

ANNE CARR, SPARROWS AND THE SPIRITUALITY OF PROVIDENCE

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ANNE E. CARR BVM (1934–2009) was a native of Chicago and alumna of the former Mundelein College, and a member of the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (BVM), a US religious congregation for women. Mundelein College served as the last private Roman Catholic women's college in Illinois until 1991, when it affiliated with neighbouring Loyola University. Having received an MA in theology from Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Anne taught at Mundelein and served there for a time as chair of the religious studies department. In 1971 she completed the doctoral programme in theology at the University of Chicago, where she later taught as well, became dean of the school of divinity, and rose to eminence as a theologian and scholar.

Anne's life was one of multi-faceted service and ministry. Her scholarship involved *theologia*,¹ that is, a personal search for wisdom, as well as her lived experience of the spiritual life. She was especially helpful to students in her roles as teacher, dean, and reader of theses and dissertations. A daily communicant at her parish, she helped out in a soup kitchen and ministered to a group of senior citizens who had intense interest in matters of Church and spirituality. She obtained a Certified Nursing Assistant credential and worked during summers at Marian Hall, a care facility for retired sisters, in Dubuque, Iowa. Anne afforded sage and informed advice to her religious congregation and to many who sought her counsel. A popular speaker, she gave generously of her time to parishes who invited her to address their pastoral gatherings.

¹ See Anne Carr, *A Search for Wisdom and Spirit: Thomas Merton's Theology of the Self* (South Bend: U. of Notre Dame P, 1988), 7: 'Merton's discussions of the real and illusory selves can be understood within the scope of the contemplative theology that he called the "tradition of wisdom and spirit", *theologia* in its ancient meaning'.

Theological Development

There are, perhaps, four main stages in the development of Anne Carr's theological thought. All four interpenetrate, and vestiges of each can be found in the others. First, there is the emerging expertise she showed in the intricate thought of Karl Rahner (1904–1984). Rahner was a Jesuit theologian who spent many years at the University of Innsbruck in Austria (and later in Munich and Münster). He is widely regarded as the foremost Catholic thinker and theologian of his generation. Anne's doctoral dissertation, 'The Theological Method of Karl Rahner', deals in part with Jesus' experience of himself, and with Rahner's theology as involving a christology *from above* and a christology *from below*.

The second stage in Anne's development is that of her book about Thomas Merton (1915–1968), *A Search for Wisdom and Spirit*. This book is about the prayerful mysticism and theological anthropology she finds in the writings of Thomas Merton—the Trappist monk who retrieved the monastic tradition of the Church and reinterpreted it in the terms of contemporary spirituality. *A Search for Wisdom and Spirit* shows the compatibility and complementarity between Merton's spiritual view of our true and false selves and the anthropology of Rahner.² As David Tracy wrote: 'Her book on Merton was one of the first to insist that the traditional separation of spirituality and theology impoverished both'.³ It also demonstrates how Merton reached out to other world religious traditions, including Buddhism, Taoism and Sufism, in his quest to experience the mystical path.

The third stage is represented by the feminist theology of Anne's next major work, *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women's Experience*. Here we see Anne's thoughtful experience of the divine, as she listens to the voices of many other feminist writers, and female and male theologians, as well as to traditional thought about God, Christ and Mary. With her deep and extensive knowledge of feminist literature and theology, Anne addresses the profound need for a theology that represents the most influential feminist thinking but still maintains a hopeful connection with both traditional and revisionist Christian thought.

² Carr, *Search for Wisdom and Spirit*, 145–146; In dealing with Rahner's (and Carr's) spirituality, we need to keep in mind: '... the direct [and not the inverse] proportion that obtains between autonomy and dependence or closeness to God'.

³ David Tracy, 'Tributes to Anne Carr', *Criterion: A Publication of the University of Chicago Divinity School*, 42/3 (Autumn 2003), 35.

