, *Richard Baxter*, ch. 7; Peter Lake, *Moderate Puritans and the Elizabethan Church* (Cambridge, 1982), ch. 7; Keith Wrightson, *English Society, 1580-1680* (London, 1983), pp. 201-2; J. R. Hale, *Renaissance War Studies* (London, 1983), ch. 18, "Incitements to Violence? English Divines on the Theme of War, 1578 to 1631"; and the discussions by Hill and Crabtree cited in n. 6 above.

¹² It may be that the period *circa* 1620-60 represents a summit of Continental providentialism too: that, for example, when J. H. Elliott tells us in his *Richelieu and Olivares* (Cambridge, 1984), p. 158, that Richelieu and Olivares were both "imbued by the idea of Providence", he means something which would not be quite so true of Counter-Reformation statesmen of earlier and later generations (although see also J. H. Elliott, "Self-Perception and Decline in Early Seventeenth-Century Spain", *Past and Present*, no. 74 (Feb. 1977), pp. 46-7). In England, providentialism may have seemed to be on the retreat earlier in the seventeenth century, at least among the laity. See Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* (Brighton, 1984), ch. 5; cf. H. R. Trevor-Roper, *Religion, the Reformation and Social Change* (London, 1967; repr. 1984), pp. 198 ff. No reader of Foxe, no reader of Sidney's *Arcadia* and no student of Elizabethan drama would doubt the hold exerted by beliefs in providence in later sixteenth-century England; for the drama, see, for example, Michael Quinn, "Providence in Shakespeare's Yorkist Plays", *Shakespeare Quart.*, x (1959), pp. 45-52; Alan Sinfield, "Hamlet's Special Providence", *Shakespeare Survey*, xxxiii (1980), pp. 89-97. Equally, no student of the responses to the Revolution of 1688-9 would imagine that providentialism had by then wholly lost its political force, and no reader of (say) Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* would wish to dismiss the influence of providentialism on eighteenth-century popular culture. For providentialism and 1688-9, see Mark Goldie, "The Revolution of 1689 and the Structure of Political Argument", *Bull. Research in the Humanities*, lxxxiii (1980), pp. 489-90. But there were limits, as Goldie shows, to the use which Whigs wished to make of providentialist arguments; and the embarrassment at mid-century providentialism experienced by the radical Whigs who published Edmund Ludlow's autobiography in the 1690s (see Edmund Ludlow, *A Voyage from the Watch Tower. Pt. 5, 1660-1662*, ed. A. B. Worden (Camden Soc., 4th ser., xxi, London, 1978), pp. 5-10, 51-2, 75-6), is a reminder of the impact which "reason" had made, at least outside the ranks of the hardened dissenters. It is my impression (i) that the conventional providentialism of neither the sixteenth nor the eighteenth

(cont. on p. 60)

In their teaching on providence, Puritans followed and expanded Calvin, who had placed the doctrine at the heart of the true believer's interpretation of the world around him. Calvin was scandalized by his contemporaries' neglect of the subject. They conceived of God, he complained, as "a momentary Creator, who completed His work once for all, and then left it", "sitting idly in heaven". "It is certain", Calvin ruled, "that not a drop of rain falls without the express command of God".¹³ The Heidelberg Catechism, that major influence on English Puritanism, warned that "they who deny providence, deny God to be God, and take away all religion".¹⁴ Richard Sibbes summoned Matthew 10:28-9, a favourite text of providentialists (Oliver Cromwell among them), when he recalled that God's "providence extends to the smallest things, to the sparrows and to the hair of our heads; he governs every particular passage of our lives".¹⁵

Providence was a large subject. Writers who approached it agreed in distinguishing between God's "general" and His "special" providence, although the distinction was variously applied. Sometimes the former meant God's government of the natural world, the latter His dealings with humanity.¹⁶ Sometimes God's "special" providence was taken to be His watch over His church and His elect, while His "general" providence supervised mankind at large.¹⁷ Sometimes

(n. 12 cont.)

century is as elaborately structured or as theologically self-conscious as that of the Puritan Revolution, and (ii) that after 1660 providence comes to be more often thought of as a benevolent than as a punitive force. On the eighteenth century there is Jacob Viner, *The Role of Providence in the Social Order* (Philadelphia, 1972).

¹³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. H. Beveridge, 3 vols. (Edinburgh, 1845-6), i, pp. 231, 236, 238.

¹⁴ Zachary Ursinus, *The Summe of Christian Religion* (London, 1587; repr. 1611), p. 329; cf. *ibid.*, p. 368; Joseph Caryl, *An Exposition with Practical Observations upon the Book of Job*, 2 vols. (London, 1676), ii, col. 1430.

¹⁵ *The Works of Richard Sibbes, D.D.*, ed. A. B. Grosart, 7 vols. (Edinburgh, 1857-64), v, p. 35; Paul, *Lord Protector*, p. 300; cf. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, i, p. 233; John Preston, *Life Eternall* (London, 1631), "The Sixteenth Sermon", p. 154.

¹⁶ John Wilkins, *A Discourse concerning the Beauty of Providence* (London, 1649), p. 62; *The Works, Moral and Religious, of Sir Matthew Hale, Knt.*, ed. T. Thirlwall, 2 vols. (London, 1805), ii, pp. 256, 266.

¹⁷ Ursinus, *Summe of Christian Religion*, p. 332; Caryl, *Exposition with Practical Observations upon the Book of Job*, i, col. 1189; *The Works of John Owen*, ed. W. H. Goold, 16 vols. (Edinburgh, 1850-3; repr. 1965-8), x, p. 33, and xi, p. 134; *Articles of Christian Religion Approved and Passed by Both Houses of Parliament* (London, 1648), p. 13; *The Confession of Faith, together with the Larger and Lesser Catechismes, Composed by the Reverend Assembly of Divines* (London, 1658), p. 21; Ralph Robinson, *Safe Conduct* (London, 1654), pp. 12, 25. Cf. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, i, p. 247; Thomas Fuller, *Jacob's Vow* (Oxford, 1644), p. 17; William Gouge, *The Progresse of Divine Providence* (London, 1645), p. 1; John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding*, ed. G. B. Harrison (Everyman edn., London, 1928; repr. 1979), pp. 47-8.

God's "general" (or "ordinary" or "mediate") providence was His usual operation through second causes, "when there is a sufficiency in the meanes ordinarily to bring about such an end, as when the greater number doth beat the lesser", or when He cures illness through medicine. By the same definition God's "special" (or "extraordinary" or "immediate") providence is made manifest "when there is not a common, naturall power in the instrumentall causes and meanes, to bring forth such an effect, or to attaine to such an end":¹⁸ thus He will enable a weak army to defeat a strong one, or — to show that "God is not tied to Galen's rules" — will save us after medicine has been shown to fail.¹⁹ God, alas, needs to dispense extraordinary providences because fallen man too often omits to notice His ordinary ones.²⁰

Providences were pleasant or unpleasant. Pleasant ones were "mercies" (or "deliverances"). Unpleasant ones were "judgements" (or "afflictions", "visitations", "trials", "chastisements", "rebukes" or "corrections"); they were "cross providences", "rugged providences", "sad", "black", "damping", "frowning", "louring" providences. Mercies were bestowed, and judgements inflicted, on individuals, on communities, on nations. Mercies were grants of divine clemency, unmerited and unexpected. Judgements, however severe, were never as dreadful as man deserved. They were signals of the wrath provoked in God by sin. Sometimes the offending sins were conspicuous, like the whoredom, the adultery, the drunkenness and the blasphemy which were held to be rampant in seventeenth-century England, and on which a host of calamities was blamed — not least the Civil Wars.²¹ At other times God sent affliction in order to stir the victim

¹⁸ John Bond, *Ortus Occidentalis* (London, 1645), p. 14; cf. Ursinus, *Summe of Christian Religion*, p. 332; *The Works of Algernon Sydney*, ed. T. Hollis and J. Robertson (London, 1772), "Discourses", p. 136.

¹⁹ *Works of Richard Sibbes*, ed. Grosart, v, p. 45; cf. *Letters of the Lady Brilliana Harley*, ed. T. T. Lewis (Camden Soc., 1st ser., lviii, 1854), p. 247; Lucy Hutchinson, *Memoirs of the Life of Colonel Hutchinson*, ed. J. Sutherland (Oxford, 1973), pp. 272-3.

²⁰ *The Works of the Right Reverend Father in God, Joseph Hall, D.D.*, ed. J. Pratt, 10 vols. (London, 1808), i, p. 86; *Memoirs of the Life of Colonel Hutchinson*, p. 278; John Rowe, *Man's Duty in Magnifying God's Work* (London, 1656), p. 17. For the concept of special providence, see also *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ii, p. 437; Alistair Fox, *Thomas More: History and Providence* (Oxford, 1982), p. 97; Charles Webster, *The Great Instauration* (London, 1975), p. 23; *A Brief Narrative of the Late Treacherous and Horrid Designe, which by the Great Blessing and Especiall Providence of God hath been Lately Discovered* (London, 1643). (The discovery of plots and conspiracies invariably prompted reflections on the operation of providence.)

²¹ *Jl. House of Commons*, 2 Sept. 1642; *Parliamentary or Constitutional History of England*, xii, p. 399; John Taylor, *Mercurius pacificus* (London, 1650); Humphrey

(cont. on p. 62)

to locate a concealed sin: a mother's miscarriage might point to "some hidden roote of evill" in her household,²² while a military setback might prompt the discovery of an "accursed thing" which had stained an army or a government or a whole nation.²³ Hidden or unhidden, sin and impurity of heart were obstacles to military and political success.²⁴ Royalists interpreted their defeat in the Civil Wars, and Puritans interpreted the Restoration, as a punishment for their sins.²⁵ In the 1640s Puritans wondered at God's mercy in favouring them in battle "though our iniquities testify against us".²⁶

(n. 21 cont.)

Moseley, *An Healing Leaf* (London, 1650); cf. T. Lister, *Life and Administration of Edward, First Earl of Clarendon*, 3 vols. (London, 1837-8), i, pp. 140, 292; Henry Leslie, *A Sermon Preached at the Publique Fast the Ninth of Feb.* (Oxford, 1643), pp. 26-7, 37; William Stampe, *A Sermon Preached before His Maestie at Christ-Church in Oxford* (Oxford, 1643), p. 2; William Chillingworth, *A Sermon Preached at the Publike Fast before His Majesty at Reading* (Oxford, 1644), p. 7; Griffith Williams, *A Sermon Preached at the Publike Fast . . . before the . . . House of Commons* (Oxford, 1644), pp. 23-4; Hale, *Renaissance War Studies*, p. 498. See also John Walter and Keith Wrightson, "Dearth and the Social Order in Early Modern England", in Paul Slack (ed.), *Rebellion, Popular Protest and the Social Order* (Past and Present Pubns., Cambridge, 1984), pp. 114-15.

²² *The Diary of Ralph Josselin, 1616-1683*, ed. A. Macfarlane (Brit. Acad. Records of Social and Econ. Hist., new ser., iii, London, 1976), p. 371.

²³ I have discussed that problem, and more generally the relationship between Puritan politics and Puritan iniquity, in my "Oliver Cromwell and the Sin of Achan", in G. Best and D. Beales (eds.), *History, Society and the Churches: Essays in Honour of Owen Chadwick* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 125-45. See also George Hakewil, *An Apologie or Declaration of the Power and Providence of God* (London, 1627), preface, sig. C.2^r.

²⁴ Chillingworth, *Sermon . . . at Reading*, pp. 13-15; *Letter Books of Sir William Brereton*, i, p. 308; *Diary of Sir Archibald Johnston of Wariston*, ed. G. M. Paul, D. H. Fleming and J. D. Ogilvie, 3 vols. (Scot. Hist. Soc., Edinburgh, 1911-40), ii, pp. 5, 7, and iii, p. 23; and compare, enjoyably, the discussion of Booth's rising of 1659 in *The Life of Adam Martindale, Written by Himself*, ed. R. Parkinson (Chetham. Soc., iv, Manchester, 1845), p. 137, with that in *An Account of the Life and Death of Mr. Philip Henry* (London, 1712), p. 49. See also *A Forme of Prayer Used in the King's Chappel upon Tuesdayes* (The Hague, 1650).

²⁵ Joshua Sprigge, *Anglia rediuvia* (Oxford, 1844), p. 219; Warwickshire Record Office, Warwick, C.R. 1886/unnumbered (Algernon Sidney, "Court Maxims, Refuted and Refelled"), p. 16; Ludlow, *Voyce from the Watch Tower*, pp. 114, 115, 149. But as Ludlow shows, it was possible subtly to shift the main burden of guilt on to the sins of one's impure allies. Puritan assessments of the providential significance of the Restoration are described in Christopher Hill, *The Experience of Defeat* (London, 1984).

²⁶ *Letters of the Lady Brilliana Harley*, p. 180. Many sermons dwelt on the theme. One Puritan explanation of God's monumental clemency was that He was more interested in laying low the Cavaliers than in prospering the Roundheads — "though we are not ripe for mercy, yet they are ripe for judgment": John Bond, *Eschol* (London, 1648), p. 33. The prevalence of the preoccupation with national transgression is indicated by *The Political Works of James Harrington*, ed. J. G. A. Pocock (Cambridge, 1977), pp. 232, 317.

The doctrine of providence was not necessarily irrational. There is no logically self-evident boundary beyond which a sovereign Creator can be deemed not to direct events. Providence seemed the friend of reason, even though it of course transcended it. Cromwell's chaplain John Owen saw in providence "a straight line" which "runs through all the darkness, confusion, and disorder of the world".²⁷ It gave order and meaning to lives which would otherwise lie at the whim of that most irrational of agencies, chance. Calvin had said succinctly what his Puritan successors said at length: "nothing cometh by chance, but whatsoever cometh to pass in the world, cometh by the secret providence of God."²⁸ Providences were not random or arbitrary displays of God's sovereignty. They formed a pattern, a "chain" or "series", visible to the true believer. Puritans agreed with Francis Bacon that "while the mind of man looketh upon second causes scattered, it may sometimes rest in them, and go no further; but when it beholdeth the chain of them, confederate and linked together, it must needs fly to providence and deity".²⁹ Cromwell, when urging Robert Hammond to "look into providences; surely they mean somewhat", impressed upon him that "they hang so together", and thought he would understand them once he recognized the "chain" that connected them.³⁰

Providence was the thread of divine purpose which drew together the seemingly disparate events of history. Cromwell urged his son Richard to read Raleigh's *History of the World* — a work, it has been observed, in which "history is the working out of the first cause, God's will, divine providence"³¹ — because "it's a body of history, and will add much more to your understanding than fragments of

²⁷ *Works of John Owen*, viii, p. 11; cf. Patrides, *Milton and the Christian Tradition*, p. 56.

