

# The **Two Wills** of God: Providence in St **John** of **Damascus**

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Andrew Louth's recent book on **John** Damascene recalls and shows more clearly than before how St **John** draws on his predecessors – sometimes in ways that would be seen within contemporary literary ethics as plagiarism – and yet does so in a way that engenders insights and ideas that are unique to him. 'I shall say nothing of my own', the Damascene writes at the beginning of the *Dialectica*, 'but collect together into one the fruits of the labours of the most eminent of teachers and make a compendium'<sup>1</sup>. St **John** effectively perceives himself as sitting on the shoulders of giants, but what he sees and is able to express from that lofty perch makes him a giant himself. What does St **John** of **Damascus** do with the wealth of patristic material on providence?

## Providence in the polemical writings

The subject reveals itself in several places of his work. In his treatise against the Manichees, providence arises in the discussion of how good and evil are allowed to coexist in the world. The Manichee questions how God could have created the devil, knowing that he would fall. He also wonders why a good God would punish the wicked eternally. Part of the Damascene's response lies in his consistently expressed theme of the impossibility of angelic or demonic change of orientation, whether that change be a fall towards evil or a repentance towards the good, as well as the impossibility of such change for human beings after their death<sup>2</sup>. But his argument ultimately rests on another of his consistent themes – God's providential ordering of creation in such a way that it would ultimately fit with his good purposes<sup>3</sup>.

In the *Dispute between a Saracen and a Christian*, **John** faces the argument that God is the author of everything, not only good but also evil. He responds in terms of God's interaction with the world in general, and with human beings (possessed of free will) in particular. That interaction is expressed partly in terms of the clear distinction the Damascene wants to identify within God's

<sup>1</sup> Proem. 60-2. See Andrew Louth, *St John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology* (Oxford, 2002), p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> *Manich.* 75 (Kotter IV, 391f.).

<sup>3</sup> *Manich.* 34-44 (Kotter IV, 372-6). See also Louth, *St John Damascene*, pp. 68f.

will: some things happen in direct accordance with God's essential will, while other things happen by permission. God *allows* certain things to happen – despite himself, as it were – but in the foreknowledge that they would ultimately lead to the fulfillment of his essential will. He suggests to the Saracen, that if he were 'to rise up and steal or fornicate', this would not be the (essential) will of God, but rather 'permission, forbearance and longsuffering'<sup>4</sup>.

In effect, these relatively brief treatments of providence, occasioned by actual or supposed arguments of John's opponents, appear to serve as rehearsals for what would become a more thorough and systematic (though still relatively brief) discussion of providence in the *Expositio fidei*. It will be interesting to recall, however, especially this last example of the distinction between God's essential will and his permission, for that is something that John will address in a significant way. As we look at the chapter in the *Expositio* dealing with providence, we will be attentive to John's sources, of which some are obvious textual sources and others are those predecessors which may have been the most likely influences for his own thinking.

### Providence in the *Expositio fidei*

As is well known, Nemesius of Emesa's *De natura hominis* is one of John's main patristic sources for the anthropology of the *Expositio fidei*. The textual indices found in Kotter's edition of the Damascene and Morani's edition of Nemesius confirm the extent of Damascene's dependence on his late-fourth-century predecessor.

The subject of Nemesius' treatise is the human person, his composition and his place in creation. The treatise ends with a discussion of human freedom, which the author sees as necessitating a prolonged excursus to explain how God interacts with that freedom. This is the context for Nemesius' reflections on providence. For his part, John Damascene follows a similar trajectory, from human free will to divine providence. In both these areas, he reproduces lengthy passages of Nemesius, to the extent of being almost entirely dependent on him. Yet, for all of the Damascene's repetition of Nemesius, it is of considerable interest to see what he leaves out. We ought to take a parenthetic glance at this before we return to the other sources of John's understanding of providence.

<sup>4</sup> Ἐὰν ἄρτι ἀναστὰς ἀπέλθω καὶ κλέψω ἢ πορνεύσω, τί αὐτὸ λέγεις θέλημα θεοῦ ἢ συγχώρησιν καὶ ἀνοχήν καὶ μακροθυμίαν; *Sarac.* 3.18-20 (Kotter IV, 432).