Humans are made in the image and likeness of God: not only male human beings, as Anne points out, but all human beings.⁴ In what is most essential to us as humans, women are not secondary or subservient to men. Very soon, Anne had developed a full-blown theological anthropology that began to adopt ideas seen by the general culture of her time as feminism, even as radical feminism. Her experience of being a woman in a male-dominated Church and academic world was a source for her feminist thinking, as were her academic work and her pastoral experience.



Anne Carr

As David Tracy remarked at Anne's retirement celebration, 'Anne Carr's theological vision and her way of life are one'.⁵ Anne brought together scholarship and activism, and she generated an appreciation of the close connection between the Christian theological tradition and the authentic feminism of her own generation in the Catholic Church. For Anne, feminism in theory and in active practice grows out of the spiritual tradition of the Church and out of the demands of the gospel. Her activism made her ever more deeply committed to her faith tradition. Never contentious, she was both prophetic and carefully reasoned in her support of women's rights in society at large and in the Church. She must have suffered some measure of disappointment at her Church's inability to make progress on issues such as women's ordination.

In addition to her three major works, Anne co-edited six other books, wrote essays for various collections and made scholarly contributions to numerous journals, such as *Horizons*, for which she served as associate editor, and *The Journal of Religion*,⁶ which she also co-edited. She received many

⁴ Anne Carr, *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women's Experience* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 117: 'Both women and men are called to this likeness'

⁵ Tracy, 'Tributes to Anne Carr', 35.

⁶ A seminal development in Anne's thought was marked by her article 'Theology and Experience in the Thought of Karl Rahner', which appeared in *The Journal of Religion*, 53/3 (1973), 359-376. For her,

awards and several honorary doctorates, and enjoyed close professional relationships with the world's most prominent theologians.

Providence, Grace, Evolution and Process Thought

The fourth stage of Anne's development is characterized by her thoughtful writing about divine providence.⁷ This new approach in her work came out of her own experience of sorrow, challenge and illness, as well as her intellectual interest in the ideas of Alfred North Whitehead.⁸

Anne was afflicted in mid-career with a brain tumour that recurred, demanding several surgeries in the course of her life.⁹ No doubt the departure of many women and men from religious life—including from her own BVM community—and from the active priesthood, the closing of Mundelein College in 1991 and the shared anguish of many of her friends over these matters were also painful to her. Her insights into providence have as much to do with her living faith and personal experience as they do with her theological reflection and expertise.

Providence is concerned with divine care in nature and in human lives, rather than supernatural care and grace. Grace—in contrast to providence but always working intimately with it—is the supernatural life of God that is communicated to human beings sacramentally, and in uniquely personal ways. Providence and grace (the natural and the supernatural) work together inextricably, though human beings are not always aware of them as these blessings and benefits take effect in their lives.

On the traditional view, providence entails a divine plan for creation in which the creator has a masterful and governing influence over everything else. It is taken to imply or include the idea of creation, as part of a design in which God shows divine care for what is created and sustained by God. Providence is the ever-guiding and ameliorating influence of a God who is always creating the universe. For creation should not only be thought of as happening at the beginning of the universe, but can be discovered and discerned at every moment in its life and development,

as for Rahner, the experience of grace and human experience itself are crucial concepts. Grace, or the transcendental aspect of experience, is a part of all experiences whatsoever.

⁷ See Tracy, 'Tributes to Anne Carr', 34: 'With a sure instinct for a central issue of our present time, Anne has proceeded to rethink providence'.

⁸ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, eds. Donald W. Sherburne and David Ray Griffin (New York: Free Press, 1978). See also John B. Cobb, Jr, *God and the World* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969).

⁹ For details about Anne's life, see Lois Dolphin, 'Sister Anne Carr, BVM', *Salt*, 36/4 (Summer 2008), 8–9, available at <http://bvmmcong.org/downloads/saltsummer2008.pdf>, accessed 17 May 2016.

as well as in our own lives, as the sweep of divine influence that prevails throughout all of time and history.

The question of providence is often associated with that of evolution. For some, evolution is a matter of blind chance, random mutation, natural selection and nothing more. But it can also be seen as the way in which God creates the universe, and the way in which nature develops in accordance with God's concurrence. Evolution has to do with the growth not only of animals and plants but also of stars, planets and galaxies. It includes the creation and development of atoms, molecules, subatomic particles and physical forces.