²⁸ Quoted from Calvin's commentaries on Daniel by Patrides, *Milton and the Christian Tradition*, p. 56; cf. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, i, pp. 242-3.

²⁹ *The Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. J. Spedding, R. L. Ellis and D. D. Heath, 14 vols. (London, 1857-74), vi, p. 413; cf. *ibid.*, iii, pp. 267-8. For Puritan approval of Bacon's observation, see Brit. Lib., Add. MS. 31, 984 ("Whitelocke's History of his Forty-Eighth Year"), fo. 43^{r-v}.

³⁰ Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, i, pp. 696-7; cf. for example *Mercurius politicus*, 4-11 Sept. 1651, p. 1047; *Diary of Thomas Burton*, iii, p. 361; *The Complete Works in Prose and Verse of Andrew Marvell, M.P.*, ed. A. B. Grosart, 4 vols. (London, 1872-5), iv, p. 103.

³¹ H. R. Trevor-Roper, reviewing Christopher Hill, *Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution*, in *History and Theory*, v (1966), p. 77. For Raleigh's providentialism, see also L. B. Campbell, "The Use of Historical Patterns in the Reign of Elizabeth", *Huntington Lib. Quart.*, i (1937-8), p. 138; Stephen J. Greenblatt, *Sir Walter Raleigh* (New Haven, 1973), pp. 139 ff.; J. S. Gouwys, "An Edition of Fulke Greville's *A Dedication to Sir Philip Sidney*" (Univ. of Oxford D.Phil. thesis, 1976), p. xvi.

story".³² Divines repeatedly urged the Long Parliament to commission "an History of Providence" which, by placing the events of the 1640s within the divine scheme of history, would become "the Magna Charta of miracles".³³ In biography, as in history, events and dispensations were vertebrae on a spinal cord of providence. Edmund Ludlow's massive autobiography *A Voyce from the Watch Tower* was appropriately subtitled *In Severall Passages of Providence relating to Publiq and Privat Concernes*.³⁴ Lucy Hutchinson recorded apparently small episodes in her husband's life "since even these little things were linkes in the chaine of providences which measured out his life".³⁵ And Robert Boyle, when he remembered his deliverances from death in childhood,

would not ascribe any of these rescues unto chance, but would be still industrious to perceive the hand of heaven in all these accidents; and indeed he would profess, that in the passages of his life, he had observed so gracious and so peculiar a conduct of providence, that he should be equally blind and ungrateful, should he not both discern and acknowledge it.³⁶

So at regular periods — at the end of the week, at the end of the year — the Puritan would record the providences which had been vouchsafed to him in that time, and set them in the larger pattern of his life.

Puritans paid careful attention to the timing of providences, for if there was no such thing as chance there could equally be no such thing as coincidence. As the minister Adam Martindale had it, "There is oft much mercie in the timing of mercies".³⁷ When parliament learned in October 1641 of the plot to seize Argyle and Hamilton in Scotland, Sir Simonds D'Ewes told the Commons "that it was the wonderfull providence of God that this busines should thus breake

³² Abbott, *Writings and Speeches*, ii, p. 236.

³³ Obadiah Sedgwick, *A Thanksgiving-Sermon Preached before the Honourable House of Commons at Westminster, April 9 1644* (London, 1644), epistle dedicatory; William Spurstowe, *England's Eminent Judgments Caused by the Abuse of God's Eminent Mercies* (London, 1644), pp. 10-11; Stephen Marshall, *A Sacred Record to be Made of God's Mercies to Zion* (London, 1645), p. 27; cf. *Life of Adam Martindale*, p. 185; *Account of the Life and Death of Mr. Philip Henry*, pp. 70-1; Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, pp. 93-6, 108.

³⁴ Ludlow, *Voyce from the Watch Tower*, p. 317.

³⁵ *Memoirs of the Life of Colonel Hutchinson*, p. 86.

³⁶ *The Works of the Honourable Robert Boyle*, ed. Thomas Birch, 5 vols. (London, 1744), i, p. 8; cf. *The Autobiography of Henry Newcome*, ed. R. Parkinson, 2 vols. (Chetham Soc., xxvi-xxvii, Manchester, 1852), i, pp. 1-2; Keeble, *Richard Baxter*, ch. 7.

³⁷ *Life of Adam Martindale*, p. 182.

out just upon the meeting againe of the Parliament".³⁸ In December 1656, when James Nayler's offence came before the House, M.P.s saw the hand of God in "the timing of discovering this business", "sitting a parliament".³⁹ Two months earlier John Rowe, preaching to parliament on a day of thanksgiving for the recent naval triumph, recalled the doubts which the House had experienced before reaching its recent decision to support the Spanish war, and remarked on

the season when these tidings [of victory] first came unto you, even at that time, when all the nation was expecting how the Lord would ballance and incline the spirits of the Parliament, as to this business. And that the Lord should send you this intelligence immediately after, but not before, you had brought your debates to a resolution, this is that which doth in some measure affect the hearts of all, and there is none that I have met with, but will say, the hand of the Lord appeared in this thing in a more then ordinary manner.⁴⁰

A providential purpose was likewise discerned in the timing of Cromwell's fatal illness and of his death on the anniversary of Dunbar and Worcester.⁴¹

The believer must attune himself to the divine timetable. He might have patiently to "wait upon God" until the time were ripe for action.⁴² In 1647 the Cromwellian army, having resisted Leveller pressure to march prematurely on London — "to run before He bids us go" — was gratified when "God found a better season for us than if we had gone at first".⁴³ Often God brought deliverance "in the

³⁸ *The Journal of Sir Simonds D'Ewes from the First Recess of The Long Parliament to the Withdrawal of King Charles from London*, ed. W. H. Coates (New Haven, 1942), p. 10.

³⁹ *Diary of Thomas Burton*, i, pp. 51, 63; cf. *ibid.*, i, p. 41.

⁴⁰ John Rowe, *Man's Duty in Magnifying God's Work*, p. 19; cf. *Letter Books of Sir William Brereton*, i, p. 59; *Mercurius politicus*, 15-22 May 1651, p. 800; *Works of John Owen*, viii, p. 117; *Life of Adam Martindale*, pp. 86-7; *Autobiography of Henry Newcome*, i, pp. 52-3; Slack, "Some Aspects of Epidemics in England, 1485-1640", p. 258.

⁴¹ *A Collection of State Papers of John Thurloe*, ed. Thomas Birch, 7 vols. (London, 1742), vii, pp. 355, 372; *Mercurius politicus*, 2-9 Sept. 1658, p. 803 (cf. *ibid.*, 11-18 Sept. 1651, p. 1063); *Collection of Scarce and Valuable Tracts . . . of the Late Lord Somers*, vi, p. 479.

⁴² To "wait upon God" might be to exercise patience in His service, or it might be to pray until He declared Himself. For the former meaning, see Thomas Young, *Hope's Encouragement* (London, 1644), pp. 9, 17; Bond, *Ortus occidentalis*, pp. 7-8; Woodhouse, *Puritanism and Liberty*, p. 101; *State Papers of John Thurloe*, vi, p. 516; *The Clarke Papers*, ed. C. H. Firth, 4 vols. (Camden Soc., new ser., xlix, liv, lxi, lxii, London, 1891-1901), ii, p. 87; John F. Wilson, *Pulpit in Parliament* (Princeton, 1969), p. 186; cf. Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, i, p. 585, and ii, p. 386. For the latter meaning, see *Letter Books of Sir William Brereton*, i, p. 453; *Original Letters and Papers of State . . . Addressed to Oliver Cromwell*, pp. 7, 10, 25; *Mercurius politicus*, 20-27 Feb. 1651, p. 609; Woodhouse, *Puritanism and Liberty*, p. 22; Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, ii, pp. 432, 444.

⁴³ Woodhouse, *Puritanism and Liberty*, pp. 41, 101.

nick of time", when human helps had been proved wanting.⁴⁴ Or he might so time a mercy as to demonstrate the efficacy of prayer. The Essex minister Ralph Josselin noted how God gave the Roundheads victory just when he was praying "for mercy upon us against our enemies".⁴⁵ In 1648 the preacher John Bond drew parliament's attention to "a meeting-mercy": "the articles of Pembroke Castle, and your order for this thanksgiving, doe both beare the same date and day".⁴⁶ Ten years later, when the English took Dunkirk, John Thurloe summarized a prevalent interpretation of the triumph:

this mercy is the greater in respect that it was obteyned the very day, whilst His Highness and the Counsell wer keepinge a day of fasting and prayer, to seeke God for help in that siege . . . it was a mere providence of God, that ordered the fight and the seekinge of the Lord to be upon one day.⁴⁷

The hold of providentialism on mid-seventeenth-century minds may seem more impressive to us than it then appeared to Puritan divines. In their eyes the doctrine was gravely imperilled by a massive wave of scepticism and Epicureanism which, in England as in Europe, also menaced the Calvinist theory of predestination. John Owen saw a clear relationship between "the idol free-will" which challenged predestinarianism and "the new goddess contingency" which threatened providentialism. In both evils he recognized that "strange advancement of the clay against the potter" which to him was a dominant and monstrous tendency of the age. He bemoaned "that atheistical corruption which depresses the thoughts of men, not permitting them, in the highest products of providence, to look above contingencies and secondary causes".⁴⁸ Indeed the equation of "atheism" with failure to acknowledge providences, and with inability or refusal to look beyond "secondary causes", was a clerical commonplace.⁴⁹ Laymen concurred with it. Mrs. Hutchinson wondered at

⁴⁴ *Life of Adam Martindale*, pp. 103, 184; *A True Relation of Mr. John Cook's Passage by Sea from Wexford to Kinsale* (London, 1650), p. 4; cf. Sir William Brereton, *Travels in Holland*, ed. E. Haskins (Chetham Soc., i, Manchester, 1844), p. 27.

⁴⁵ *Diary of Ralph Josselin*, pp. 13, 15; cf. *ibid.*, pp. 209, 357.

⁴⁶ Bond, *Eschol*, p. 36.

⁴⁷ *State Papers of John Thurloe*, vii, p. 158; cf. *ibid.*, pp. 158-9, 178; [Henry Hasselwood], *Doctor Hill's Funeral-Sermon* (London, 1654), p. 1.

⁴⁸ *Works of John Owen*, vii, pp. 6, 12, and x, pp. 30, 40; cf. *ibid.*, viii, p. 348, x, pp. 12, 116, and xi, p. 9.

⁴⁹ Wilkins, *Discourse concerning the Beauty of Providence*, pp. 74-7; Rowe, *Man's Duty in Magnifying God's Work*, pp. 14, 15; Henry Scudder, *God's Warning to England* (London, 1644), pp. 11, 31. A belief in providence was, together with a belief in the immortality of the soul, a fundamental qualification conventionally required by Christians of pagans if they were to be viewed favourably by them. See, for example, Thomas More, *Utopia*, ed. E. Surtz and J. H. Hexter (New Haven, 1965), p. 221. See

(cont. on p. 67)

the stupidity of blind mortalls [who], instead of employing their studies in those admirable bookes of providence wherein God dayly exhibitts to us glorious characters of His love, kindnesse, wisdom and justice . . . ungratefully regard them not, and call the most wonderfull operations of the greate God the common accidents of humane life.⁵⁰

Oliver Cromwell thought that “he must be a very atheist” who, in his “blindness”, thought of “all those marvellous dispensations which God hath wrought” in the Civil Wars as “bare events”.⁵¹ Politicians had a special duty to observe the stretching out of God’s arm, for as the minister John Arrowsmith explained, “Professors eminent for their place in church or state . . . as being more concerned in the publique welfare than Christians of a more private station, are bound to observe the wheelings of providence more than others”.⁵²

Nothing was more certain to provoke divine punishment than man’s failure to recognize dispensations. “Not to see God in such works of His providence”, Edmund Calamy warned parliament in 1642, “is a curse, and will bring a curse”. Like many preachers — and like Oliver Cromwell — Calamy pointed to Psalm 28:5, “Because they regard not the works of the Lord, nor the operations of his hands, he shall destroy them, and not build them up”, and to Jeremiah 17:5, “Cursed be the man that trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm, and whose heart departeth from the Lord”.⁵³ After his victory at Pembroke in 1648 Cromwell condemned three royalists, who had earlier “apostatized” from the parliamentary cause, to the prospect of the death penalty, “judging their iniquity double because they have sinned against so much light, and against so many evidences of divine presence going along with and prospering a righteous cause”.⁵⁴ At Dunbar in 1650, thought Cromwell, the Scots were punished for “not beholding the glory of God’s wonderful dispensations in this series of His providences”.⁵⁵ Cromwell’s victims in battle discovered that the only way to appease him, and so to avoid further punishment at his hands, was to acknowledge the triumph of his God over theirs. “Those”, he observed, “whom God hath brought to a

(n. 49 cont.)

also *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ii, pp. 494-5; I. Simon, *Three Restoration Divines*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1967-76), ii pt. 2, pp. 406-7.

⁵⁰ *Memoirs of the Life of Colonel Hutchinson*, p. 278.

⁵¹ Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, i, p. 377, and ii, p. 339; cf. *ibid.*, iii, p. 592.

⁵² John Arrowsmith, *England’s Eben-Ezer* (London, 1645), p. 25.

⁵³ Edmund Calamy, *God’s Free Mercy to England* (London, 1642), pp. 14-15; Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, ii, p. 173, iii, pp. 53, 587, and iv, pp. 707-8.

