

God's Care for Us: The Common Doctrine of Holy Scripture, Faith, and Reason
As taught in the *Consolation of Philosophy* of St Boethius and by Moses Maimonides in the
Guide of the Perplexed

An Epiphany Quiet Day in the Chapel of King's College, Halifax
Saturday, February 7th, 2009: From Ten in the morning to Three in the afternoon

FIRST TALK: ARE HUMANS ALONE OUTSIDE GOD'S CARE?

During the Fall, or Michaelmas, Term while teaching my classes in the history of philosophy I noticed that the doctrine of Providence, or God's care for us, in the *Letters* of Iamblichus, a Syrian pagan philosopher of the 4th century after Jesus Christ, in the *Consolation of Philosophy* of the Christian St Boethius from the 6th century, and in the *Guide of the Perplexed* of Rabbi Moses Maimonides from the 12th century was fundamentally the same. Since a Quiet Day is not a philosophy seminar those of you gathered here today may ask why I am troubling you with this observation. Let me begin to answer this very appropriate question by saying something about the character of philosophy in the ancient and medieval world.

PHILOSOPHY AS A WAY OF LIFE

Anciently philosophy was not an abstract university subject but a spirituality, a way of life. Thus, St Augustine in his *Confessions* tells us that the first step in his conversion to Christianity was reading an exhortation to the study of philosophy similar to the *Letters* of Iamblichus, the *Consolation* of Boethius, and the *Guide* of Maimonides. Augustine's report of the effect of his reading the *Hortensius* of the great Roman pagan statesman and rhetorician Cicero is astonishing. He writes that this book "changed my feelings."¹ It changed his experience, religious practice, values, and desires in respect to God himself: "It altered my prayers, and created in me different purposes and desires."² Inflamed by philosophy, Augustine repented his vain hopes for success; in their place, he writes: "I lusted for the immortality of wisdom with an incredible ardour of the heart." "I began to rise up to return to you."

Augustine describes his new love, philosophy, as the love of wisdom, the wisdom which itself is God. He speaks in the language of passionate feeling which lovers and mystics use: "How I burned, my God, how I burned."³ In common with Iamblichus, Boethius, and Maimonides, Augustine believed that in seeking wisdom with his whole heart, he would be seeking God. Many books later in the *Confessions*, and twelve years later in his spiritual and intellectual journey, when he takes the final step to Christian life by deciding to be baptised, he comes clean about his sin during the period in between. In those years, he had not preferred the immortal wisdom which is God to "physical delights," as the *Hortensius* had exhorted and had not fulfilled his promises to Wisdom.⁴ To put it in the language we shall develop in these talks, despite various panics and good resolutions, he had not turned away from his enslavement to what fortune gives; his conversion had not been decisive.

¹ *Conf.* 3.4.7.

² *Conf.* 3.4.7.``

³ *Conf.* 3.4.8.

⁴ *Conf.* 8.7.16.

It tells us a lot about both religion and philosophy during the period when Christianity was defined that, having finally fixed his will on the conversion which baptism signifies and effects, Augustine and his fifteen year old illegitimate son, Adeodatus, “Given by God,” prepared for the sacrament by philosophical study and prayer in a community of likeminded friends at Cassiciacum. This kind of community was a precursor of the monasteries, rightly regarded as heirs of the philosophical schools of the ancient world. Monasteries took over the spiritual techniques developed by the Stoics, Epicureans, Cynics, Sceptics, Aristotelians, and Platonists, their mystical practices, both in the reading of sacred texts and in the journey towards union with God, and, of course, their single-minded devotion to immortal wisdom which baptism sealed for Augustine.

PHILOSOPHY CONSOLES A CONDEMNED PRISONER

The *Consolation of Philosophy* has been a *vade mecum* for Christians, a spiritual guide always to have with you to help in assessing what the Bible calls “the world”, in facing the trials of life, and in keeping the soul directed towards God. Its practical importance is indicated by the fact that both King Alfred the Great and the first Queen Elizabeth translated it into English. It is the very opposite of an abstract academic exercise, although it contains many difficult philosophical arguments. Crucially, it was written in prison by a Roman noble while he waited for his execution by torture, and the person to be consoled by Lady Philosophy, Sophia, *Wisdom*, or the *Logos* is, first of all, himself. We enter the dialogue through identifying with the prisoner. The *Consolation* begins with the a prisoner, not only confined in a cell, but also doubled up in the manner of the prisoners at the bottom of Plato’s Cave. The work of philosophy in the Cave is called conversion, literally getting the prisoner to turn around, to convert towards light and freedom. This is also the work of consolation.

