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Research Article

The Concept of Divine Providence in the Face of Suffering

Osagie Slyvester Aimiehinor
Faculty, school of ministry, Diocese of Benin
fatherosas@yahoo.com

Abstract: the perennial question of suffering in a world governed by an allegedly benevolent and omnipotent deity has long challenged theologians, philosophers, and believers. This paper explores the concept of divine providence in the context of human suffering, examining key theological frameworks, biblical narratives, and philosophical discourses. It argues that while divine providence does not negate the reality of suffering, it provides a lens through which suffering acquires meaning, purpose, and potential for spiritual transformation. The study integrates classical theological thought with contemporary reflections, offering a nuanced understanding of providence that honors both divine sovereignty and human experience.
Keywords: Divine providence, suffering, theodicy, theology, providential care, spiritual meaning

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1. Introduction

The coexistence of divine providence and human suffering presents one of the most profound paradoxes in religious thought. If God is all-loving and all-powerful, why does He permit suffering? This question, known broadly as the problem of evil, becomes particularly urgent when juxtaposed with the doctrine of divine providence—the belief that God governs and sustains the universe with purposeful care. For over two decades of theological inquiry and pastoral engagement, I have encountered this dilemma not as a mere abstraction, but as a living question arising from the anguish of people who yearn to make sense of their pain in light of their faith. This paper seeks to navigate the tension between divine providence and human suffering by drawing upon scriptural, theological, and philosophical sources to argue that providence does not eliminate suffering but recontextualizes it within a larger divine narrative.

2. Literature Review

The interplay between divine providence and human suffering has been the subject of extensive theological and philosophical exploration across centuries. The literature reflects a spectrum of interpretations, ranging from deterministic to relational models of divine activity, each seeking to address the implications of suffering under divine oversight. This review synthesizes key contributions from patristic, scholastic, reformed, existential, and contemporary thinkers, providing a foundation for understanding how divine providence is conceptualized in the context of suffering.

1. Classical Foundations: Augustine and Aquinas

Augustine of Hippo laid the groundwork for much of Western theology concerning divine providence and the problem of evil. In his Confessions and City of God, Augustine (1991) argues that God's providence is inscrutable yet benevolent, allowing evil not as an end in itself but as a means to a greater good. He introduces the privation

theory of evil, asserting that evil is not a substance but the absence of good, thus absolving God of direct responsibility while upholding divine sovereignty (Augustine, 1991:26).

Building upon Augustine, Thomas Aquinas offers a more systematized approach. In Summa Theologiae, Aquinas (1947) proposes that God's providence includes permission of evil to achieve higher goods, exemplified in his teleological ordering of creation. Aquinas distinguishes between primary and secondary causes, allowing for human agency within divine governance, thus integrating moral responsibility into the providential framework (Aquinas, ST I.22:1).

2. Reformed and Protestant Developments

The Protestant Reformation brought renewed focus to the sovereignty of God in all aspects of life, including suffering. John Calvin (2008) in Institutes of the Christian Religion presents a robust view of providence, asserting that "nothing happens but what is knowingly and willingly decreed by God." Calvin's vision is one of meticulous providence, wherein even apparent chaos is subject to divine design. Critics of Calvin's model often point to the challenge it poses for human freedom and moral accountability (Helm, 1994:34).

In contrast, more moderate Reformed theologians such as Herman Bavinck (2004) emphasize the harmony of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Bavinck affirms that God's providence includes both general and special oversight, which can include suffering as part of sanctification and moral development.

3. Theodicy and Modern Philosophical Reflections

In the modern era, the problem of suffering has been examined through the lens of theodicy—the justification of God's goodness despite the presence of evil. Alvin Plantinga's (1974) God, Freedom, and Evilarticulate the free will defense, maintaining that a world with free moral agents entails the possibility of moral evil, which God permits for the sake of genuine love and relationship. While effective against logical arguments, the free will defense struggles to address natural evils such as disease and natural disasters (Rowe, 1979:19).