⁵⁴ Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, i, p. 621.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, ii, p. 340; cf. *ibid.*, ii, pp. 337, 339.

sense of His hand upon them, and to amend, submitting thereto and to the power to which He hath subjected them, I cannot but pity and tender".⁵⁶

Repeatedly after his victories Cromwell urged parliament to "give God all the glory" for them. Repeatedly he lamented man's tendency to attribute military success not to the Lord himself but to His "weak instruments", a sin which robbed God of the "glory" and the "praise" which were His due.⁵⁷ "God is not enough owned" in parliament's victories, complained Cromwell in 1645; "we look too much to men and visible helps: this hath much hindered our success".⁵⁸ Such vain ingratitude might incite the Lord to limit, even to withdraw, His favour. For it was God who infused courage and skill into His troops: they were helpless without Him.⁵⁹ It was God who pierced the enemy's counsels, God who "infatuated" the royalists and hardened their hearts and lulled them into over-confidence.⁶⁰ Sometimes God pointedly placed His forces at an initial disadvantage, in numbers or in the site of battle. After the victory at Preston in 1648 Cromwell requested the Commons to reflect on "the disparity of forces on both sides; that so you may see, and all the world acknowledge, the great hand of God in this business".⁶¹ The triumphs of "our armies" in that year, achieved against all the odds, persuaded John Owen that "their work was done in heaven before they began it . . . The work might have been done by children, though He was pleased to employ

⁵⁶ Thomas Carlyle, *The Letters and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, ed. S. C. Lomas, 3 vols. (London, 1904), iii, p. 415; Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, ii, p. 226; cf. *ibid.*, ii, pp. 160-1, 174, 356.

⁵⁷ Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, i, pp. 360, 365, 505-6, ii, pp. 38, 124-5, 127, 143, 144, 160, 171, 235, 261, 262, 325, 330, 377, iii, pp. 54, 71, and iv, p. 871; cf. *Original Letters and Papers of State . . . Addressed to Oliver Cromwell*, p. 61; *Parliamentary or Constitutional History of England*, xii, p. 253; *Memoirs of the Life of Colonel Hutchinson*, p. 70; *State Papers of John Thurloe*, vi, p. 632; Stephen Marshall, *Meroz Cursed* (London, 1642), p. 43; Marshall, *Sacred Record to be Made of God's Mercies to Zion*, pp. 8, 30; Sedgwick, *Thanksgiving-Sermon . . . 1644*, pp. 12, 15-16; Henry Lawrence, *Some Considerations Tending to the Vindication of Christian Ordinances* (London, 1649), p. 39; *Severall Proceedings in Parliament*, 4-11 July 1650, pp. 580-2.

⁵⁸ Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, i, p. 340.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, ii, pp. 127, 164, 235, 324; Marshall, *Sacred Record to be Made of God's Mercies to Zion*, p. 30; cf. Young, *Hope's Encouragement*, pp. 17-18; *Memorials of the Civil War . . . Forming the Concluding Volumes of the Fairfax Correspondence*, ed. R. Bell, 2 vols. (London, 1849), i, p. 171.

⁶⁰ *Letter Books of Sir William Brereton*, i, p. 357; *Works of John Owen*, viii, p. 166; *Parliamentary or Constitutional History of England*, xiii, p. 286; *Collection of Scarce and Valuable Tracts . . . of the Late Lord Somers*, vi, p. 501; *State Papers of John Thurloe*, vi, p. 790.

⁶¹ Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, i, pp. 637-8.

such worthy instruments. They see, I doubt not, their own nothingness in His all-sufficiency”.⁶² Soldiers who won after staring defeat in the face liked to observe that “our extremity was God’s opportunity to magnify His power”.⁶³ Dunbar, where triumph was snatched from defeat, prompted a spate of such reflections. The Lord, exclaimed the minister Sidrach Simpson to Cromwell,

hath stepped out of heaven to raise those who were even as dead, and to judge His adversaries . . . He is a God mighty in battell, in wisdom going beyond the subtilty of man . . . He hath saved by a few, weake, weaned ones, that the mighty might not glory in their might, but in Himself alone . . . You were before too many, too vigorous when you smote your adversaries. Till you had felt all that the colde earth, and want of provisions in a strange countrey, could doe to you (wherein they so much trusted for a conquest) it was not tyme for God to put to His hand.⁶⁴

Oliver St. John agreed: God had delayed the battle until the enemy,

relying uppon and bosting in the arme of flesh, [had become too] confident . . . therefore hath the Lord soe ordered the busines, that wee may see it was not our owne sword, nor our owne bow, but His right hand, and His holy arme that hath gotten us the victory.⁶⁵

God liked to demonstrate His sovereignty by confounding the “reasonable” strategies of His armies — and then bringing them victory nonetheless. After defeating royalist forces in a skirmish of 1645, Cromwell wrote that

though I have had greater mercies, yet none clearer; because, in the first God brought them to our hands when we looked not for them; and delivered them out of our hands, when we laid a reasonable design to surprise them, and which we carefully endeavoured.⁶⁶

Of the “unspeakable mercy” at Fife in 1651, Cromwell could

truly say, we were gone as far as we could in our counsel and action, and we did say one to another, we knew not what to do. Wherefore it is sealed up in our hearts, that this, as all the rest, is from the Lord’s goodness, and not from man.⁶⁷

Sometimes God intervened when the strategies — or the humanity — of His generals threatened His vengeful purpose. After the sack of Wexford, as Cromwell reported to parliament, it was

deeply set upon our hearts that, we intending better to this place than so great a ruin, hoping the town might be of more use to you and your army, yet God would not have it so; but, by an unexpected providence, in His righteous justice, brought

⁶² *Works of John Owen*, viii, pp. 97-8.

⁶³ *Parliamentary or Constitutional History of England*, xiii, p. 286; cf. *Barrington Family Letters*, p. 202.

⁶⁴ *Original Letters and Papers of State . . . Addressed to Oliver Cromwell*, pp. 22-3.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 25; cf. *ibid.*, p. 18; Richard Vines, *The Happiness of Israel* (London, 1645), pp. 21-2.

⁶⁶ Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, i, p. 340.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, ii, p. 433; cf. *ibid.*, ii, p. 364; *Diary of Archibald Johnston*, ii, pp. 115-16.

a just judgment upon them, causing them to become a prey to the soldier, who in their piracies had made preys of so many families, and made with their bloods to answer the cruelties which they had exercised upon the lives of divers poor Protestants . . .⁶⁸

Yet, limitless as was God's sovereignty and powerless as were men to alter His purpose, the Lord's servants were not to "tempt" providence by inaction or inertia. Adam Martindale encapsulated the conventional view; "Though God can worke by unlikely meanes, or without any, it is ill to tempt Him to do soe".⁶⁹ Henry Cromwell, when two of his friends were drowned, observed that "the hand of God was eminently seen in that dispensation, in that they would not be perswaded to shun the danger that was evident".⁷⁰ To trust wholly in God's providence, while yet not trusting wholly to it, required a delicate balance not easily struck. When plague afflicted the garrison at Shrewsbury in 1650, "many of the godly" were "blame worthy": some "for their timorousnesse" in "dispersing" from the garrison, "as if they could by it alone escape the hand of God, which argueth a distrust in His providence and preservation", while others "by their indiscreet over-hardinesse provoke the Almighty by their presumptuous running themselves into danger, when they have no just calling to it".⁷¹ To avoid "tempting of God", Cromwell explained to Robert Hammond, the believer must contrive to avoid "carnal confidence" on the one hand and "diffidence" on the other.⁷²

God's servants must make full use of "means" in public as in private life. In 1650 a correspondent of Cromwell, describing the government's military preparations in England, explained that

although wee doe not, nor dare not, rely upon these things, for that wee knowe the arme of our God is not shortened, but that He can save by few as well as many; yet wee dare not but use the meanes, least we should be found tempters of the Lord our God.⁷³

In 1655 an apologist for the Protectorate declared that while the Lord's manifest approval was the rock of the government's authority,

God alloweth, nay requireth that we shall use all lawful means; for us to neglect to use the means, or obstinately reject the means, we are self-enemies, and it is just with God to withhold the mercy we desire, or to bring the judgements upon us we

⁶⁸ Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, ii, p. 142.

⁶⁹ *Life of Adam Martindale*, p. 182.

⁷⁰ *State Papers of John Thurloe*, vi, p. 699.

⁷¹ *Perfect Weekly Account*, 10-17 July 1650, p. 532; cf. *A Perfect Diurnall . . . in Relation to the Armies*, 8-15 July 1650, p. 361; Slack, "Some Aspects of Epidemics in England, 1485-1640", pp. 246-8.

⁷² Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, i, p. 698.

⁷³ *Original Letters and Papers of State . . . Addressed to Oliver Cromwell*, p. 18; cf. *Traitors Deciphered* (London, 1650), p. 86; Hale, *Renaissance War Studies*, p. 498.

would avoid. To neglect, slight, or condemn any lawfull means, is a tempting of God; that man that shall cast off all means, and say he will rest upon providence, neither beleeveth there is indeed an overruling providence, nor can rest upon providence upon any Scripture ground . . .

It followed that if Cromwell were to concede the control of the militia which "providence hath put into his hand", and which parliament had recently contested, "he should provoke providence and betray his trust to the Commonwealth".⁷⁴ Propaganda which stressed the providential sanction of Cromwell's rule was itself a legitimate "means" through which God's designs were to be accomplished. Cunning, the wisdom of serpents, was as requisite a quality in God's service as was courage. As the preacher William Carter told parliament, "the worke of God is such, as must have men of wisdom in it. The enemies of God are crafty".⁷⁵ Certainly there was a distinction to be made: the distinction which John Owen drew between "carnal policy" directed to "self-ends" — "that cursed policy which God abhors" — and "civil wisdom, or a sound ability of mind for the management of the affairs of men, in subordination to the providence and righteousness of God".⁷⁶ But the difference, one of ends, was not one of means.

II

The distinctive feature of Puritan teaching on providence was its preoccupation with grace and election. That "a special providence watches over the safety of believers", Calvin had written, was "attested by a vast number of the clearest promises".⁷⁷ The saint, as God's instrument on earth, was both specially equipped and specially obliged to discern providences.⁷⁸ The most fundamental of the dispensations which God vouchsafed to the saint was to keep him alive while the process of sanctification was accomplished. Just as God's government of the natural world alone preserved it from its tendency to dissolution, so providence alone preserved the saint from death, the natural consequence of sin, while God's grace worked upon his

⁷⁴ Smith, *God's Unchangeableness*, pp. 31, 53. In one sense the Puritan responsibility to act in accordance with providence resembled the classical republican duty to master *fortuna*; cf. *The Modern Statesman* (London, 1654), pp. 51-2: "fortune (which we Christians truly term providence)".

⁷⁵ William Carter, *Israel's Peace with God* (London, 1642), p. 14; cf. Hale, *Renaissance War Studies*, p. 497.

⁷⁶ *Works of John Owen*, viii, pp. 348-9.

⁷⁷ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, i, p. 255.

⁷⁸ Scudder, *God's Warning to England*, pp. 11-12; *Original Letters and Papers of State* . . . Addressed to Oliver Cromwell, p. 25.

heart. The average saint was likely in his lifetime to experience a number of "deliverances" from death. At least some of them probably happened in childhood, and there was a good chance that at least one of them occurred (with somewhat heavy-handed Puritan symbolism) by the fireside.⁷⁹ It was a dire offence for men to interfere in each other's progress to salvation. Thus John Goodwin, pleading for liberty of conscience, could portray persecution as soul-murder, and claim that the persecutor, by cutting off his victim from the supply of grace, did "limit or straiten the providence of God".⁸⁰

God trained the elect soul by "mixing" mercies with judgements. The former saved the saints from despair and fortified their faiths. The latter were "meanes of humbling us and exciteing of us to endeavour a true reformation of what by diligent search and prayer the Lord shall show us to be amisse".⁸¹ While the joys of the saints might exceed those of the unregenerate, so could their tribulations. God, thought the Puritan M.P. Sir Gilbert Gerard, made afflictions "the portion of his dearest children", who "have found more good in them then in all the pleasures of this world . . . They be God's rodds to drive into way when we err, and to weane us from the world which we all love too well".⁸² "The prosperous state", observed the elect politician John Jones, "is the slippery and dangerous state of a Christian, because then the poore creature is apt to have his affections fixed upon outward enjoyments".⁸³ Ralph Josselin begged God "to better me by corrections, for I need it"; and when they came "I blesse God for divers smittings of heart, in the first budding of temptations".⁸⁴

The saint must search within himself to learn why God had favoured or chastised him in a particular way at a particular time. Josselin's suspicion that the principal cause of his child's death lay

⁷⁹ *Life of Adam Martindale*, pp. 3-5, 22; *Letters of the Lady Brilliana Harley*, pp. 246-7; *Diary of Ralph Josselin*, p. 1; William Turner, *A Compleat History of the Most Remarkable Providences, Both of Judgment and Mercy, which have Hapned in this Present Age* (London, 1697), p. 100. But Puritans believed that one might die in childhood and still be saved.

⁸⁰ John Goodwin, *Theomachia* (London, 1644), pp. 35-6; repr. in *Tracts on Liberty in the Puritan Revolution*, ed. W. Haller, 3 vols. (New York, 1934), iii, pp. 41-2.

⁸¹ *Barrington Family Letters*, p. 75. For the principle of "mixture", see also *Life of Adam Martindale*, pp. 43, 121; *Diary of Ralph Josselin*, pp. 67, 206, 431; Sedgwick, *Thanksgiving-Sermon . . . 1644*, p. 22; *A Third Volume of Sermons Preached by . . . Thomas Manton, D.D.* (London, 1689), pp. 74 ff.

⁸² *Barrington Family Letters*, p. 204.

⁸³ "Inedited Letters of Cromwell, Colonel Jones, Bradshaw and Other Regicides", ed. J. Mayer, *Trans. Hist. Soc. Lancs. and Ches.*, i (1860-2), p. 201.