Surprising to current views of the relation of philosophy and religion, the condemned prisoner being Platonically converted, Boethius, was a devout Christian. He had written theological as well as philosophical books, and worked to further orthodox Christianity—indeed this may have been a cause of his condemnation, the King at the time belonged to a heretical sect. Nonetheless, the book he wrote to prepare himself for death, contains not a single *explicit* reference to Christian scripture or to doctrines which are not common to philosophy and religion, although much of the language echoes phrases from Scripture. This reminds us that, on his death bed, Augustine asked to have passages from the pagan philosopher Plotinus read to him, and we remember that he believed that most of the great prologue of St John’s Gospel was also taught by Plotinus. We need to take a minute to let the significance of this sink in: for the thinkers we are considering philosophy is strength for the soul “now and at the hour of our death.”

We do not know with certainty why Boethius had fallen so hard and so quickly out of the King’s favour, but there is no reason to disbelieve his testimony that it was his honesty, integrity, and his devotion to making truth rule that subjected him to hatred and false accusations.⁵ On this account, the *Consolation* is a life or death struggle, where both eternity and the remainder of his present life are at stake, with the prisoner’s fundamental complaint, namely, that Providence does not rule in human affairs, God’s will is not done on earth as it is in heaven. In contrast to the lawfulness of nature, the unjustly punished prisoner declares:

⁵ *Cons.* I.v.

“only humans are outside God’s care.”⁶ Philosophy’s persuasions, which are of many kinds and include poetic songs, bring the prisoner to the conviction that we are governed by an infinitely good Providence to whom we should pray in hope. It is not the least of the convergences between Iamblichus, the *Consolation*, and the *Guide* that they are all concerned in the end with prayer, its need, its possibility, and its character.

PERPLEXITIES ABOUT SCRIPTURE: A GUIDE TO PRAYER

There are many formal differences between the *Guide of the Perplexed* and the *Consolation*, for example, the *Guide* is full of quotations from Scripture and interpretations of them, and it gives a series of religious exercises, modes of prayer, to help us in bringing ourselves under the care of God’s good providence. We shall avail ourselves both of Maimonides’ treatment of Scripture and of these exercises in the course of this Quiet Day. However, its elaborate argument moves to the same conclusion as does the *Consolation*, namely that the Providence of God extends to the care of human individuals,⁷ and it has fundamentally the same teaching as the *Consolation* on how that care reaches out to us, and on how we are to draw ourselves toward it so that God is our strength and comfort. One of the differences stems from Maimonides’ colourful language, for example, when teaching that God cares for us, he says that God differentiates between: “an ox that defecates upon a host of ants so that they die, and a building whose foundations are shaken upon all the people at their prayers who are found in it so that they die.”⁸ Language of this kind, and what seems to me to be a sense of humour not generally evident among philosophers, should not conceal from us that philosophy was for Maimonides every bit as personally serious, every bit as much a life and death matter, every bit as much a spirituality, as it was for Boethius.

Like Boethius, Maimonides himself knew great hardship. He too was born into wealth and power; his father held these both in the Moslem state of Cordoba and in the Jewish community there. When Maimonides was ten, persecution from new puritanical and intolerant Moslem rulers forced his family to flee first from Cordoba and then, after twelve years of wandering, from Spain itself in order to preserve their Jewish faith. Crucially, during this time Maimonides worked hard on and was comforted by his philosophical studies. He settled in Egypt where troubles, including some owed to invasion by the Crusaders, continued. The worst blow was the death of his beloved brother while travelling on family business. The consequent sorrow, financial hardship, and care nearly killed Maimonides too, and indeed he fell seriously ill both physically and mentally for at least a year. Religion together with philosophy sustained him. He testified that were it not for these “I would have perished in my affliction” (quoting Psalm 119.92).⁹ He personally experienced the consolation of philosophy.

Like the *Consolation* of Boethius, the *Guide of the Perplexed* is a spiritual guide. Although it is not a dialogue, it is written in a conversational style because it was composed for a former student, Judah, who like Augustine or Boethius, was determined *both* to follow the law of his religion and the truth reason taught. Refusal to give up either for the sake of the other brought Judah to deep and threatening perplexity at the points where they seemed to

⁶ *Cons.* I.vi.