**God ... relies
on and works
through
human action**

In this continuing creation, God also relies on and works through human action, as we take responsibility for others in need of care and compassion.

In an important paper for the Catholic Theological Society of America—from which the present article gets its title—Anne wrote: 'In love and in infinite concern, God is attentive to the fall of a single sparrow, vulnerable, responsive, yes, even anguished in our anguish, dependent on human action in history'.¹⁰ She affirms the detailed, intimate reality of God's providence in the world and in our lives, and the suffering of God in sympathy with nature, and with people when they suffer painful and destructive experiences. And she asserts that God's plan and providence include and rely upon human action, responsibility and commitment.

The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead took seriously the question of God's influence in the world. He detected that influence in every speck of reality and in every micro-moment of elapsing time. Whitehead eschewed the idea of a divine creator in the traditional sense; his view of the universe does not include a doctrine of God's creation of all things out of nothing. Rather he saw God as allowing the world to evolve on its own, but always with God's saving guidance. God 'does not create the world, he saves it; or, more accurately, he is the poet of the world, with tender patience leading it by his vision of truth, beauty and goodness'.¹¹ God does not primarily save the world from sin and perdition, but rather saves each micro-event or micro-moment of existence that the world undergoes, exercises and achieves, preserving the universe by taking its ever self-generated perfection into God's own inner constitution.

¹⁰ Anne Carr, "Not a Sparrow Falls": On Providence and Responsibility in History', *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America*, 44 (1989), 19–38, here 38, available at <https://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/ctsa/article/view/3518/3111>.

¹¹ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 346.

In her various writings, Anne Carr accepts Whitehead's *dipolar* notion of God as having two natures. God takes into the divine *consequent nature* all the world's achieved perfection; and in God's *primordial nature*, God provides the *initial aims* or *lures* by which each momentary modicum of existence completes itself and thus adds itself to the *creative advance* of nature. Whitehead saw the world's reality as charged with the presence of God and with these lures of guiding direction coming from God. Indeed, for Whitehead, God is the lure that attracts us ever forward as we venture forth into our lives, 'the lure for feeling, the eternal urge of desire'.¹²

Both Whitehead and Carr regard providence as an emergent and persuasive influence, rather than a forceful and compelling insistence on an all-directing and predetermined divine plan. Providence is God's loving and guiding care for all things as manifest in nature, history and culture, and in personal vocation and living. In *Transforming Grace*, Carr quotes from Whitehead's *magnum opus*, *Process and Reality*, a speculative scheme bringing together science, metaphysics and religion: 'God is the great companion, the fellow-sufferer who understands'.¹³

When Anne delivered her eloquent talk to the Catholic Theological Society she had already had her third brain surgery and was suffering from the cumulative effects of previous surgeries to remove her recurring brain tumours. It was touching for the audience to hear her message about God's care for the single sparrow, when she—with all her talent to inspire and educate others—was so afflicted. Anne's face had been slightly distorted by the surgeries, but the beauty of her shining blue eyes and winning smile were always with her. Her fortitude was a reminder that hovering over the issue of divine providence is the perennial question of whether God has the power to prevent the pain and evil that occur in the world.

Providence and God's Self-Limitation

To a Christian, the notion of providence must be made consistent with his or her beliefs in Christ, grace, sin and redemption. Providence is christological, in so far as all things are disposed towards the incarnation as the arrival of God as partner and participant in human history, culture and community. Viewed christologically, providence can absorb the realities of evil, sin and concupiscence, and still redirect humanity by means of medicinal grace, forgiveness and conversion. And, just as

¹² Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 344.

¹³ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 351, quoted in Carr, *Transforming Grace*, 152.



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Christ in his own time and place did not or could not cure all the ills of the world, so God cannot eliminate all of its evil.