John Hick (1966) introduces the "soul-making" theodicy, drawing from Irenaean themes. Hick argues that suffering is integral to the development of moral and spiritual virtues—courage, compassion, patience—which could not emerge in a world devoid of hardship. Hick's model shifts the focus from divine protection to divine formation, suggesting that providence is not about shielding humans from suffering but guiding them through it toward maturity.

4. Existential and Pastoral Perspectives

While traditional theodicies offer philosophical clarity, they often fall short in addressing the existential dimensions of suffering. Paul Tillich (1952) and Jürgen Moltmann (1993) approach providence not as mere divine control but as God's presence in suffering. Moltmann, in The Crucified God, argues that God does not remain aloof from human pain but participates in it through the suffering of Christ, thus transforming the meaning of divine providence into a theology of solidarity.

Nicholas Wolterstorff (1987:24), in his autobiographical Lament for a Son, exemplifies a pastoral-theological approach. Rather than providing systematic answers, he explores how divine providence sustains faith in the midst of irreparable loss. His reflections resonate with pastoral caregivers and those navigating grief, underscoring the necessity of theological humility and compassionate accompaniment.

5. Biblical Narratives and Providence in Scripture

Scriptural narratives consistently affirm divine providence in the midst of suffering. The story of Joseph (Genesis 37:50) offers a paradigm for understanding providence through adversity: "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Genesis 50:20, ESV). Similarly, the Book of Job provides theological space for protest, lament, and trust, ultimately anchoring providence not in explanation but in divine presence (Job 38:42).

The New Testament reinforces this theme through the suffering of Christ, who "learned obedience through what he suffered" (Hebrews 5:8, NRSV). Paul's epistles are replete with references to redemptive suffering (Romans 8:28; 2 Corinthians 12:9–10), framing providence as both sustaining and transformative.

6. Divine Providence: A Theological Overview

Divine providence refers to God's continuous involvement with all created things in such a way that He keeps them existing, cooperates with them in every action, and directs them toward an intended end (Grudem, 2020:23). This concept encompasses God's foresight (from the Latin providere, "to foresee") and His governance over the cosmos. In the Christian tradition, providence is often categorized in three dimensions: preservation, concurrence, and governance (Bavinck, 2004:56).

1. **Preservation** entails God's sustaining of creation in existence.
2. **Concurrence** implies God's cooperation with creatures in their actions.
3. **Governance** refers to God's guidance of all events toward His ultimate purposes.

These categories affirm that God is not a distant observer but an active participant in the unfolding of history—including the moments marked by inexplicable suffering.

7. Suffering in Biblical Perspective

Scripture does not shy away from the reality of suffering; rather, it embeds suffering within the narrative of divine providence. The story of Joseph in Genesis 37–50 is paradigmatic: sold into slavery by his brothers, falsely accused, and imprisoned, Joseph later reflects, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Genesis 50:20, ESV). This verse captures the essence of providence in suffering—not as deterministic fatalism but as redemptive transformation.

Likewise, the Book of Job presents suffering as a profound mystery. While Job never receives a direct answer to his suffering, the divine speeches from the whirlwind (Job 38:41) redirect his attention from the "why" of suffering to the "who" of God's majesty and sovereignty. As Wolterstorff (1987) observes in his Lament for a Son, biblical faith allows room for lament without losing trust in God's providential care.

8. Philosophical and Theological Interpretations

The problem of suffering, especially as articulated in theodicy, has led thinkers like Augustine, Aquinas, and more recently Alvin Plantinga to grapple with reconciling divine goodness with evil. Augustine (Confessions, Book VII) sees evil not as a substance but as a privation of good—a corruption of what God originally made good. Aquinas argues that God permits evil to bring about a greater good (Summa Theologiae I.2:3).

Plantinga's (1974) free will defense is a modern articulation that preserves divine goodness and omnipotence by positing that moral evil is a consequence of human freedom—a necessary condition for genuine love and relationship with God. However, critics like John Hick (1966) argue that such theodicies must also account for natural evil—suffering not caused by human agency.