⁷ *Guide* III.17.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Quoted in Joel L. Kraemer, “Moses Maimonides: An Intellectual Portrait,” *The Cambridge Companion to Maimonides*, ed. K. Seeskin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 27.

conflict. The three long, often difficult, and very subtle, books of the *Guide* are devoted to the care first of Judah's soul, and then, of every reader who is willing to identify with the personal "you" to whom Maimonides speaks. In the same way that we need to identify ourselves with the prisoner in the *Consolation* to learn from it, we need to make ourselves one with the student to whom Maimonides is writing. The *Guide's* aim for us is well put in the following which brings to mind the conversion philosophy works in Plato's Cave:

Maimonides wants to raise the reader from imaginary and superstitious beliefs that cause fear to a rational consciousness that brings equanimity. The reward is a new vision of the world, intellectual serenity, self-transformation, and spiritual conversion. The aim of the *Guide* is to enlighten and to give peace and tranquility to body and soul: "And when these gates are opened and these places are entered into, the souls, will find rest therein, the eyes will be delighted, and the bodies will be eased of their toil and of their labour." [*Guide*, Introduction]...The *Guide* urges human beings to become fully human by perfecting their reason and living in accordance with wisdom. Beyond this, Maimonides instructs us to contemplate the beauty and harmony of the universe and to experience the divine presence everywhere, in a silent room, in a storm at sea, or in the starry sky above, so that we may come to [what philosophy also awakened in Augustine] a "passionate love of God."¹⁰

GUIDING AND CONSOLING A PERPLEXED STUDENT

I am emphasising the personal, or existential, character of the *Consolation* and the *Guide*, because I want to give credibility to their authors when they argue that we should trust in God's care for us—they experienced in their own bodies the reasons such trust is hard. I also want us to find ways of entering these texts addressed to the perplexed student or to someone who feels cuttingly the injustice of the world and who can be ministered to by careful critical reasoning. It is also crucial to recognise the limits which the personal character of these texts erect. I have just quoted a good judgement of what Maimonides aims to do and for whom he aims to do it: "The *Guide* urges human beings to become fully human by perfecting their reason." As we shall see in the next talk, it is essential to Boethius (as well as to his pagan predecessors) that we humans identify precisely our place in the cosmos and that we seek our perfection as rational beings. The books of Maimonides and Boethius are spiritual exercises, adapted to the condition of those for whom they are designed. In one case, this is someone who recognised that the lady who appeared beside his prison cot: "was my nurse in whose house I had been cared for since my youth—Philosophy."¹¹ In the other, Judah, must satisfy Rabbi Moses that he had mastered astronomy, mathematics, and logic before he judged his former student ready to think with him about what is revealed in the sacred books. We have here exercises of a particular kind, for people with a particular set of problems, and a particular way of approaching these problems. Put in another way, the *Consolation* and the *Guide* provide excellent material for meditations in a university chapel; there are many places and many people for whom they would be worse than useless.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹¹ *Cons.* I.iii.

This brings me to a paradoxical feature of the spirituality of these books: this is theory as practice. Meditation or contemplation is something done. Dante shows us this in the ascent up through the heavens of Paradise, when, by each step taken towards God, we are brought to saints who more and more completely unite thinking and doing. Finally we reach those whose practice is contemplation. I tried to bring out that thinking must be done as our own work in a sermon for Epiphany here last year. I was trying to show why Jesus reiterated the words of the prophet Isaiah, declaring, as John's Gospel has it: "They shall all be taught by God." (John 6:45, Isaiah 54:13). When explaining how, ultimately, God is our teacher from within, I looked at the questioning dialogue which learning requires like this:

Questioning prods thinking. No one can do it for you. The questioner is asking: "Is there really anything here? What is it? Do you have it in your mind? Do we have it right? Has the truth dawned in you, and thus on us thinking together?" This questioning is nothing else except the work of the university and, when it does its work radically enough...the light of God is born in our hearts.

This year dealing with the same texts, Dr Ian Stewart, brought out the same point when explaining what the Epiphany of God among us here in the university requires:

The pattern is unmistakable. The Epiphany of Jesus, the revelation of God become flesh, this meeting of heaven and earth, of the divine and human, will draw into itself the human attempt to know, to know itself and the world around it.

Dr Stewart continued:

If the Christian revelation, celebrated in Epiphany, that God in Christ became man, means anything, it means that all our striving to know ourselves, to know the world around us in our neighbour, and in the created world, is ultimately a seeking of God himself as our source.

GOD'S CARE: OUR TURNING

Let me put this in another more general way. For our tradition, God's action towards us, his operation in us, requires as its other side, our turn toward him, our acting by and in him. God does not govern us as if we were inanimate or unconscious, as if we were dead dogs, his action in us as knowing loving creatures is our conversion towards him in knowledge and love. As Jeremiah put it: "Turn us unto thee, O Lord, and we shall be turned." (Jer. 5.21).