⁸⁴ *Diary of Ralph Josselin*, pp. 172, 193.

in his own inclination “to unseasonable playing at chesse” was reached after “I had seriously considered my heart, and wayes, and compared them with the affliction and sought unto God”.⁸⁵ By prompting such self-examination, providences became signposts on the saint’s journey to salvation. The godly commonly begged God to “sanctify” providences, and to “sanctify the rod” of their afflictions.⁸⁶ “Sanctified providences are the best”, pronounced Josselin, “bee they adversitie or prosperitie”.⁸⁷ Mercies on the battlefield were “improvements to grace” among men whose spirits were properly affected by them.⁸⁸ Cromwell repeatedly noticed how the victories of his troops “seem to strengthen our faith and love” and to help “perfect” their souls.⁸⁹

In detecting providences, and in opening his soul to their efficacy, the saint had two principal aids: the Bible and prayer. The figurative models of Scripture taught Puritans not only to interpret their providential experiences but to anticipate them. “The judgements of God which are His rod”, explained the preacher Henry Scudder to parliament, “do second His word . . . The Lord never smites, but He hath spoken first, and warned by His word”.⁹⁰ Prayer is an activity inevitably and tantalizingly beyond historical recovery. Josselin, recording some of the “hints” and “intimations” with which God answered his prayers, indicated that the Lord might give concrete guidance, formulated in words and phrases which “came with power, and commanded my heart”.⁹¹ Did the Cromwellian army derive the

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 114; cf. Keeble, *Richard Baxter*, p. 139. Josselin was pleased when news of a providence found his soul in a healthy state, and dismayed when it did not: *Diary of Ralph Josselin*, pp. 409, 468. Afflictions might sometimes be rather acts of guidance for the future than rebukes for the past — the believer must discover which: *ibid.*, p. 136; cf. *ibid.*, p. 204.

⁸⁶ The import and the frequency of those requests can be discerned *ibid.*, pp. 138, 161, 202, 205, 287, 300, 354, 357, 369, 371, 378, 390, 428, 443, 459, 485, 488, 513, 516, 557, 570, 597, 598, 625; *Barrington Family Letters*, pp. 91, 94, 115, 204, 220; *Letter Books of Sir William Brereton*, i, p. 100; Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, ii, p. 236; *State Papers of John Thurloe*, vii, pp. 309, 376, 590; *Diary of Sir Archibald Johnston*, ii, pp. 82, 193, 285; *A Declaration of His Highness the Lord Protector and the Parliament for a Day of Solemn Fasting . . . September 1656* (London, 1656), p. 2; J. T. Cliffe, *The Puritan Gentry* (London, 1984), p. 72; cf. *Works of Algernon Sydney*, “Trial”, p. 65. It was not only Puritans who spoke of sanctifying providences: see, for example, Thomas Twittee, *The Art of Salvation* (Oxford, 1643), p. 10; *The Whole Works of the Right Rev. Jeremy Taylor*, ed. R. Heber, 15 vols. (London, 1828), xv, pp. 339–40.

⁸⁷ *Diary of Ralph Josselin*, p. 657.

⁸⁸ Bond, *Ortus Occidentalis*, p. 34; cf. Carter, *Israel’s Peace with God*, p. 39.

⁸⁹ Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, i, p. 690, and ii, pp. 103, 190.

⁹⁰ Scudder, *God’s Warning to England*, p. 16.

⁹¹ *Diary of Ralph Josselin*, pp. 114, 205, 236, 297; cf. Bunyan, *Grace Abounding*, pp. 64–5, 80–1.

political conclusions which emerged from its prayer-meetings from similarly tangible advice? Or did the soldiers rather learn to recognize the moment when a political proposal previously formulated among themselves appeared to be at one with the Holy Spirit present in their counsels? Whatever the experiences of the Cromwellians at prayer, some of the major political decisions of the seventeenth century were taken as a result of them.⁹²

So intense was the relationship between God and the elect soul that the distinction between ordinary and extraordinary providences tended to collapse before it. Every state of health or of the weather, even of the most "ordinary" kind, was a feature of the world whose continuous interaction with the promptings of his own soul the saint must continuously observe. When Cromwell's ships went forth on God's behalf, the strength and the direction of the wind, however unexceptionable, were divinely ordained.⁹³ Any change in the weather at a militarily critical moment must have an acute providential significance. Cromwell told parliament how, shortly before Dunbar, a brigade of horse, exposed by night to the advancing Scottish army, was saved when "the Lord by his good providence put a cloud over the moon, thereby giving us opportunity to draw off those horse to the rest of the army".⁹⁴ Inconveniently, the course of nature tended to affect the regenerate and the unregenerate indiscriminately. In 1650 the Cromwellian officers in Ireland were distressed when God,

⁹² See my "Oliver Cromwell and the Sin of Achan", pp. 129-33. For prayer, see also Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, pp. 113-24. Sometimes God revealed His will through prophecies or visions or dreams — although orthodox Puritans hesitated to travel down those dangerous interpretative paths. For scruples about the interpretation of dreams, see Ludlow, *Voyce from the Watch Tower*, p. 106; *True Relation of Mr. Cook's Passage by Sea*, p. 14; Turner, *Compleat History of the Most Remarkable Providences . . . in this Present Age*, p. 47; Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, pp. 128-30; Patricia Caldwell, *The Puritan Conversion Narrative* (Cambridge, 1983), p. 16. Cromwell evidently believed that God might give advance knowledge of military success: Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, i, pp. 365, 645; cf. *Diary of Ralph Josselin*, pp. 305, 339.

⁹³ See, for example, Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, iii, p. 186; cf. *ibid.*, ii, pp. 162-3; Ludlow, *Voyce from the Watch Tower*, p. 191. Sainly attitudes sometimes present problems here. When Ludlow is "sure" that the Restoration was "brought about by the immediate hand of God", or "more and more convinced of the hand of the Lord" in Charles II's return, or "assured that it was done by the wise disposing hand of God", he has presumably considered, before rejecting, a possibility that God's providence, or at least His special providence, was *not* the cause of the Restoration: *ibid.*, pp. 89, 119, 149. The consuming providentialism of his autobiography makes it hard to imagine how that possibility could have entered his head.

⁹⁴ Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, ii, p. 322.

by extending to the invaders a plague He had visited upon the natives, “removes that distinction and difference which formerly He . . . kept between us and the people of the nation, and by this He sweeps away in that common deluge many precious ones”.⁹⁵ In the same year John Cook, the Commonwealth’s Solicitor at the trial of Charles I, faced death when a huge storm blew up while he and his wife journeyed on the Irish Sea. As they crouched beside their unregenerate fellow passengers, the Cooks implored God to “throw the Aegyptians and all thy implacable enemies into the midst of the sea, but let us be preserved that we may prayse thy name”.⁹⁶

Yet saintly providentialism, self-regarding as it undoubtedly was, was not necessarily selfish. There are many occasions when the student who meets Puritan accounts of the operations of providence may wish to level the charge of egoism. He may wish to protest too against narrow horizons, against circularity of reasoning, or against a simple want of common sense. The modern reader is on the side not of William Prynne, who ransacked history for occasions when God had shown His dislike of stage plays by destroying theatres or afflicting spectators, but of Prynne’s critic Sir Richard Baker, who asked “what great wonder is this; if in so many hundred years, in so many thousand places, some few such accidents have sometimes happened?”.⁹⁷ The same reader is perplexed by the double thinking of saints who could confidently discern God’s purpose when things went well, and then emphasize the inscrutability of providence when they went badly. He is dismayed by the apparent self-absorption of Henry Cromwell, who feared that the death of a friend into whose family he had hoped to marry “may be a reproof particular unto myself, for placing . . . too much upon the consequences of this alliance”;⁹⁸ or of Ralph Josselin, who thanked God for protecting his own household and parish from calamities which had visited his neighbours, and who wrote as if the outcome of the battle of Edgehill had been determined by the prayers of his Essex congregation.⁹⁹ Yet in one sense such statements are open to misunderstanding. The design of providence, incomprehensible both in its size and in its

⁹⁵ *Original Letters and Papers of State . . . Addressed to Oliver Cromwell*, p. 72.

⁹⁶ *True Relation of Mr. John Cook’s Passage by Sea*, p. 6; cf. Frances Cook, *Mrs. Frances Cook’s Meditations* (London, 1650); David Lodge, *Small World* (London, 1984), p. 254.

⁹⁷ Sir Richard Baker, *Theatrum triumphans* (London, 1670), pp. 71-3; cf. *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, ed. M. Sylvester (London, 1696), bk. iii, p. 84; see n. 150 below.

⁹⁸ *State Papers of John Thurloe*, vi, p. 821.

⁹⁹ *Diary of Ralph Josselin*, p. 13.

detail, enabled God's dispensations to interact in a unique manner with the motions of each believing soul. The Puritan could answer only for his own soul, of which he was the steward. Although he loved to learn of the spiritual experiences of his fellow saints, there was a point beyond which he could not hope to share or comprehend them. There, as in so many respects, God's judgements were unsearchable and His ways past finding out. Writers liked to compare providence to a complicated clock, wherein man, able to glimpse "onely two or three wheels . . . how they move one against another", could merely see "contrariety and confusion", while God alone could view the beauty of "the whole frame":¹⁰⁰

the greatest statesmen, the wisest politicians . . . cannot discern whether the wheels move forward or backward . . . The motions of providence are so perplex and various, that it comes not within the compass of the wisdom of man to gather any certain conclusions from them.¹⁰¹

Was there not, therefore, a profound presumption in the invocations of divine approval by politicians? Must there not be at least some occasions when God, as Oliver Cromwell liked to say, acted "for reasons best known to Himself"?¹⁰² "Who can look into the bottom of the sea", asked John Owen biblically, "or know what is done in the depths thereof? God's works in their accomplishment are . . . oftentimes . . . unsuited to the reasons and apprehensions of men", who were too frequently guilty of "a reducing the works of providence to inbred rules of their own".¹⁰³ Milton (although, like Owen, perhaps not invariably obedient to his own precept) condemned whomsoever "without warrant but his own fantastic surmise, takes upon him . . . to unfold the unsearchable mysteries of high providence".¹⁰⁴ Yet while Puritan politicians could be relied upon to demonstrate, in their allusions to the dispensations of providence, a proper awe — so that there hovers, around their boldest and

¹⁰⁰ Wilkins, *Discourse concerning the Beauty of Providence*, p. 52; cf. *ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

¹⁰¹ William Strong, *A Treatise Shewing the Subordination of the Will of Man unto the Will of God* (London, 1657), pp. 157-8; cf. *Works of John Owen*, viii, p. 10, and xi, p. 8; Smith, *God's Unchangeableness*, p. 29; John Warren, *Man's Duty Subservient to God's Glory* (London, 1657), p. 31; Caryl, *Exposition with Practical Observations upon the Book of Job*, i, cols. 410, 856-7, 1628-9, 1644.

¹⁰² Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, ii, p. 177, iii, p. 874, and iv, p. 473; cf. Ludlow, *Voyce from the Watch Tower*, p. 210.

¹⁰³ *Works of John Owen*, viii, p. 142; cf. *ibid.*, x, p. 35.

¹⁰⁴ Quoted from Milton's *Eikonoklastes* by Michael Fixler, *Milton and the Kingdoms of God* (London, 1964), p. 164; cf. *ibid.*, pp. 215-16; William Haller, *Liberty and Reformation in the Puritan Revolution* (New York, 1955; repr. 1963), p. 352 (quoting Milton's *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*).

most confident acknowledgements of divine intervention, an air of astonishment and wonder and gratitude — they had in general few inhibitions about interpreting it. For the same Puritans who were informed by the clergy of their congenital inability to comprehend providences were also told by them of their inescapable obligation to do so, of the charge of atheism that would be levelled against them if they omitted that endeavour, and of the dreadful wrath and destruction which failure would awaken in the Almighty. In general they were much more alive to their duty than to their incapacity.¹⁰⁵

When he interpreted dispensations, the saint faced one particularly perilous temptation: the wish to regard worldly success as evidence of God's favour. Sometimes the temptation proved insuperable — although few saints slipped as badly as the first earl of Cork, who adopted the motto "God's providence is mine inheritance" at the time of his ennoblement, or Sir William Brereton, who detected God's hand when he succeeded in transporting his horses across the Irish Sea without a licence.¹⁰⁶ The fruits of providence were properly to be found in the inward, not the outward man.¹⁰⁷ In any case not all saints led successful lives, either economically or politically. Indeed, despite all the joyful and triumphant providentialism of the saints in arms, it may be that for most believers at most times the doctrine of providence exercised its greatest influence as a system of consolation and tranquillity.¹⁰⁸ Behind their tribulations lay the inscrutable but benevolent providence of which Milton reminded the faithful at the conclusion of *Samson Agonistes*:

¹⁰⁵ Joseph Caryl distinguished between God's "visible and plain" providences and His "many invisible works both of mercy and judgment", and wrote of the invisible category that "we should be, though not curiously, yet seriously searching, as much as possibly we can, even into those ways of God which are unsearchable; we should consider, though we cannot search them out": Caryl, *Exposition with Practical Observations upon the Book of Job*, ii, col. 1430. Allusions to the unsearchable depths of God's purpose were often concessive preliminaries to statements which look presumptuous in the light of them: see for example *Original Letters and Papers of State . . . Addressed to Oliver Cromwell*, p. 93; *Diary of Ralph Josselin*, p. 402.

¹⁰⁶ Nicholas Canny, *The Upstart Earl* (Cambridge, 1982), p. 19; Brereton, *Travels in Holland*, p. 168; cf. *Letter Books of Sir William Brereton*, i, p. 162; *Diary of Lady Margaret Hoby*, ed. Dorothy M. Meads (London, 1930), p. 201.

¹⁰⁷ That God was thought to reward the saints with earthly prosperity is suggested by Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, pp. 88-9, and by Cliffe, *Puritan Gentry*, pp. 22-3, 104; see also William Hunt, *The Puritan Moment* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), p. 128. But the subject is a complex one: see, for example, Lake, *Moderate Puritans and the Elizabethan Church*, pp. 135-7.

¹⁰⁸ The consolatory properties of providentialism are emphasized by Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, ch. 4.

All is best, though we most often doubt,
 What the unsearchable dispose
 Of highest wisdom brings about
 And ever best found in the close.