Hick's "soul-making theodicy" posits that suffering is essential for spiritual development, aligning with Irenaean thought. From this vantage, divine providence does not shelter humanity from suffering but uses suffering as a crucible for forming mature, spiritually resilient persons.

9. Divine Providence in the Context of Lived Experience

Over the years, pastoral and experiential theology has emphasized that divine providence is not merely a metaphysical doctrine but a lived reality. For believers, providence often manifests not in dramatic deliverance but in quiet assurances, inner strength, and communal solidarity during hardship.

For instance, Holocaust survivor Corrie ten Boom recounted finding traces of divine presence even in the horrors of a concentration camp (Ten Boom, 1971:45). Similarly, Christian mystics like Julian of Norwich, despite living through the Black Death, famously declared, "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well" (Julian of Norwich, Revelations of Divine Love). This is not naïve optimism but profound theological trust.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative theological methodology rooted in **systematic theology**, **biblical exegesis**, and **comparative theological analysis**. As a senior researcher with over two decades of experience in theology, I have adopted an **interpretive framework** that seeks to integrate classical doctrinal positions with lived human experience, especially in pastoral and existential contexts.

1. Sources and Scope

The primary sources for this study include:

- **Sacred Scripture** (primarily canonical texts from the Hebrew Bible and New Testament),
- **Doctrinal writings** from key theologians such as Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, and Bavinck,
- **Modern theological and philosophical literature** from scholars like Hick, Plantinga, Moltmann, and Wolterstorff,

- **Autobiographical and pastoral works** that address personal experiences of suffering within a theological framework.

These sources were selected for their historical authority, theological depth, and relevance to the contemporary discourse on divine providence and suffering.

2. Hermeneutical Approach

This study uses a **hermeneutic of trust and suspicion**—trust in the integrity of the theological tradition, and suspicion in the face of easy answers that fail to address the existential depth of suffering (Ricoeur, 1970). Biblical texts were interpreted using **theological exegesis**, which honors both the literary-historical context and the canonical theological meaning.

In engaging classical theological texts, I employed a **diachronic method** to trace doctrinal developments across history, while also using a **synchronic method** to compare parallel concepts from different theological traditions. This allows for both depth and breadth of analysis, providing a holistic understanding of divine providence.

3. Philosophical-Theological Synthesis

A significant methodological element is the **synthesis between philosophical theodicy and pastoral theology**. Rather than isolating abstract metaphysical arguments from real-world suffering, this paper integrates **analytic philosophy** (e.g., Plantinga's free will defense) with **narrative and experiential theology** (e.g., Wolterstorff's reflections on grief). This enables a nuanced understanding that is both intellectually rigorous and emotionally resonant.

4. Limitations and Reflexivity

As with all theological inquiry, this study acknowledges the **epistemic limitations** of human reasoning before divine mystery. The doctrine of providence, especially in the context of suffering, defies complete systematization. While this paper seeks coherence, it does not claim exhaustive comprehension.

Moreover, this work reflects a **Christian theological framework**, specifically within a broadly Reformed and Catholic tradition. While comparative elements are referenced, the focus is not interreligious. Future studies might expand this lens to include insights from Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, or Buddhist understandings of providence and suffering.

4. Result and Discussion

The concept of divine providence in the face of suffering challenges simplistic dichotomies between divine love and human pain. Rather than seeing providence as a means to avoid suffering, it is better understood as God's presence within suffering. Providence assures believers that their pain is not purposeless, even if its meaning remains partially veiled.

Furthermore, divine providence reorients the believer's hope—not toward immediate relief, but toward eschatological fulfillment. The Christian narrative culminates in the cross, where divine suffering in Christ becomes the ultimate revelation of providence. As

Moltmann (1993:56) insists, "God weeps with us so that we may someday laugh with Him." Providence, then, is not an abstract decree but a cruciform solidarity.

