

## BOOK REVIEW

**Stephen H. Webb, *American Providence: A Nation with a Mission*. New York: Continuum, 2004. 173 pp. £18.99. Hbk. ISBN-13: 978-08264-1623-0.**

Stephen Webb's book *American Providence* is aptly named. While he purports to recover the importance of the doctrine of God's providence for American political life, the book has less to do with God's agency in the world than America's. God, Webb argues, is providing for the world through the power, wisdom, and benevolence of the American nation. Apart from justifying and guaranteeing American dominance, God is surprisingly absent from the book.

This is a shame, because, as Webb notes, Christians desperately need to recover the significance of the doctrine of Providence. If, as Christians believe, God is truly sovereign, bringing about God's purposes, then a faithful and wise politics must take into account what God is doing in the midst of and through all the things that human beings are doing. This is a difficult and dangerous endeavor, prone to all sorts of errors and abuses. Yet it is also unavoidable. Webb nicely shows that, however much they try to distance themselves from the doctrine of Providence, theologians and politicians cannot avoid the providential task of reading the signs of the times. Unfortunately, Webb has made a renewal of the doctrine of Providence less attractive by reinforcing its association with its most dangerous (and unattractive) error—self-righteousness.

*American Providence* is based upon a number of important insights concerning the relationship of Christianity, American democracy, and globalism. It is unfashionable to argue that American Christianity and American democracy have influenced one another, but it also seems uncontroversial. Each has been shaped by a larger and more diverse web of influences, yet it is hard to conceive of one without the other. Similarly, while the value of globalism may be contested, its existence and the driving influence of American cultural and economic vitalities upon it cannot.

Given these realities, it is apparent that we are not simply rational and autonomous agents of our own destinies, but are shaped by our particular contexts and carried along by the currents of a historical process beyond our control. Providence not only represents, therefore, an unavoidable theme in American religious and political history but also a significant resource for understanding our current circumstances. So far, Webb makes a persuasive case against both the prevailing secular ethos, which continues to embrace the untenable anthropology of Enlightenment liberalism, and a Christian ecclesiocentrism, which moves God from the global, historical stage to the splendid isolation of the Church's internally focused story and practice.

Webb's fundamental argument is sensible and appropriate: American Christians can make a significant contribution to American political discourse by recovering a robust sense of God's agency in the world and developing the theological capacity to interpret what God is doing. Things begin to go dreadfully wrong, however, when Webb offers his interpretation of the workings of Divine Providence today. He makes the devastating and common error of conflating God's actions and intentions with American actions and intentions, confusing the fact of American power with God's endorsement of American intentions.

Put simply, Webb argues that American religious, economic, and political institutions and values are dominating the world, which could not happen apart from God's will, which means it must be in accord with God's good and benevolent intentions for the world. Anything which stands in the way of American dominance, therefore, must be counter to God's will and, by definition, evil. Providence provides the moral clarity to recognize that "Islam is the enemy of America" (133) and "Islam increasingly is the voice of the losers of globalization" (133), who benightedly resist the benevolent and righteous victory of democracy, capitalism, and Christianity. Webb celebrates General Boykin's suggestion that "America's true enemy is Satan, that President Bush has been appointed by God, and that Islamic extremists hate America because we are a Christian nation" (18) as the sort of robust providential thinking which proves that "some Americans, at least, ha[ve] regained their confidence in theological terms" (26). Despite Webb's protests, it is hard to see this as distinct in any way from the sort of self-serving "rhetoric of providence" that characterized American "Manifest Destiny" and raises profound suspicion about the motives of anyone who speaks of "God's Will" today.

A genuine, self-critical, and humble doctrine of providence requires that we ask not what God is doing *through us* (with all the self-righteous, self-justifying imaginations that provokes), but what God is doing *to us* (with all the self-critical, self-doubting apparitions that entails). It is the sort of providential thinking that inspired Isaiah to describe Cyrus, a pagan, imperialist, as an agent of God's will (Isaiah 45). Isaiah never argued that Cyrus was righteous or that Cyrus's intentions were God's. He simply assumed that God made God's will known more through the events that befell Israel than through their actions and intentions. It is the sort of providential thinking that inspired early Christians to know that, through the powerless suffering and death of God's only son, the cross—a vehicle of Roman imperial domination—marked God's victory over all the principalities and powers. They saw a world turned upside down, where God's providence revealed itself in defeat rather than victory, in the "least of these" rather than the "first among you." It is the sort of providential thinking that inspired Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, which distinguished God's purposes from those of both the South and the North, seeing in the war God's judgment on both sides. "The Almighty," Lincoln acknowledged, "has his own purposes," in which neither the Union nor the Confederacy could lay claim to God's righteousness.

Webb is correct that we must read the signs of the times. We are at the mercy of One who shall not be thwarted—a power that transcends even the actions

and intentions of the American empire. I agree with Webb's conviction that God is ruling the world and that faithfulness is a matter of conforming our ways to God's ways. But his simplistic, self-serving association of American power and God's purposes is impious to the point of idolatry. He glorifies America, not God. He proclaims faith in the trinity of Christianity, Democracy, and Capitalism, not the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. I will recommend his book not only because it reveals how essential the doctrine of Providence is for public life today, but because it offers an example of the dangerous corruptions to which it is always prone.

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