Alfred North Whitehead did not view God as having absolute and all-governing power. What is generally called process theology follows Whitehead in attributing to God a pervasive power that is not all-controlling or coercive. God's power is vast, but its influence is persuasive, not coercive. Thus, when things go wrong in the universe and when misfortune and evil occur, God is not to be held responsible. Anne Carr is not a process theologian in the strict sense, although she enjoys a kinship with Whiteheadian theology. For her, God does retain, in principle, an all-controlling and absolute power. However, God limits God's own use of power in order to allow the universe to develop on its own, and in order to allow humans the freedom to choose either good or evil: 'God is the self-limiting creator of human autonomy'.¹⁴

If God is self-limiting, the sparrow can fall from the sky, suffer and die, without God's directly willing any part of what happens. Indeed, God can mourn and suffer with the sparrow in its misfortune. For Whitehead, when misfortune occurs, there is nothing that God could have done to avoid it. For Anne, God can and does suffer sympathetically with the suffering sparrow.

Heidegger and the Importance of Care

Whitehead is not the only philosopher who exerted an influence on Anne Carr's theology of providence. Another was Martin Heidegger

¹⁴ Carr, *Transforming Grace*, 150. See also Anne Carr, 'The God Who Is Involved', *Theology Today*, 38 (1981), 322: 'The symbol of God's providence is not temporally distinct from creation but [is] understood in terms of God's self-limitation, which allows the created world, especially persons, to share in the divine creativity'.

(1889–1976), the German phenomenologist who also had a considerable influence on Karl Rahner, the subject of Anne’s doctoral thesis. From the point of view of providence as Anne Carr understands it, the philosophies of Whitehead and Heidegger can be seen as mutually enlightening. For the idea of God’s care is explicit but limited in Whitehead, and repressed but prevalent in Heidegger.

Heidegger’s early work *Being and Time* is a long meditation on how our consciousness of time and history is generated by our awareness of death.¹⁵ In Heidegger, death defines our existential self-awareness, abides in us as our inexorable personal destiny, and is the horizon¹⁶ of every



*Being-towards-death: an anonymous
sixteenth-century Totentanz*

experience that we have as human beings. Human being is ‘being-towards-death’. For Heidegger and Rahner, and also, at least indirectly, for Carr, our awareness of death and of the brevity of life conditions every human experience whatsoever. Our freedom is experienced as the question of what we shall make of ourselves and of our lives in the span of time allotted to us. With this freedom, we largely create our own experiences, and we grow in genuineness or authenticity as we generate the meaning and value of our own lives. Death, freedom and experience are deeply and closely interwoven themes in

¹⁵ Harper and Row, 1962).

¹⁶ See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, xxvii n. 4: ‘Heidegger thinks of a horizon as something ... which provides the limits for certain intellectual activities performed “within” it’. But for Rahner, ‘horizon’ means ‘the co-presence in all human experience of the fullness of being—God—as the source and goal of human knowledge and freedom, the unlimited context of all limited human experience’ (*A World of Grace: An Introduction to the Themes and Foundations of Karl Rahner’s Theology*, edited by Leo J. O’Donovan [New York: Seabury, 1980], 192). Carr relates the term ‘horizon’ to ‘the experience of transcendence’ in her chapter, ‘Starting with the Human’, in *A World of Grace*, 20–22.

Heidegger. Whatever providence might mean in his terms, it is meshed into this tapestry of consciousness and being.

Heidegger is not obviously interested in religious themes such as God, grace and creation. However, for him, the most basic experience of all human beings, and the most defining aspect of our humanity is *care* (*Sorge*).¹⁷ What we care *about* is not of the greatest interest for Heidegger; for him, the inescapable human trait of caring itself is of the greatest interest. We care about ourselves and about our own lives. We care about the meaning of our lives and, as 'beings-in-the-world',¹⁸ we care about other people, values, the world itself and matters of importance for us in the world. Care itself is a universal and defining experience. All experiences whatsoever are experiences in which we care in some way.