Samuel Hartlib, distressed by the religious divisions of Europe, fortified himself with the reflection that God “maketh crosse wills, crosse lines, and crosse ways, serve His will, and come direct to His line”.¹⁰⁹ In its consolatory form the providentialism of the saints bore some resemblance to the neo-Stoicism of the late Renaissance, when Justus Lipsius reinvigorated the tradition of Seneca and Boethius. Puritans and Stoics alike spurned the vanity of human wishes, and offered a comforting perspective upon the outward prosperity of the wicked and the outward adversity of the just. John Wilkins turned to the Stoics for support in a popular publication of 1649 of which the title indicates the character of mainstream providentialism: *A Discourse concerning the Beauty of Providence in All the Rugged Passages of It: Very Seasonable to Quiet and Support the Heart in these Times of Publick Confusion*.¹¹⁰ “To be very solicitous about any particular successe”, asked Wilkins, “what is it but to limit and confine the power of God? nay, to prefer our own policy before the wisdom of providence?”. We should “be carefull of our own duty, to serve providence in the usuall means, and leave the disposall of events to Him”.¹¹¹

However sore their adversities might be, the saints had more to say about God’s loving kindness to them than about the implacable wrath with which He punished them. Judgements were analogous to the Law, mercies to the Gospel; and “a gracious and godly heart is more wrought upon by mercies than judgements”.¹¹² It was uncharitable to God to “enforce” Him, by our sins, to “correct us for our own good”, for “the Lord delights to show mercy”.¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ Quoted by W. K. Jordan, *The Development of Religious Toleration in England*, 4 vols. (London, 1932-40), iv, p. 26.

¹¹⁰ Wilkins, *Discourse concerning the Beauty of Providence*, pp. 79, 95, 106-8. The leading exponent of Christian Stoicism in England had been Joseph Hall: see *Works of the Right Reverend Father in God, Joseph Hall*, vi, pp. 52-3, 247-8, vii, pp. 34, 39, and viii, p. 13.

¹¹¹ Wilkins, *Discourse concerning the Beauty of Providence*, preface, and p. 107; cf. *Life of Adam Martindale*, p. 23; *Works of John Owen*, x, p. 29; *Works, Moral and Religious, of Sir Matthew Hale*, ii, pp. 29, 218, 440. Sometimes Puritans, when uncertain how to act, resolved to “try providence”, or “stay my selfe on God’s providence”, or “put my condition to the Lord’s providence”: see, for example, *Diary of Ralph Josselin*, pp. 8, 199-200; *Autobiography of Henry Newcome*, i, p. 62; [Slingsby Bethel], *The World’s Mistake in Oliver Cromwell* (London, 1668), p. 2.

¹¹² Calamy, *God’s Free Mercy to England*, pp. 36-8.

¹¹³ *Letters of the Lady Brilliana Harley*, p. 47. (I have not reproduced the lady’s unusual orthography.)

Miscarriages by Puritan women were endured without complaint, and instead with acknowledgements of God's mercy, which was manifest in His giving the mother strength to recover — and in His having preserved her previous children through childbirth.¹¹⁴ When a child did survive birth but died later, God might be “wonderfull good” to the parents by protracting the fatal illness and so preparing them for the blow.¹¹⁵ Admittedly Puritans knew that “murmuring against the divine providence” was a “sin”,¹¹⁶ and no doubt they wrote with the sense that God was looking over their shoulders. Yet sometimes the records they kept of their afflictions have an artlessness which dispels scepticism. Ralph Josselin, whose diary is a haunting testament to the force of Puritan providentialism, was at one point, it is true, almost “overwhelmed” by the manifold griefs in his life. In 1650, when he lost two children and his closest friend within one week, “my heart trembled, and was perplexed in the dealings of the Lord so sadly with us”. But Josselin thought his “sin” to blame; and soon “my heart is cheered” when “I eye my God, and thinke on His wisdom in all providences”.¹¹⁷

In politics, as in private life, providentialism is likely to have exercised its widest influence as an encouragement to acquiescence and submission. The doctrine of providence may have been summoned to justify regicide in 1649, but alongside that revolutionary usage there persisted the traditional Protestant belief — a belief on which the *de facto* theorists of 1649-52 played — that evil rulers were scourges whom God inflicted as punishments for national sins, and whose tyranny God had commanded His people to endure. There persisted too the habit of resignation to the political results upon which providence had determined, and which man was powerless to alter. John Thurloe, who amidst the political troubles of the Protectorate seems to have derived much strength and comfort from his belief in the overruling wisdom of providence, expressed the orthodox position at one crisis when he deemed it “good to wait upon Hym, and to referre all matters to His wise and gracious disposition, without beinge anxious about the event, after wee have done our duty”.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 78; *Barrington Family Papers*, p. 220; cf. *Diary of Ralph Josselin*, pp. 163-4, 284; *The Diary of the Rev. Henry Newcombe*, ed. T. Heywood (Chetham Soc., xviii, Manchester, 1849), p. 6.

¹¹⁵ *Diary of Ralph Josselin*, pp. 203-4.

¹¹⁶ *Works, Moral and Religious, of Sir Matthew Hale*, ii, p. 106.

¹¹⁷ *Diary of Ralph Josselin*, pp. 205, 207.

¹¹⁸ *State Papers of John Thurloe*, vii, p. 153; cf. *ibid.*, vi, pp. 261, 311, 330, 568-9, 576, and vii, pp. 38, 295; *Letter Books of Sir William Brereton*, i, pp. 413, 422. See (cont. on p. 80)

Politicians acknowledged the hand of providence, and accordingly fell into line, when their views were overruled by a higher authority or a majority vote. In 1650 Scoutmaster-General Rowe was about to hasten from London to join Cromwell in Scotland when a parliamentary order reached him to stay behind; “and truly I cannot but submit to it, as that which I reverence as a providence”.¹¹⁹ In 1657 Thomas Cooper M.P. initially opposed the passage of the Humble Petition and Advice through parliament, but

haveinge according to what light and understandinge I have receaved from the Lord, discharged my conscience, I can and doe freely acquiesce in the will of God; and though this matter, soe longe as it was in debat, was against my mynde, yet beinge now concluded by the major parte, I can and shall through the assistance of God, I hope, approve myselfe with as much faithfullness to it, as if I had been never soe much for the thinge in the first promoteinge of it: and this I doe not upon a politick but Christian account, well knowinge that if a haire of a man’s head fall not to the ground without the Lord’s providence, much les doe soe great thinges as the governments of the world suffer alteration without speciall providence.¹²⁰

In parliament in March 1659, as a vote approached, the M.P. Arthur Annesley resolved to “rest upon the providence of God, as to how the question goes”.¹²¹ In May of the same year Richard Cromwell, “having, I hope, in some degree, learned rather to reverence and submit to the hand of God, than to be unquiet under it”, determined to accept “the late providences” which had tumbled him from power; for although “I could not be active in making a change in the government of these nations; yet, through the goodness of God, I can freely acquiesce in it, being made”.¹²²

After the Civil Wars, providentialism gave the New Model’s opponents a reason (or a pretext) for bowing to their victors. Opponents of the Commonwealth’s “engagement” conceded that the invocations of providence in government propaganda had proved “somewhat taking with divers”.¹²³ The Cromwellians, impressed by the submissiveness of so many defeated Cavaliers, recalled Deuteronomy 32:31, “For their rock is not as our Rock, even our enemies themselves

(n. 118 cont.)

also *Works of Francis Bacon*, iii, p. 432; *H.M.C. Report, De L’Isle and Dudley*, vi, p. 395.

¹¹⁹ *Original Letters and Papers of State. . . Addressed to Oliver Cromwell*, pp. 16-17. (Rowe’s own preference in the matter is not easy to establish from his letter.) Cf. *A Briefe Relation*, 25 Dec. 1649 – 1 Jan. 1650, pp. 203-4.

¹²⁰ *State Papers of John Thurloe*, vi, p. 157; cf. *ibid.*, vi, pp. 407, 707.

¹²¹ *Diary of Thomas Burton*, iv, p. 208.

¹²² *Parliamentary or Constitutional History of England*, xxi, p. 419. For criticism of reasoning of this kind, see, for example, Samuel Johnson, *Remarks upon Dr. Sherlock’s Case of Allegiance* (London, 1690), pp. 12-18.

¹²³ [Edward Gee], *A Plea for Non-Scribers* (London, 1650), appendix, p. 13.

being judges". In 1648, the Cromwellian soldiers believed, their "very enemies were . . . made to say, God was amongst us of a truth, and therefore they could not stand against us".¹²⁴ In 1653 Cromwell told Barebone's Parliament that "even our enemies" had confessed "that God himself was certainly engaged against them, or else they should never have been disappointed in every engagement".¹²⁵ So perhaps there was truth in the claim of an apologist for the Protectorate that "many of the chief murmurers have acknowledged" that Cromwell "by the providence of God is made Lord Protector", and have "owned him as our Ioshua".¹²⁶ Certainly Oliver's own following, and his stature among his critics, had long been strengthened by the air of providential destiny which surrounded him.¹²⁷

III

The most conspicuous and clear-cut manifestations of approval which God vouchsafed to the Cromwellians were of course their victories in war. "The great God of battle", declared the Commonwealth in 1649, "by a continued series of providences and wonders", had "determined very much in favour of the Parliament".¹²⁸ Both sides in the Civil Wars repeatedly "appealed" to the Lord to declare between them. The Roundhead triumph at Cheriton in 1644, according to the preacher Obadiah Sedgwick, "was a victory after a mutuall appeal to God": "the enemy's word was, *God is for us*. Our word was, *God is with us*"; so "the Lord seemed to decide the great doubt, and to resolve the question which side was right; whose cause was His".¹²⁹ In 1650 men were told of their duty to subscribe to the "engagement", "especially when God by so many solemne appeales on boath sides have by His divine providence decided the question".¹³⁰ The victory at Dunbar in the same year was viewed as an

¹²⁴ *Collection of Scarce and Valuable Tracts . . . of the Late Lord Somers*, vi, pp. 501-2; cf. *Perfect Weekly Account*, 10-17 July 1650, p. 528; *Original Letters and Papers of State . . . Addressed to Oliver Cromwell*, p. 134.

¹²⁵ Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, iii, p. 54.

¹²⁶ Smith, *God's Unchangeableness*, p. 41; cf. *Diary of Ralph Josselin*, p. 412.

¹²⁷ I have discussed that subject in my essay, "The Politics of Marvell's Horatian Ode", *Hist. J.*, xxvii (1984), pp. 525-47. For the impression made by Cromwell's providentialist role on his followers, see *Original Letters and Papers of State . . . Addressed to Oliver Cromwell*, pp. 6-7, 10, 17-18, 26, 30, 44; *State Papers of John Thurloe*, vi, pp. 609, 848; *Works of John Owen*, xi, p. 5.

¹²⁸ *Parliamentary or Constitutional History of England*, xix, pp. 68, 177; cf. *ibid.*, xii, pp. 309, 405.

¹²⁹ Sedgwick, *Thanksgiving-Sermon . . . 1644*, p. 24.

¹³⁰ [John] Goodwin] to William Heveningham, 2 Jan. 1649/50: Bodleian Lib., Oxford, Holkham MS. 684 (microfilm), unfoliated.

especially significant declaration of God's favour. Two years earlier Cromwell had reminded the Scots "what a witness God, being appealed to, hath borne upon the engagement of the two armies", and warned them "how dangerous a thing it is to . . . appeal to God the righteous judge in an unjust war". Now he exclaimed that "The Lord hath heard us . . . upon as solemn an appeal as any experience can parallel".¹³¹ God, concurred Oliver St. John, "takes the umpirage upon Him", by answering "the highest and most solempne appeale that could be made by men; whearin both parties referred the decision to the cause of God, and desyred that He would give His judgment therein at the day of battayle".¹³²

Yet was God's purpose so easily scrutable? Could His will truly be known from the result of battle? The defeated Kirk gave Cromwell's claims short shrift: "wee have not so learned Christ as to medle with times and seasons which the Father hath kept in His owne hand".¹³³ The Cromwellians would not have conceded that detecting God's favour in the outcome of battle was the same as discerning His approval in outward prosperity, for the saints, after all, were fighting not for their own power or glory but as the weak instruments through whom God was effecting His sovereign and unalterable purpose. Yet there were logical problems for the victors to face, at least if they wished to convince their critics. For was the Lord necessarily on the victors' side? Had not the Old Testament God often given success to the wicked, in order to make their subsequent fall the greater and the more instructive? Had He not made temporary use of the Israelites' enemies in order to chastise His own people, who, once corrected, had returned to their victorious path? When in 1650 Sir Archibald Johnston of Wariston "debayted with" Commissary-General Whalley, and was told by him that the Cromwellians' "successe" was "an argument of God's approbation", Johnston pointed out "that God gaive successe to whomsoever He used as instruments of His justice against enemies, or mercy for correction of His children, and yet without approbation of their course, as Benjamin, Nebuchadnezzar,

¹³¹ Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, i, p. 652, and ii, p. 335; cf. *ibid.*, i, p. 650, ii, p. 339, and iii, p. 45.

¹³² *Original Letters and Papers of State . . . Addressed to Oliver Cromwell*, p. 25; cf. *ibid.*, pp. 19, 73; *An English Translation of the Scottish Declaration against James Graham* (London, 1650), p. 19; Ludlow, *Voyce from the Watch Tower*, pp. 129, 144-5; *Diary of Thomas Burton*, i, p. lxxv, and iv, p. 227; *Mercurius politicus*, 4-11 Sept. 1651, p. 1046. On the idea of appealing to providence, see also *Political Works of James Harrington*, pp. 23-4, and J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment* (Princeton, 1975), pp. 367-8.

¹³³ Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, ii, p. 304.