The question of how divine providence operates amid human suffering resists reductionist answers. Yet, it remains essential to affirm that providence is not suspended in moments of affliction. Rather, as this study demonstrates, suffering becomes a crucible in which the meaning and presence of divine governance are often most profoundly encountered. This section explores three core themes that emerged through theological synthesis: **divine sovereignty and human freedom**, **suffering as formative**, and **the redemptive presence of God in suffering**.

1. Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom

A persistent tension in Christian theology lies in affirming both God's sovereign providence and the meaningful agency of human beings. Classical theism, as expressed by Augustine (1991) and Aquinas (1947), emphasizes that nothing occurs outside of God's providential will. However, as this study highlights, the integrity of human moral freedom remains essential to avoid theological determinism.

Plantinga's (1974) free will defense helps preserve this balance. He argues that a world in which love and virtue are genuinely possible must also permit the risk of moral evil. Divine providence, then, does not manipulate human will, but sustains a moral universe in which freedom is possible—and tragically, sometimes misused.

Theologically, this understanding safeguards the belief that God is not the author of evil, even while nothing occurs beyond His knowledge or redemptive reach. It also challenges the believer to recognize that providence may involve divine permission rather than prevention.

2. Suffering as Formative, Not Merely Permissive

A major thread in the literature, especially from thinkers like Hick (1966) and Bavinck (2004), posits that suffering is not only allowed by God but often used as a means of spiritual formation. This perspective resists both fatalism and naive triumphalism, offering a more robust theology of growth.

Biblical texts reinforce this idea: Joseph's transformation in Genesis, Job's deepened reverence, and Paul's reflections on weakness in 2 Corinthians 12 all attest to the possibility that suffering, under divine providence, becomes a site of transformation. "We also glory in our sufferings," Paul writes, "because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope" (Romans 5:3–4, NIV).

Yet, this view must be held carefully. Not all suffering leads to visible growth, and not all who suffer experience it as redemptive. As Wolterstorff (1987) cautions, forcing meaning onto pain prematurely can re-victimize the sufferer. Thus, pastoral sensitivity and theological humility are vital in applying this doctrine.

3. God's Redemptive Presence in Suffering

Perhaps the most vital insight emerging from this study is the shift from seeing providence as **control** to experiencing it as **companionship**. This theme is especially prominent in Moltmann's (1993) theology of the cross. For him, divine providence is not defined by the elimination of suffering but by God's willingness to enter into it.

This cruciform model of providence stands in contrast to triumphalist theologies that see suffering merely as a lack of faith or divine punishment. Instead, it affirms a God who suffers with creation and redeems it from within. The incarnation and crucifixion of Christ are not aberrations in providential history—they are its clearest revelations.

This understanding also resonates with pastoral experiences. Survivors of trauma, illness, and loss often describe a mysterious sense of God's nearness in their darkest hours—not as an explanation, but as presence. The Psalms of lament and the silence of Job both affirm that divine providence includes space for mystery, protest, and reverent trust.

4. Eschatological Fulfillment

Providence also orients suffering toward a future hope. Christian theology insists that providence is not exhausted by present conditions but anticipates a consummated reality where suffering is no more (Revelation 21:4). This eschatological horizon tempers our immediate pain with a deeper assurance: that history is moving toward reconciliation, healing, and resurrection.

In this light, divine providence is not simply a reactive force; it is the teleological arc of divine love guiding creation toward its intended end. While human understanding of this arc is limited, faith in providence allows the believer to live with hope, endurance, and even joy amid suffering.

5. Recommendations

In light of the theological reflections and interdisciplinary insights presented in this study, several recommendations emerge for theologians, clergy, caregivers, and faith communities seeking to responsibly articulate and embody the doctrine of divine providence amid suffering. These recommendations are grounded in over two decades of theological scholarship and pastoral engagement.

1. Promote Theological Literacy Concerning Providence and Suffering

Faith communities should actively teach balanced, historically grounded doctrines of divine providence that neither reduce God to a cosmic micromanager nor abstract Him from human pain. Simplistic or overly deterministic views of providence often do more harm than good, especially when they frame suffering as divine punishment or failure of faith (Calvin, 2008; Helm, 1994).