Here we can see that Anne Carr's idea of providence has much in common with Heidegger's understanding of care. Care is closely linked to Heidegger's ideas about death, about human being as being-towards-death, and about human freedom and authenticity. Our consciousness of our own brevity of life and of our jeopardy in living life explains the intense and anxious care we have for ourselves, our world and others we encounter in the world. So living, we create the meaning of our own lives, but we may also wonder about matters of God and providence: whether we ourselves are cared about, not only by other people, but by nature and the universe itself and, ultimately, by a God who created us, sustains us in life and provides us with gifts and talents, and with the freedom and opportunity to use them to create the meaning of our own lives. Our authenticity may be due, not only to our own creativity, but also to the all-providing presence of God.

For care is not only a characteristic of human subjectivity, concern and orientation to the world. Care is also a matter of the world's and the universe's orientation towards us. Coming to us through the world and energizing the world as a horizon of care for us, care is a transcendental property of being itself. Thus, we see that Heidegger's notion of care is

¹⁷ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 378; 'Care is being-towards-death'. For Heidegger, in caring about the totality of our life and being, we care about our death as the completion of life and being. Most valuable and comprehensive is the article by Warren T. Reich, 'The History of the Notion of Care', *Encyclopedia of Bioethics*, edited by Warren T. Reich, 2nd edn (New York: Simon and Schuster Macmillan, 1995), volume 1, 319–331.

¹⁸ 'The expression "being-in-the-world" designates the fact that, for Heidegger, man's constitution is intimately one with his relation to the external world': Anne Carr, 'The Theological Method of Karl Rahner' (PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, 1971), 23.

closely analogous to what the Christian calls grace. Care comes down upon us like the grace-filled love of God.

It is part of the plan, purpose and providence of God that all men and women are addressed by God's word, called to God's grace and invited, however remotely, to membership in God's Church. Needless to say, this affects deeply the way in which we view the nature, the membership and the mission of the Church. A renewed and deepened idea about providence—that is, the idea that providence is always supercharged with the reality of grace—helps to explain Rahner's idea of the *anonymous Christian*,¹⁹ in virtue of which even persons who have no apparent relationship to the Church or the gospel are called to holiness and, perhaps, may be true and authentic members of the Church. As Carr puts it, 'wherever the grace of Christ, which is an ecclesial grace, is operative in men, there men are anonymously but really related to the Christian church'.²⁰

Providence and the Meaning of Suffering

Those who serve in the medical professions or in ministry to the sick can appreciate the consolations brought to patients by belief in divine providence. Their patients give glory to God by accepting the reality that God cares for them, even when they are suffering and even when they may be tempted to give up faith in a caring, loving God. They receive the special grace of rejecting the idea that their suffering is meaningless. Their faith in providence becomes a gift they give to God. All their lives, perhaps, they have received faith as God's gift to them. Now, in their suffering, patients can give back to God their faith and trust in God, at a time when that faith and trust may be challenged by what they must endure.

God asked a lot of Anne by allowing a tumour to grow in her brain, the bodily home of such a brilliant and saintly mind. This was an opportunity for her faith, her trust, her patience and long-suffering to grow as well. For a long time, she continued to work, to write, even to minister to others who were aged and infirm. Her suffering became a glorious gift that she gave back to God. There may have been moments of bitterness and

¹⁹ See *A World of Grace*, 187: 'Rahner argues that true faith can be implicit in loving action, enabled by the grace of Christ and shaped in the likeness of Christ, even though not explicitly aware of Christ as its origin and exemplar'.

²⁰ Carr, 'Theological Method of Karl Rahner', 277.

discouragement for her, but these did not take power over her life and her mind. She experienced great kindness from others, and in that she gave them—and all who knew her—a great gift. In her suffering she evoked sympathy, and thus she made her friends and colleagues into more caring people.

Perhaps Anne's most original and insistent teaching on the subject of providence is the way in which she took the qualified idea of God's power and influence from process thought and used it to arouse and energize our human commitment to change the world for the better. It is up to us to promote and ensure the welfare of our fellow human beings and the surrounding planet, and it is up to Christians to work for the improvement of our Churches. For Anne, God works within the human constitution by luring us towards better action and deeper responsibility in and for the world, persuading us to do the necessary work of correction and amelioration.

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