Cyrus . . .".¹³⁴ After Dunbar, Sidrach Simpson, describing to Cromwell how the news of the battle had been received in England, wrote that although "some" of the English presbyterians "doe reflect upon their appeals to God, and resolve to sit down under this decision", "most" of them "sett not more upon it, then Israel's being beaten the first and second day against Benjamin, who was wholly ruined afterwards by them".¹³⁵ In the same year a Presbyterian opponent of the "engagement" made an obvious logical point: "the argument from providence is *ab eventu* or from the issue of a thing; they then that will conclude from this medium must tarry a while longer, even till the end be seene, and till the winding up of providence".¹³⁶ And when it was claimed in Richard Cromwell's parliament that God had "taken away" the House of Lords "by a long series of providence", there were M.P.s ready to remonstrate that "No good Christian can argue from events", and that "what God doth providentially, He not always approves".¹³⁷

At times, the triumphant Puritans appeared to concede the force of their critics' arguments. In terms close to the formulations of those critics they acknowledged that victories could not by themselves be proof of God's favour. Joseph Caryl, preaching before the Commons in thanksgiving for recent victories, allowed that "successes and events cannot make a bad cause just or good" — although, he added at once, "they make a good cause beautifull, and add lustre to the justice of it".¹³⁸ Milton agreed: "Wee measure not our cause by our success, but our success by our cause. Yet certainly in a good cause success is a good confirmation; for God hath promised it to good men in almost every leafe of Scripture".¹³⁹ Fairfax and Cromwell both

¹³⁴ *Diary of Archibald Johnston*, ii, p. 59; cf. Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, ii, pp. 335-6, and iii, p. 860; Gee, *A Plea for Non-Scribers*, appendix, p. 12; *Traytors Deciphered*, pp. 32, 84; *A Second Parcel of Objections against Taking the Engagement Answered* (London, 1650), p. 23. See also Ursinus, *Summe of Christian Religion*, p. 333.

¹³⁵ *Original Letters and Papers of State . . . Addressed to Oliver Cromwell*, p. 23.

¹³⁶ Gee, *A Plea for Non-Scribers*, appendix, p. 15.

¹³⁷ *Diary of Thomas Burton*, iii, pp. 361-2.

¹³⁸ Joseph Caryl, *The Saints Thankfull Acclamation* (London, 1644), epistle dedicatory; cf. Joseph Caryl, *A Sermon Pressing to, and Directing in, That Great Duty of Praising God* (London, 1656), epistle dedicatory. For the comparable views of critics, see, for example, Samuel Gott, *An Essay of the True Happines of Man* (London, 1650), p. 211; *The Diary of Sir Henry Slingsby*, ed. D. Parsons (London, 1836), pp. 29-30.

¹³⁹ Fixler, *Milton and the Kingdoms of God*, p. 164 (from *Eikonoklastes*); cf. *The Political Works of James I*, ed. C. H. McIlwain (New York, 1965), p. 54. Milton's wish to "justify the [providential] ways of God to men" is a fundamental concern of his writing. In *Paradise Lost* Milton's Arminian theology justifies the fall and its

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made statements which, although their meaning is not wholly clear, appear to endorse the distinction which Caryl and Milton drew.¹⁴⁰

Yet the victors wanted to have it more than one way. In one mood they could argue at length that amidst the manifold assertions of superior virtue and intention which had been advanced by the contending parties of the 1640s — assertions which, they observed, could all sound equally plausible and which man was not equipped to prove or to test — the unbroken victories of the New Model provided uniquely clear and uniquely objective evidence of God's favour. For

as the engaging upon such pretences and principles does always imply, and is for the most part accompanied with, appeals to God for judgment, so it is the proper work of God to bear true witness and righteous judgment in such cases; and as He is always engaged to do it sooner or later, clearer or darker; so, in this age and part of the world, He hath seemed both to make haste to judgment in such cases, to give it quickly and speedily, and also to make bare His arm therein, that men may see it . . .

It was with that thesis that the army launched the revolutionary programme of the winter of 1648-9.¹⁴¹

Yet on other occasions the Cromwellians were shamelessly, indeed proudly, subjective. They appealed not, or not only, to the "outward mercies" of the battlefield but to an inward knowledge of God's approval: a knowledge which victory might strengthen, and from which the sensation of victory might at times become indistinguishable in their minds, but of which victory had not been the originator. Often the army leaders would talk of "that presence and blessing that God hath afforded this army", the "blessing" being the outward military success which fortified and interacted with the saints' awareness of the spiritual "presence" among them.¹⁴² Ultimately the Cromwellians appealed to experience, not to logic: the experience of shared prayer and, in war, of shared tension broken by shared triumph. Both the emotional force and the logical deficiency of that

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consequences: in *Samson Agonistes* he justifies God's ways to the defeated Puritans of the Restoration.

¹⁴⁰ Fairfax: Sprigge, *Anglia rediviva*, p. 222; cf. *ibid.*, pp. 219-20; *Memorials of the Civil War . . . Forming the Concluding Volumes of the Fairfax Correspondence*, i, pp. 35, 249, 285, 288. Cromwell: Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, ii, p. 357; cf. *ibid.*, ii, pp. 287-8.

¹⁴¹ *Parliamentary or Constitutional History of England*, xviii, pp. 161-3 ("Remonstrance", 16 Nov. 1648). It is my impression that in 1648 the New Model, and Cromwell, gave more thought to the problems of interpreting providence than they had done earlier.

¹⁴² Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, i, pp. 505, 677, and ii, pp. 36-7, 186, 235, 288, 444; *Constitutional Documents of the Puritan Revolution*, p. 402; *Diary of Ralph Josselin*, pp. 78-9.

position emerge vividly from the long disquisition on providence in the speech with which Cromwell dissolved his first Protectorate parliament in January 1655. His opponents in the Commons had protested that “the providences of God are like a two-edged sword, which may be used both ways; . . . and a thief may take as good a title to every purse which he takes by the highways”.¹⁴³ Now they paid the price for that insolent comparison, as Cromwell vented his wrath on men who mocked God’s providence, who blasphemously “call His revolutions human designs” and “necessities of men’s creations”. From such people Cromwell had “a sure refuge”. They “are without God in the world, and walk not with Him, and know not what it is to pray, or believe, and to receive returns from God, and to be spoken unto by the Spirit of God”.¹⁴⁴

Thus the “self-confirming” quality, the circularity, which historians often observe in Puritan providentialism is as common in the public as in the private lives of the saints. Edmund Ludlow, without any sense of complication or contradiction, described “the unheard-of thunder, lightning and raine” at the coronation dinner of Charles II:

which though his owne flatterers prophanelly applied to the greatning of their solemnity, as if heaven itselfe exprest its joy thereat by the dischardge of their cannon, yet others, more understanding in the dispensations of the Lord, supposed it rather a testimony from heaven against the wickedness of those who would not only that he should rule over them, but were willing to make them a captaine to leade them into Egiptian bondage; from which the Lord by His providence plainly spake His desire to have delivered them.¹⁴⁵

Ludlow was writing of the hour of Puritan defeat, but the saints had reasoned similarly in their time of victory.

Yet for all the logical fallibility of victorious providentialism, and for all the logical objections which were intermittently raised against it, the protesting victims found effective criticism hard to sustain. Their own thinking was too much steeped in providentialism to allow them the confidence and the detachment with which they might have made nonsense of Cromwellian arguments. One pamphlet of 1650 which came unusually close to doing so, Edward Gee’s *A Plea for Non-Scribers*, devoted careful reasoning to a reminder that “The judgments of God are a great deep, His way is in the sea, and His path in the great waters, and His footsteps are not known”. But when Gee sought to illustrate the dangers of prying into God’s secrets, he

¹⁴³ *Diary of Thomas Burton*, i, p. xxx; cf. *ibid.*, i, p. lxix.

¹⁴⁴ Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, iii, pp. 591-2.

¹⁴⁵ Ludlow, *Voyce from the Watch Tower*, p. 287.

turned to Thomas Beard's anthology of retributive providences, *The Theatre of God's Judgements*, where he found a "terrible warning" in a dire physical affliction with which God had once punished a man who had seen divine favour in his present prosperity. Gee appears to have been as oblivious to the contradiction as Beard had been.¹⁴⁶

Something of the difficulty which confronted Cromwell's critics can be seen too in the writings of Richard Baxter. In 1659 Baxter averred that his generation had been too bold in its scrutiny of God's purposes.¹⁴⁷ He bemoaned the disastrous lapse of his old friend Major-General Berry, who had been "affectionate in religion, and while conversant with humbling providences, doctrines and company, he carried himself as a very great enemy to pride", but who had gone to the bad when "Cromwell made him his favourite, and his extraordinary valour was crowned with extraordinary success . . . And all this was promoted by the misunderstanding of providence, while he verily thought that God, by their victories, had so called them to look after the government of the land".¹⁴⁸ Yet under Cromwell, Baxter had been as convinced as anyone not only that some massive providential design was at work in the Civil Wars, but that it was "the duty of His servants to read and study" the "strange providences in our military affairs and changes of state". Men, he complained, "make light" of the immeasurable privilege which God's dispensations conferred upon them; and they neglected the obligation to reform which those providences imposed.¹⁴⁹ They were repeating the sin of the Israelites: "Who would have thought that a generation that had seen the wonders in Egypt, and had passed through the Sea, and been maintained in a wilderness with constant miracles, should yet be so vile idolaters, or murmuring unbelievers . . .?"¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁶ Gee, *Plea for Non-Scribers*, appendix, pp. 11, 16. For Gee's providentialism, see also P. Zagorin, *A History of Political Thought in the English Revolution* (London, 1954), p. 76.

¹⁴⁷ Fixler, *Milton and the Kingdoms of God*, pp. 221-2.

¹⁴⁸ *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, bk. i, p. 57; cf. Owen Watkins, *The Puritan Experience* (London, 1972), pp. 126-9.

¹⁴⁹ Richard Baxter, *The Quaker's Catechism* (London, 1655), preface, "To the Separatists and Anabaptists in England".

¹⁵⁰ Richard Baxter, *True Christianity* (London, 1655), p. 204. Cromwell's Puritan enemies were unable to identify a boundary between legitimate and illegitimate inquiry into providences, and failed to sustain a distinction, which one might expect to have been useful to them, between a (proper) desire to understand God's will and an (improper) determination to enact it. For how could God's instruments be content with mild curiosity or with passivity? One distinction which *was* drawn in the seventeenth century was made by Sir Richard Baker, in his attack on Prynne in *Theatrum triumphans*, pp. 71-2: "It is, no doubt, good counsel, when any extraordinary
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The inhibitions which forestalled an outright assault on Cromwell's providentialism impeded not only Cromwell's Puritan enemies but his royalist ones. Cavaliers were torn between denying that God's will was visible on the battlefield and asserting that, while God might temporarily have afflicted them, in the long term He was on their side. The latter impulse usually prevailed.¹⁵¹ To abandon, in defeat and poverty and exile, their belief in God's approval would be to abandon all hope and consolation. Even when their king had been executed, the more committed of the royalists were defiant in their providentialism. "We make no doubt", their propaganda announced, "but we have God (the punisher of all perfidious dealers) on our side, and in Him is our sole hope".¹⁵² Although "these enemies of God prosper, and are mighty . . . and though the divine vengeance be deferred, yet it will surely come, and overtake them in a day when they looke not for it".¹⁵³ That voice was to find echoes in the 1660s: in the assurances delivered from the "watch-tower" of Edmund Ludlow that, although God "permits" the restored royalists to "smite" the Puritans "with a rod, yet the staffe of destruction that they lift up against them shall be beaten backe on their owne heads . . . Yea, it will bee but a very little while before . . . the destruction of His enemyes";¹⁵⁴ or in the concluding chorus of *Samson Agonistes*:

Oft he seems to hide his face,
But unexpectedly returns
And to his faithful champion hath in place
Bore witness gloriously . . .

For whatever their differences of theological premise, royalist and Puritan providentialists shared instinctive and profound assumptions. Roundhead and Cavalier can sound identical in times of dejection: the lament of Charles Fleetwood in 1659 that "the Lord had blasted them and spitt in their faces" can be set beside the admission of

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fearefull accident happens, to call ourselves to account . . . acknowledging, that such things are oftentimes sent of God, as gracious warnings to draw us to repentance; but yet, when such things happen, to censure them presently, as judgments of God upon any particular sin; and to determine upon what particular sin, or sinner they are sent; this is more than this man hath warrant for"; for "the judgments of God are as secret as fearfull". Cf. the letter of the archbishop of York in *The Times*, 12 July 1984, on the place in God's purpose of the burning of York Minster.

¹⁵¹ *Parliamentary or Constitutional History of England*, xii, pp. 330, 331, and xiii, pp. 5-6, 72-3. But in what spirit should we take the claim made by Charles I in the west country shortly after Marston Moor that God had recently shown favour to the cause of the royalists by giving them success "in these parts"?

¹⁵² *The Royal Diurnal*, 22-30 Apr. 1650, p. 7.

¹⁵³ *Traitors Deciphered*, p. 84.

¹⁵⁴ Ludlow, *Voyce from the Watch Tower*, p. 127.

Henry Hammond after the execution of Charles I that "God hath spit in our face".¹⁵⁵ And they sound similar in times of triumph. The explanation of the Restoration in the concluding paragraph of Clarendon's *History of the Rebellion* is "Puritan" in its providentialism; and John Evelyn could easily be mistaken for a Puritan divine or a Cromwellian soldier when he compares the same event to "the returne of the Jews from the Babylonish captivity", and declares that "it was the Lord's doing . . . this hapning when to expect or effect it was past all human policy".¹⁵⁶ Now at last God's favour had been made clear. "The court of heaven", declared the Anglican clergyman Gilbert Ironside in 1660, "hath been solicited this many years *pro* and *con* . . . and now let the world judge whose prayers have been heard".¹⁵⁷

IV

If providentialism ran so deep among the Civil War vanquished, what limits could restrain its application to politics by the victorious saints? Between 1640 and 1651 God first delivered them, to their astonishment, from Laudian persecution, and then awarded them a spectacular, even miraculous series of uninterrupted military successes. When Barebone's Parliament assembled in 1653, Cromwell told it that "truly God hath called you to this work by, I think, as wonderful providences as ever passed upon the sons of men in so short a time".¹⁵⁸ Soon his listeners were telling the nation of their

¹⁵⁵ Fleetwood: *Clarke Papers*, iv, p. 220; cf. Godfrey Davies, *The Restoration of Charles II* (Oxford, 1955), p. 188, and Christopher Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution* (London, 1977), pp. 347-8, 377. Hammond: "Illustrations of the State of the Church during the Great Rebellion", ed. N. Pocock, *The Theologian and Ecclesiastic*, vi (July 1848), p. 4. For royalist providentialism in defeat, see also Paul, *Lord Protector*, p. 103; cf. Felix Raab, *The English Face of Machiavelli* (London, 1964), p. 156.