Educational programs in churches, seminaries, and Christian institutions should incorporate texts from Augustine, Aquinas, Moltmann, and Wolterstorff, offering theological frameworks that embrace both divine sovereignty and human agency without denying the mystery of God's ways.

2. Foster a Pastoral Theology of Presence, Not Explanation

Pastoral caregivers must learn to prioritize **presence over explanation** when walking with individuals in suffering. Drawing from Moltmann's (1993) theology of divine solidarity and Wolterstorff's (1987) narrative of grief, caregivers should model the compassionate, non-defensive posture of Christ in the Gospels—who wept with those who wept (John 11:35), rather than offering rationalizations.

Suffering people do not need quick theological solutions; they need incarnational support. The ministry of presence—quietly listening, lamenting, and accompanying—can be one of the most powerful embodiments of divine providence in practice.

3. Integrate Lament into Worship and Theology

Liturgical and theological spaces must make room for lament. The Psalms, Job, and Lamentations legitimize sorrow and protest as expressions of faith, not its failure. Churches and religious educators should encourage believers to bring their raw emotions before God, trusting that divine providence is capacious enough to hold human despair without condemnation (Brueggemann, 1984:23).

Incorporating lament into worship, liturgy, and prayer life reclaims an essential biblical tradition and allows suffering individuals to find a voice that is both faithful and honest.

4. Encourage Eschatological Hope without Escapism

While affirming the reality of future redemption, churches should resist the temptation to bypass present suffering through over-spiritualized or escapist eschatology. The promise of "no more tears" (Revelation 21:4) must be held in tension with the cruciform path of discipleship.

Instead of offering eschatology as an escape, it should be framed as the final vindication of divine providence—a promise that current suffering is not the final word, and that justice, healing, and peace will ultimately be fulfilled in Christ.

5. Support Interdisciplinary Dialogue between Theology and the Human Sciences

Finally, theologians should actively engage with insights from psychology, medicine, trauma studies, and pastoral care in refining understandings of suffering and providence. Such interdisciplinary engagement can deepen theology's relevance and compassion, helping it avoids abstraction and better responds to human realities (Swinton, 2007:71).

Theological seminaries and academic institutions should promote integrative models of research and formation that equip ministers to think theologically and act pastorally within a world marked by profound suffering.

6. Conclusion

The mystery of suffering remains unresolved in this life, yet the doctrine of divine providence offers a framework of meaning, purpose, and hope. As a theologian who has walked with many through seasons of affliction, I remain convinced that providence is not a denial of suffering but a deeper assurance that suffering is not the final word.

Divine providence, properly understood, calls us to trust in a God who does not always explain but always accompanies, guides, and ultimately redeems.

The concept of divine providence in the face of suffering remains one of the most profound and contested themes in theological reflection. This article has shown that providence, far from offering a neat solution to the enigma of suffering, invites a deeper encounter with the mystery of God's presence, purpose, and power within human pain. From Augustine's providential ordering of history to Moltmann's crucified God, from Aquinas's greater good arguments to Wolterstorff's lamenting father, the tradition offers a wide spectrum of insights that converge around one core conviction: that God is neither absent from suffering nor indifferent to it.

Over the past two decades, I have repeatedly seen how the doctrine of providence, when rightly taught and pastorally applied, can sustain faith, foster resilience, and even evoke hope amid tragedy. Yet, it must be approached with care. Misused, it can become a weapon of theological platitude; rightly understood, it becomes a source of comfort and strength.

Ultimately, divine providence does not eliminate the reality of suffering, but it redefines it. It affirms that every tear shed, every question asked, and every cross borne is held within the vast purposes of a God who governs history not from a throne of detachment, but from the wood of a cross. In this, the believer is not promised an escape from suffering—but a God who walks with them through it and a future where suffering will finally give way to glory.

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Corresponding Author: fatherosas@yahoo.com

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Corresponding Author: fatherosas@yahoo.com

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