*Omissions from Nemesius*

Because Nemesius' intention was to refute other theories of freedom and providence<sup>5</sup>, his references are eclectic throughout, and he enjoys pointing out parallels between Christian and pagan thought. This constitutes the first category of omissions in Damascene's *Expositio*. For even in John's otherwise verbatim reproductions of Nemesian passages, references to non-Christians are systematically excised. John's aim and scope are clearly narrowed to Christian thought, the Christian world.

Another omission may emerge from similar sensibilities. Nemesius' first chapter explicitly about providence (42 in Morani's numbering), sets out to convince Christians, Jews, and pagans alike of the existence of providence. His examples are far-reaching, and in some cases appear to take a broadly inclusive approach to non-Christian faith. One of the proofs he proposes for the existence of providence, for example, is

the agreement among all human beings to acknowledge the need to pray and to perform divine service by means of sacred offerings and holy places. For how, or to whom, should anyone pray, if there were no mind guiding the world?<sup>6</sup>

The urge to pray and worship, and the zeal for good, are elements not exclusive to Christians; they somehow point to the one God who has providential care over all. This kind of thinking appears not to interest the Damascene in the slightest, for while he draws extensively from the preceding and following chapters of the *De natura hominis*, he leaves this chapter entirely uncited.

Further on, in discussing providence as God's allowing people to make ill-advised choices or his allowing bad things to happen to them, the Damascene cites Nemesius verbatim for around fifteen lines of text.<sup>7</sup> He adds just one sentence of his own, filling out the picture of how God allows a proud person to fall in order to be humbled and brought to repentance. He eliminates Nemesius' short citation from Menander, which had been used only to illustrate a point about the pedagogical nature of sin. He also effectively narrows Nemesius' understanding of the exemplary character of witness and self-sacrifice. Nemesius portrays martyrdom as something which stirs up emulation in the hearts of others. But aside from explicitly Christian martyrdom, Nemesius spells out cases of secular martyrdom: for him, the inspiring example of the martyrs is the same as that of 'those who have sacrificed themselves for their country, their people, their liege-lords, their children, or their faith'. John sees only Christian martyrs as exemplary in this way and so illustrations from the pagan world are superfluous.

<sup>5</sup> See R.W. Sharples, 'Nemesius of Emesa and Some Theories of Divine Providence', *VC* 37 (1983), 141-56.

<sup>6</sup> *Nat. hom.* 41, 336 (Morani 122).

<sup>7</sup> *Expositio* 43 (Kotter II, 101, lines 28-43).

So **John** reveals himself as decidedly and unapologetically less eclectic than Nemesius. As he progresses in his chapter on providence, his relationship to Nemesius continues to be of interest, although in different ways.

### *Definition of Providence*

When it comes to defining providence, the Damascene begins by quoting **two** sentences – the same **two** cited by Maximus the Confessor: ‘Providence, then, is the care that God takes over existing things. Providence is the will (βούλησις) of God through which all existing things receive their suitable direction’<sup>8</sup>. The **two** sentences are direct from Nemesius, but interestingly Nemesius himself suggests that they constitute already accepted definitions of providence<sup>9</sup>, so that there appears to be an emergent stock definition, possibly pre-existing Nemesius, but in any event codified by him and canonized by Maximus and **John of Damascus**.

### *Providence as Permission*

**John** goes on to set out the interaction of providence with human free will under the rubric of divine permission, or concession (συγχώρησις). Providence – which becomes itself an acting subject<sup>10</sup> – *permits* bad things to happen to good people, so that their virtue might be apparent to others, as in Job’s case. Providence ‘permits something strange to be done, so that through this seemingly strange act something great and marvellous might be accomplished’ – the quintessential example being Christ’s death on the cross. While Nemesius supplies John’s text for much of what he says on this theme, he is not John’s only source of ideas. As we look at three other potential sources, we must remain attentive to the precise manner of their setting out the notion of permission as a kind of secondary will of God.

Indeed, the idea of providence as the ‘permission’ or ‘patience’ of God, precedes Nemesius: it can be attributed at least as early as Irenaeus, when he asserts that God permitted Jonah to be swallowed by the whale – using the whale to help Jonah convert Nineveh, something which Irenaeus takes also to mean that God permits our own apostasy in the recognition that this is ultimately a way towards salvation<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> *Expos.* 43.2 (Kotter II, 100); Nemesius *Nat. hom.* 42, 343f. (Morani 125); Maximus *Ambig.* 10.42 (PG 91, 1189B). Maximus only inserts the clause ‘according to our God-bearing fathers’, by whom he must have meant at least Nemesius.