¹⁵⁶ Quoted by Lister, *Life and Administration of Edward, First Earl of Clarendon*, i, p. 516.

¹⁵⁷ Gilbert Ironside, *A Sermon Preached at Dorchester* (London, 1660), p. 13. I owe this reference to my pupil John Spurr, whose research has revealed the persistence and the depth of providentialism among the Anglican clergy of the Restoration period. For providentialist interpretations of 1660 by royalists, see also Nicholas Jose, *Ideas of the Restoration in English Literature, 1660-1671* (London, 1984). We should add, however, that Anglican providentialism did not usually display that preoccupation with grace and election which Puritans brought to the subject; that Cavalier providentialism is in general neither as frequently nor as intensely expressed as Roundhead providentialism; and that Roundhead appeals to providence were frequently derided by royalist polemicists and poets as damning evidence of Puritan hypocrisy. William Laud had complained that "many things in the works of providence, many men, yea and sometimes the best, are a great deale too busy with": *Sermons Preached by William Laud, D.D.*, ed. J. W. Hatherell (London, 1929), p. 149.

¹⁵⁸ Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, iii, p. 60.

more than usual expectation of some great and strange changes coming on the world, which we believe can hardly be parallel'd with any times, but those for a while before the birth of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. And we do not know, that any records of all the nations in the world (we scarce except the Jews themselves) can afford such a series of divine providence, or more clear impressions of the goings forth and actings of God in any people, then hath been in these nations.¹⁵⁹

Bold as such claims might seem, they were not confined to the heady year 1653. Throughout the Puritan Revolution, respectable audiences learned that God's recent actings in England had not been surpassed "since Israel's coming out of Egypt", even "since the first day of the creation of the world".¹⁶⁰ Whereas in recent times "all the nations in Christendome have been in grievous perplexities many yeers round about us: we have bin hitherto kept as another land of Goshen, where light hath still shined, when all others have been in darkness".¹⁶¹ England "hath bin like Noah's arke, safe and secure, when all other nations have been drowned with a sea of bloud".¹⁶² That extraordinary mercy clearly betokened some no less extraordinary divine intention, the more so since England's notorious sins merited a very different return. The glorious privileges which England had been unaccountably vouchsafed would inevitably yield to hideous destruction if the accompanying responsibility to purify the land were not swiftly met.

In the recognition by godly Englishmen that "God doth sometimes shew mercy to a nation when it least deserves it, and least expects it",¹⁶³ lay one of the perceptions which gave them a sense of intimate affinity with the people of Israel. In Israelite history they repeatedly detected divinely inspired "parallels" to their own experience. As Henry Stubbe put it in 1659, "Our case hath been parallel" to the history of the Old Testament, "and we may therein read the grounds of our confidence, that thorough a resemblance of events the same providence operateth now in us, which did of old, and we expect the same issue".¹⁶⁴ It was believed in particular that "the case of the

¹⁵⁹ Austin Woolrych, *Commonwealth to Protectorate* (London, 1982), p. 155.

¹⁶⁰ *Mercurius politicus*, 8-15 Feb. 1655, p. 5119; Calamy, *God's Free Mercy to England*, p. 10; cf. *Works of John Owen*, viii, p. 351; Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, iii, pp. 434-5.

¹⁶¹ Haller, *Liberty and Reformation in the Puritan Revolution*, p. 19 (quoting Stephen Marshall).

¹⁶² Calamy, *God's Free Mercy to England*, p. 17; cf. Haller, *Liberty and Reformation in the Puritan Revolution*, pp. 68-9; Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, iii, pp. 290, 579; Jeremiah Burroughes, *Sion's Joy* (London, 1641), pp. 51-2.

¹⁶³ Calamy, *God's Free Mercy to England*, p. 3.

¹⁶⁴ Henry Stubbe, *Malice Rebuked* (London, 1659), p. 4; cf. Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, iii, pp. 434-5; Jeremiah Burroughes, *An Exposition with*
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Israelites opposed by the Benjamites, runs parallel with our present quarrels".¹⁶⁵

When we observe the excited responses to those "parallels"; when we remember the apocalyptic and millenarian beliefs which they were so often held to illustrate;¹⁶⁶ when we think on the depth and on the circularity of the Cromwellians' conviction that God was on their side: then the destructive potential of Civil War providentialism seems unimaginably vast. If, as an apologist for regicide had it, "right and might" were "well met",¹⁶⁷ and if the God who had smitten and laid waste the Israelites' enemies and obliterated their cities was now loose in England, what was to save the land from wholesale slaughters and pogroms? The Irish might have said that they were not spared them; and even in England, although providentialism did not license massacres, it did produce a sacrificial killing. The execution of Charles I is inexplicable without reference to the Old Testament "vengeance" breathed by Cromwell after the second Civil War,¹⁶⁸ and to the biblical theory of blood-guilt which was as potent a force among the regicides in January 1649 as it was to be among Cromwell's soldiers in Ireland later in the year.¹⁶⁹ Although feelings more often ran high in the later 1640s than earlier in the decade, there are hints even in the first Civil War of the capacity for devastation which providentialism

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Practical Observations Continued upon the Fourth . . . Seventh Chapters of . . . Hosea (London, 1650), preface.

¹⁶⁵ Edmund Staunton, *Phinehas's Zeal* (London, 1644), epistle dedicatory; Carter, *Israel's Peace with God*; cf. Paul Christianson, *Reformers and Babylon* (Toronto, 1978), pp. 237-8. There was of course nothing new in the detection of parallels between Israelite and English history: they had been almost a Tudor commonplace. But the Puritan Revolution gave a new frequency and a new depth of conviction to such comparisons.

¹⁶⁶ In that large subject, it is a general rule that Puritan politicians were more ready to interpret providence than to calculate the millennium.

¹⁶⁷ John Goodwin, *Right and Might Well Met* (London, 1649).

¹⁶⁸ Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, i, pp. 653, 669; cf. *Parliamentary or Constitutional History of England*, xviii, p. 163.

¹⁶⁹ Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, ii, pp. 127, 142, 199, 349-50; cf. Numbers, 35:33. God's wrath had not only to be appeased by the avenging of blood shed in seventeenth-century Britain. It must be assuaged too by repayment of the saints' sacrifices (i) in Mary's reign, whence the blood of the martyrs "doth lie upon the land, and crieth for vengeance": Calamy, *God's Free Mercy to England*, pp. 49-50; Scudder, *God's Warning to England*, p. 19; (ii) in Europe's wars of religion: *Diary of Ralph Josselin*, pp. 300-1; *Mercurius politicus*, 15-22 May 1651, p. 800; *State Papers of John Thurloe*, vii, p. 190; and (iii), as readers of Milton's sonnet xv will remember, in Piedmont. God also demanded vengeance for the blood of the Indians slaughtered by Spaniards in the New World: Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, iii, pp. 879-90. On blood-guilt, see also Patricia Crawford, "Charles Stuart, That Man of Blood", *Jl. Brit. Studies*, xvi (Spring 1977), pp. 41-61.

contained: in Cromwell's letter to Valentine Walton after Marston Moor, for example, which reported proudly that "God made them as stubble to our swords", and which commended Walton's son for his regret, as he lay dying of his battle wounds, that "God had . . . suffered him to be no more the executioner of His enemies".¹⁷⁰

Yet there was to be no holocaust. As civil wars go, the English experience, the "war without an enemy", was uncommonly civil. Even the executions of five royalists after the death of Charles I and of two royalist conspirators in 1658 were carried out only after much heart-searching. The Puritans rarely allowed their providentialism to obscure the constraints of natural law, still less the moral precepts of Scripture. It was agreed that "the holy God directs and leads His people onely into the pathes of righteousness, that is, into such actions, as agree with His naturall and voluntary divine lawes".¹⁷¹ No one would have challenged Ireton when at Putney he reminded the Levellers that, while the saints must follow wherever providence might lead, they could be sure that God "will so lead this army, that they may not incur sin, or bring scandal upon the name of God".¹⁷² The preacher Thomas Jacomb put the conventional view: "In the carrying on of God's providential will, do not swerve from God's preceptive will, for it is not providence but the Word that is your rule; providence without the Word is doubtfull, but providence against the Word is dangerous".¹⁷³ Sometimes the statements of Cromwellians may seem to have strained against that orthodoxy. They gave themselves wide interpretative room in their emphasis on the role of the Spirit in interpreting Scripture, without which the Bible was a dead letter; and their acknowledgement that providence must ultimately be subordinated to Scripture can seem to pull in the opposite direction from their eagerness to remind men that God worked wonders not only in the Bible but in events around them.¹⁷⁴ Yet if they may have bent the rules, they never broke them. In any

¹⁷⁰ Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, i, pp. 287, 288.

¹⁷¹ *State Papers of John Thurloe*, vi, p. 245; cf. *A Second Parcel of Objections against the Taking of the Engagement Answered*, pp. 22-3; *Discolliminius* (London, 1650), p. 19; Gee, *A Plea to Non-Scribers*, appendix, p. 18; Smith, *God's Unchangeableness*, p. 26.

¹⁷² Woodhouse, *Puritanism and Liberty*, p. 50; cf. Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, i, pp. 543-6.

¹⁷³ Thomas Jacomb, *The Active and Publick Spirit* (London, 1657), p. 45; cf. Robinson, *Safe Conduct*, p. 29.

¹⁷⁴ Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, iii, p. 58, and iv, p. 473; Woodhouse, *Puritanism and Liberty*, p. 477; *Original Letters and Papers of State . . . Addressed to Oliver Cromwell*, p. 25.

case, profound as was the influence of the Old Testament upon them, there was always the counterweight of the New. At critical moments, when a vengeful policy beckoned them, the saints would remember one particular New Testament text, James 3:17: "But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy . . .".¹⁷⁵

So the politics of the Puritan Revolution were less violent than the pervasiveness of the doctrine of providence might lead us to expect. Were there ways in which the influence of providentialism on the broad character of Puritan politics can be said to have been more profound? That question could not be settled conclusively here, for the influence of a doctrine on a politician can be properly tested, and a distinction safely made between his conventional deference to it and his anxious alertness to it, only when we observe his behaviour under the pressure of events, with the aid of a narrative form which is beyond the ambitions of this essay. Yet there are generalizations which can perhaps be profitably hazarded.

Not least, providentialism devalued political planning. God's sovereignty, which liked to blast the counsels of men, could not be circumscribed by human calculation. Indeed Cromwell thought dispensations especially significant when "they have not been forecast, but sudden providences".¹⁷⁶ The directions which providence took could not be predicted. Politicians and army officers were wont to describe themselves as "following" providence or as being "led" by it. Thus at the end of 1648 the New Model leaders ominously announced that "we are now drawing up with the army to London, there to follow providence as God shall clear our way".¹⁷⁷ Early in 1650 the Cromwellian officers in Ireland "thought fit to take the field, and to attempt such things as God by His providence should lead us to upon the enemy". When they did so they found, as Cromwell told a friend, that "truly our work is neither from our brains nor from our courage and strength, but we follow the Lord who goeth before, and gather what He scattereth, that so all may appear to be from Him".¹⁷⁸ Later in the same year, when the New Model invaded

¹⁷⁵ Woodhouse, *Puritanism and Liberty*, p. 51 (cf. *ibid.*, pp. 99, 107-8); Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, iii, p. 61; "Inedited Letters of Cromwell, Colonel Jones, Bradshaw and Other Regicides", p. 226.

¹⁷⁶ Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, iii, p. 591.

¹⁷⁷ Woodhouse, *Puritanism and Liberty*, p. 467; cf. *ibid.*, p. 40, where William Goffe at Putney, urging radical courses on his colleagues, reminds them of the saints' duty to "follow Christ wheresoever He goes".

¹⁷⁸ Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, ii, pp. 212, 235; cf. *ibid.*, p. 179. Puritans commonly spoke of following in the "footsteps" of providence, or of

(cont. on p. 93)

Scotland, its leaders declared their resolution “to follow Him in integrity, through difficult paths”, and acknowledged their “fear” lest “He going before, we should not follow”.¹⁷⁹ Cromwell conceived his expedition to Hispaniola because “providence seemed to lead us hither”.¹⁸⁰ His failures of parliamentary management can be set beside his announcement, when Barebones’s Parliament met, that he and his fellow officers would behave during its sitting “as the providence of God shall lead us”, and beside his remark to his first Protectorate parliament, when he dissolved that querulous assembly, that rather than “intermeddle” in its affairs he had waited to “see . . . what God would produce by you”.¹⁸¹

If providentialism could be a recipe for political naïvety, it also fostered more serviceable political qualities. It warranted flexibility and demanded agility. It dispensed Cromwell from being “wedded and glued to forms of government”. It enabled him to think of them as “dross and dung in comparison of Christ”,¹⁸² and to move swiftly from one constitutional position to a markedly different one. In 1648, Ludlow’s *Memoirs* tell us, Cromwell and his fellow “grandeers . . . would not declare themselves either for a monarchical, aristocratical or democratical government: maintaining that any of them might be good in themselves, or for us, as providence should direct us”.¹⁸³ Men must adjust to God’s will, not prescribe to it by constitutions and documents of their own invention. Monck indicated the room for manœuvre which providentialism could supply when he said in 1660 that he “disliked all promissory oaths; and he entertained scruples shared by many against swearing never to acquiesce in that which divine providence might possibly ordain”.¹⁸⁴ Five years earlier Edmund Ludlow, according to his *Memoirs*, refused to promise obedience to the Protectorate, since “if providence open a way, and give an opportunity of appearing in behalf of the people, I cannot

(n. 178 cont.)

tracing its “imprint”. In Marvell’s “First Anniversary”, appropriately, the “hidden force” in Cromwell’s life not only “pushed/ Still from behind” but “before him rushed”.

¹⁷⁹ Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, ii, p. 288.

¹⁸⁰ Clarke Papers, iii, p. 207.

¹⁸¹ Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, iii, pp. 65, 581.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, i, pp. 527, 540.

¹⁸³ *Memoirs of Edmund Ludlow*, ed. C. H. Firth, 2 vols. (London, 1894), i, pp. 184-5.

¹⁸⁴ Quoted by Lister, *Life and Administration of Edward, First Earl of Clarendon*, i, p. 489.

consent to tie my own hands before-hand, and oblige myself not to lay hold on it".¹⁸⁵

Together with political flexibility, providentialism might put a premium on courage and on instinct. It required and enabled Cromwell to peer into the political unknown and to take his followers into uncharted territory, where rational calculation might have deemed their survival impossible. Sometimes Cromwell's words are reminiscent of Calvin, who had written that "when once the light of divine providence has illumined the believer's soul, he is relieved and set free, not only from the extreme fear and anxiety which formerly oppressed him, but from all care".¹⁸⁶ "Care we not for tomorrow, nor for anything", rejoiced Cromwell in 1648, in words which point both to the strength and to the weakness of political providentialism.¹⁸⁷ Calvin had described "the exulting confidence of the saints", who said to themselves "The Lord is on my side; I will not fear: what can man do unto me?".¹⁸⁸ For his part Cromwell warned against the "bondage spirit" of the man whose "voice of fear is, If I had done this, if I had avoided that, how well it had been with me!".¹⁸⁹ John Owen said admiringly of Ireton that he asked not "What saith this man, or what saith that man, but what saith the Lord?". Ireton "consulted not with flesh and blood at all, and the wisdom of it"¹⁹⁰ — a biblical injunction which the saints urged on Cromwell and which he claimed to have followed when he broke up the Long Parliament.¹⁹¹ In those words too, perhaps, the basic strength and the basic weakness of political providentialism are to be glimpsed.

Cromwell's innocence is not to be exaggerated, nor his fearlessness mistaken for recklessness. Beside the Cromwell whose God exalts every valley and makes every mountain low, there is the Cromwell who knows that the saints must work through "means", and who insists at Putney that God's servants are obliged "to consider the probability of the ways and means to accomplish" His ends, "accord-

¹⁸⁵ *Memoirs of Edmund Ludlow*, i, p. 434. We may be sure that the emphasis on providence in these passages will have been stronger before John Toland edited them: see Ludlow, *Voyce from the Watch Tower*, *passim*.

¹⁸⁶ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, i, p. 261.

¹⁸⁷ Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, i, p. 644; cf. *Mercurius politicus*, 24 June – 1 July 1652, p. 1691.

¹⁸⁸ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, i, p. 262.

¹⁸⁹ Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, ii, p. 602; cf. *ibid.*, i, p. 696.

¹⁹⁰ *Works of John Owen*, viii, p. 349.

¹⁹¹ Worden, "Oliver Cromwell and the Sin of Achan", pp. 133-4; cf. Galatians i.16.

ing to reason and judgment".¹⁹² As well as trust in God the saint must keep his powder dry. There is always a tension between the Cromwell who cuts suddenly through negotiation and compromise to impose the Lord's solution, and the Cromwell who sees conventional political manoeuvre as a divinely approved aid to God's purpose. The first Cromwell is Gideon, triumphing when his followers have been "sifted, winnowed and brought to a handful".¹⁹³ Behind that posture lay much radical rhetoric of the 1640s. Preachers then reminded parliament that God would discard lukewarm instruments, that His work would not be done by men who "runne well a while, and afterwards draw back", that the children of Israel had failed to prosper when they "did not drive out the Canaanites from amongst them".¹⁹⁴ The minister John Bond told parliament in 1648 that "in our first warre the Lord made it His worke to sift these three nations somewhat generally, and as it were with a wider and courser sieve". There was, Bond explained,

a speciall providence in that, for should the first sieve have been too shy and fine, it might have kept back so great a masse and weight on that side, as might have borne and broken out the bottome or floor of the sieve . . . in this second warre, He is sifting the sifted againe with a much finer rince . . . separating between the faithfull and the formalist.¹⁹⁵

Yet even in his most revolutionary moments there were bridges which Cromwell was careful to leave unburned. Always lines were kept open through which he might rebuild the unity of that eclectic godly party whose fracture at Pride's Purge he so deeply regretted. The second Cromwell thinks that God will want his instruments to operate from as broad a power-base as possible, and sees the ancient constitution as a means by which that base might be secured. This is the Cromwell who backs off from needless confrontation; who aims to unite even unregenerate Englishmen behind him against God's enemies in Ireland and Scotland;¹⁹⁶ who appoints *politique* ex-royalists to leading positions in the regimes of the Interregnum; who holds out the hope of toleration to Anglicans and Catholics. When he wants

¹⁹² Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, i, p. 518.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, iii, p. 54; cf. *Original Letters and Papers of State . . . Addressed to Oliver Cromwell*, p. 60; Smith, *God's Unchangeableness*, p. 29.

¹⁹⁴ Carter, *Israel's Peace with God*, p. 11; Scudder, *God's Warning to England*, p. 21; cf. *A Briefe Relation*, 25 June – 2 July 1650, pp. 674–5; *Parliamentary or Constitutional History of England*, xix, p. 180.

¹⁹⁵ Bond, *Eschol*, p. 1. In another favoured metaphor, trials and afflictions were a furnace where those who fought in God's name were purified and purged: Ludlow, *Voyce from the Watch Tower*, p. 115; cf. Calamy, *God's Free Mercy to England*, p. 37.

¹⁹⁶ Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, ii, pp. 38–9.

to avoid radical action he remembers the decision of David, taken upon “prudential grounds”, not to attempt revenge for the death of Abner, “in regard the sons of Zeruiah were too hard for him”.¹⁹⁷ The two Cromwells were not always at ease with each other. His political instinct could be at odds with his fear of “fleshly reasonings” which God would punish, of “thoughts that perhaps may be foolish and carnal”.¹⁹⁸ Perhaps the balance of cunning and fastidiousness (or is it high-mindedness?) is best caught in the letter of 6 November 1648 in which he described to Robert Hammond his recent diplomatic success in Scotland. He had gone there to effect

a conquest, or if not, things put in a balance; the first was not very unfeasible, but I think not Christian, and I was commanded to the contrary by the two Houses; as for the latter, by the providence of God it is perfectly come to pass, not by our wisdom, for I durst not design it, I durst not admit of so mixed, so low a consideration; we were led out (to the praise of our God be it spoken) to more sincere, more spiritual considerations . . .¹⁹⁹

Cromwell’s conscience was clean — and God’s purpose had been served.

V

In any discussion of the relationship between ideas and politics, between belief and power, there is a place for scepticism. We need to contemplate, even if we do not altogether accept, Clarendon’s enjoyable account of what he took to be the cynical manipulation of providentialist susceptibilities by Sir Henry Vane in his advocacy of the Self-Denying Ordinance;²⁰⁰ or Henry Stubbe’s commendation to absolute rulers of the example of Oliver Cromwell, who had built his crack army by instilling into his troops the belief “that there is no such thing as chance, no mistakes in providence”;²⁰¹ or the wry observation of Sir Thomas Blount that “There is not any thing whatsoever, that derives so great an authority amongst men, as the opinion of divine favour, or heavenly designation”.²⁰² Henry Cromwell noted how, in correspondence, politicians could use

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, i, p. 551, and ii, p. 273; 2 Samuel 3:39.

¹⁹⁸ Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, i, pp. 519, 696, and ii, p. 38.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, i, p. 678.

²⁰⁰ Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon, *The History of the Rebellion*, 6 vols., ed. W. D. Macray (Oxford, 1888; repr. 1958), iii, pp. 457-8; for Vane, cf. *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, i, p. 627 n.

²⁰¹ Henry Stubbe, *An Account of the Rise and Progress of Mahometanism*, ed. H. M. K. Shairani (London, 1911), pp. 178-9.

²⁰² Sir Thomas Blount, *Essays on Several Subjects* (London, 1691; repr. 1697), p. 85.

“wary” providentialist language to skirt the facts of power.²⁰³ The attention paid by some politicians to providentialist arguments became conspicuously closer when they used them to exert psychological pressure on a colleague such as Charles Fleetwood, who was known to be especially vulnerable to them.²⁰⁴ The Protectoral regime, in the declarations with which it appointed fast days, smuggled vindications of government policy into awed expositions of the workings of providence — and so served God’s purpose by strengthening the government He had appointed.²⁰⁵

Can such behaviour, the modern reader naturally asks, have been always free from cynicism? Can the expressions of grateful wonder at the dispensations of providence which became virtually obligatory in the preambles to the petitions of the period have been invariably ingenuous and freshly minted? It can hardly need to be emphasized that providentialism afforded infinite scope for self-deception; that the social interests and the constitutional assumptions of Puritans may have figured more prominently in their interpretations of providence than they recognized; or that politicians, consciously or unconsciously, will have played up or played down the doctrine of providence, and pulled it in different directions, as it suited them. A religion which seeks to cure the world can be relied upon to become infected by it. Yet the worldliness of providentialism was as much its political strength as its political limitation. It is one thing to acknowledge the presence of that worldliness: quite another to suppose that the political Puritan would have acted as he did even had the doctrine of providence been unknown to him. The latter suggestion, indeed, must halt us in our tracks, for if the doctrine of providence had been unknown to him he would have been an unrecognizably different person. There would have been no Puritan politics for him to pursue.

Puritan expositors of providentialism faced a dilemma. They strove to keep their audiences on their spiritual toes, to make them permanently aware of the transcendent in the ordinary. Men, they complained, thought about providence only in exceptional moments of

²⁰³ *State Papers of John Thurloe*, vi, p. 519.

²⁰⁴ *Collection of Scarce and Valuable Tracts . . . of the Late Lord Somers*, vi, p. 499; *State Papers of John Thurloe*, vii, pp. 669-70, 771-4, 797 (cf. *ibid.*, vi, pp. 244-6); *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, vii, pp. 119-20. For the manipulation of providentialism, see also *Diary of Thomas Burton*, iii, p. 160.

²⁰⁵ See, for example, Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, iii, pp. 225-8; *A Declaration of His Highness, Inviting the People of England and Wales to a Day of Solemn Fasting and Humiliation* (London, 1656).

trial or deliverance, and soon forgot it once the crisis was past.²⁰⁶ Yet the more frequently the doctrine was expounded, the more familiar and therefore the less fresh and vivid it must be. It might become a source less of wonder than of cliché: a system of thought half-consciously deferred to, for example, in the widespread parenthetical phrase “God willing” — a term which is now to be found among the fragments of colloquial speech that belong to the modern deposit of providentialism. (“It’s a mercy”; “grateful for small mercies”; “tempting providence”; “these things are sent to try us” are some of the others.) Possibly the doctrine of providence — like much else in Puritanism — lost a little of its edge during the 1650s, at least among younger men. But if so, erosion was to be a very long and very unsteady process. At its period of widest influence, from about 1620 to 1660, Puritan providentialism was a major force in English life and English politics. It supplied a coherent, self-contained view of the world, a view which, however crabbed or irrational or unhealthy it may seem to us, allowed room for wine and song and laughter.

Admittedly a doctrine which ruled out chance was hardly conducive to a sense of the absurd. Yet the idea of chance, which has rarely been a happy bedfellow of theology, can disconcert secular rationality too. Providentialism has its secular forms; and if God is dead, then providence may be said to have outlived Him. Men of the modern world who think of themselves as rational or irreligious are often prone, as if by instinct, to detect — as Puritans did — a pre-ordained pattern to their lives, to discern connections among the apparently random interactions of events which shape them, and to relate those connections to their sense of moral order. The traditional English novel has thrived upon, as it has no doubt reinforced, an alertness to such patterning; and even the profound preoccupation of the modern novel with the absence of providence is an inverted tribute to the power of the doctrine. Among modern historians, the challenge to providentialism has been less forceful. Whigs and Marxists have illustrated the resilience of a linear and moral approach to history in which determinism is not always readily distinguishable from providentialism. And even historians to whom the Puritan belief that the Great Rebellion was caused by providence seems ridiculous are as certain as Puritans were that nothing so important could have happened by accident.

Puritan statesmen who wrote letters concerning urgent matters of

²⁰⁶ A good example in politics of that failing is Sir William Lockhart: see his many letters in *State Papers of John Thurloe*, vi-vii.

state were sometimes so carried away by their reflections on the operation of providence that thoughts on the subject which began as digressions threatened to take over the correspondence. It happened to Lord Chancellor Steele in the kingship crisis of 1657, and it happened to John Thurloe after the capture of Dunkirk.²⁰⁷ Of course, a politician might be more reflective at his writing-desk than amidst the turmoil of debate or the detail of committee, where practical challenges had to be faced, or taxes voted or spent. Yet he could not afford to let providence slip from his sight. To do so, indeed, was the most fundamental of political errors. For whatever calculations he might make, there was one perception which dwarfed all others: that to ignore or disobey God's will was to invite the likelihood of retribution and disaster. The authentic voice of political Puritanism is to be heard nowhere more clearly than in the fear of divine punishment: in the eagerness of M.P.s to put James Nayler to death in order to "divert the judgement from the nation";²⁰⁸ in the conviction held by regicides that the execution of Charles I was "the only way to appease the wrathe of God towards the nation";²⁰⁹ or in the warning given to his fellow New Model officers by William Goffe, when in 1647 they hesitated before the challenge of revolution, to "tremble at the thought that we should be standing in a direct opposition against Jesus Christ in the work that He is about".²¹⁰

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²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, vi, pp. 294-5, and vii, p. 192; cf. *ibid.*, vii, pp. 174, 188.

²⁰⁸ See my "Toleration and the Cromwellian Protectorate", in W. J. Sheils (ed.), *Persecution and Toleration* (Studies in Church Hist., xxi, Oxford, 1984), pp. 223-4; cf. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, p. 92; Keith Thomas, "The Puritans and Adultery: The Act of 1650 Reconsidered", in Donald Pennington and Keith Thomas (eds.), *Puritans and Revolutionaries: Essays Presented to Christopher Hill* (Oxford, 1978), pp. 263, 277.

²⁰⁹ Ludlow, *Voyce from the Watch Tower*, p. 143; cf. Hutchinson, *Memoirs of the Life of Colonel Hutchinson*, pp. 189-90.

²¹⁰ Woodhouse, *Puritanism and Liberty*, p. 40; cf. *ibid.*, p. 101.