<sup>9</sup> He begins the second sentence with ὀρίζονται δὲ αὐτὴν καὶ οὕτως, suggesting that providence is ‘also commonly defined as ...’

<sup>10</sup> Providence, for Nemesius and many Christian writers, is a subject of identity, an actor. Providence is either to be identified with God himself, or a power exercised by God. Cf. Maximus the Confessor: ‘... providence is either the one who is truly known to be the Creator, or is a power exercised by the Creator ...’ (*Ambig.* 10.42 (PG 91, 1189B)).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *Adv. Haer.* 3.20.1, also 4.37.7. There is a useful treatment of these passages in **John Behr**, *Asceticism and Anthropology in Irenaeus and Clement* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 45–52.

Origen, in his third homily on Genesis, distinguishes between God's will (*voluntate*) on the one hand and providence on the other.

God concerns himself with mortals, and nothing is done either in heaven or on earth without his providence. Note that we say 'without his providence', and not 'without his will'. For if many things happen without his will, nothing is done without his providence. Providence is that according to which God organizes, administers, and disposes all things; will is that according to which God wants or doesn't want something<sup>12</sup>.

Origen seems to be positing a primary volition of God which gives way to and is somehow actualized by the disposition and administration of 'providence'.

Maximus the Confessor<sup>13</sup> follows a similar kind of line and also may have been a source for the Damascene, although he, characteristically, expresses his understanding of providence in terms of the *logoi* of creation. For Maximus, the *logos* of each created thing is in effect an expression of God's *essential will* or intention for that thing, or for its nature. Providence, says Maximus, is responsible for 'the eternally preserved succession of everything and each one according to form, so that the *logos* of each nature is not corrupted', but rather held together within the created order<sup>14</sup>.

This entire line of thinking, one which distinguishes a primary will of God and a secondary providential execution of it, is something that **John** makes explicit in his own particular way, independent of Nemesius.

### The **Two Wills** of God

Before citing Nemesius on providence as permission, he introduces the notion himself by establishing a dichotomy between those works that are 'according to [God's] good will (κατ' εὐδοκίαν)' and those that are 'according to [God's] permission (κατὰ συγχώρησιν)'. As his reflection on providence progresses through several more paragraphs, he becomes all the more explicit on the distinction between the **two**. He takes leave of Nemesius' text entirely, in order to describe a kind of double will of God. He calls them the antecedent (or primary) will (προηγούμενον θέλημα) and consequent (or secondary) will (ἐπόμενον θέλημα). The primary will of God, his essential will, is his own, (ἐξ αὐτοῦ) – and **John** describes it as 'the will that all be saved, and come to his kingdom' (cf. 1 Tim 2:4). The secondary or consequent will, which **John** equates with permission, comes into play through interaction with free human beings – its source or cause is us (ἐξ ἡμετέρας αἰτίας).

**John's** speaking of God as having **two wills** is obviously not to be construed as a theological ditheletism – they are in effect **two** aspects or modes of the same essential divine will. Instead, he finds a useful and unique way of

<sup>12</sup> *Hom. in Gen.* 3.2 (SC 7bis, 114-16).

<sup>13</sup> I am grateful to Andrew Louth for providing me with his unpublished paper, 'The Doctrine of Providence in St Maximos the Confessor'.

<sup>14</sup> *Ambig.* 10.42 (PG 91, 1189A).

bringing together what was being said for centuries about providence. Irenaeus, Origen, Nemesius, and Maximus were aiming at this primary and secondary level of divine concern for creation. All of these thinkers, except Nemesius, spoke of a primary will in God, and expressed providence in terms other than 'will'. (Indeed, Origen was emphatic in distinguishing 'providence' from 'will'.) Nemesius did not speak of God's primary will, but called providence 'the will (βούλησις) of God through which all existing things receive their suitable direction'.

**John** brings all of this together in identifying God's providential will (θέλημα – that is, *faculty* of will) as standing in relation to God's essential will. That relationship is one of practicality, necessitated by God's unyielding respect for the freely made choices of human beings.

For **John**, providence can be called the secondary will of God, one which is brought to the service of his primary will. This latter is effectively God's essential will for universal salvation, while the secondary will permits things to happen which may seem quite contrary to that goal of salvation. They are 'willed' nonetheless, in the full knowledge that they may become the very means of return and growth God-ward.