When we apply this to Providence, our question about God's care for us, we arrive at something which may surprise the assumptions of up-to-date Christians. In his big new book, *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor shows how humanistic atheism evolved out of certain features of Western Christianity. Crucial to this development was a transformation in our understanding of how God's Providence, His care for us, works. Belief in Providence became faith that the circumstances and connections of human life were arranged for human flourishing. By the operation of what some imaged as the "invisible hand" of Providence, even when seeking our self-interest, indeed, especially when seeking our self-

interest, all things would work out for the best.¹² All the old virtues of self-denial taught by the saints and philosophers, must be rejected. When worldly goods are pursued with rational self-interest, because “private vices conduce to public benefit”¹³, what was once the kingdom of heaven would now be enjoyed in everyday existence.¹⁴

This transformation of Christianity explains why many at present have a religious *belief* in laissez-faire capitalism, why prophetic *dreams* are for expanded consumption, and why religious *hope* has become a confidence in historical progress. It explains why the duty President Bush imposed on his people in response to the 9/11 murders was to carry on as before. Consumption must be resumed, lest the economy falter. The greatest fear was that consumer confidence would be lost. The greatest anxiety was that we would be less willing to take on more debt in order to consume more. Equally, we are told that the cause of the present collapse is a lack of *faith* in the credit markets.

From the perspective of older religion, pagan, Jewish, Christian and Moslem, the current demonstration that bubbles burst would only show that the wheel of fortune is still turning. Our predecessors would learn again, as Boethius did, that the world is still the world. “The world” in the Biblical sense is the pursuit of happiness apart from God. According to Scripture *this* world passes away and those who identify with it share its fate.¹⁵ It does not move progressively forwards but revolves, rising pleasure, increasing glory are equally matched with fall, humiliation, and destruction.

Boethius and Maimonides are trying to show us, both by the manner and the content of their teaching, that God exercises his care for us by drawing us, each according to his or her proper mode, to joy, by knowledge and love of Him. Just as we must enter into the dialogue between Philosophy and the prisoner, between teacher and student, so being governed by God, is to hear, turn and see:

Hear, O thou Shepherd of Israel, thou that leadest Joseph like a flock; show thy self also, thou that sittest upon the cherubim. Turn us again, O God, show the light of thy countenance, and we shall be whole” (Ps. 80.1&2).

If we follow Boethius and Maimonides, when we hear from St Paul that “all things work together for good to them that love God” (Rom. 8.28),¹⁶ we shall not imagine Paul to be teaching that the external worldly circumstances or the earthly rewards of the lovers of God are different than for those who hate him. Certainly Paul’s own experience, that of Boethius, Maimonides, and the saints generally, is exactly the contrary. Jesus poses a sceptical question to those who make a causal link between sin and calamity. He asks:

¹² C. Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2007), 177: “The crucial thing in the new conception is that our purposes mesh, however divergent they may be in the conscious awareness of each of us.”

¹³ Ibid. 229.

¹⁴ Ibid. 181: true self-love and social are the same, so we come “to see our society as an ‘economy’.”

¹⁵ E.g. 1 Cor. 7.31, 11.31, Tit. 2.12.

¹⁶ Significantly the context of this passage is Paul’s teaching on predestination, which is providence looked at in terms of individual salvation.

Those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and slew them, think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem? (Lk. 13.4)

Rather, Boethius and Maimonides will have us understand, that, as Plato teaches, virtue is its own reward, and that the joy of having cultivated the knowledge and love of God is the joy of knowing and loving God. This joy is the good will of God towards us; love is its own reward.

THE USES OF MISFORTUNE

Love brings us to another confluence between Boethius, the prisoner, and Maimonides, the Jew driven out of his homeland, surviving by the hard labour of making himself indispensable to his Moslem rulers in Egypt. The suffering brought by misfortune is part of God's care because it leads us away from the fantasies of the imagination, purges false love, and intensifies true love. It is the most effective instrument of repentance. Let me first put this in the words of Boethius as Lady Philosophy connects bad fortune and friendship for him, in a way I suppose we have all experienced:

It is a strange thing that I am trying to say, and for that reason I can scarcely explain myself in words. I think that bad fortune is of greater use to men than good fortune. Good fortune is ever lying when she seems to favour by an appearance of happiness. Misfortune is always truthful, because, by her changes, she shows herself inconstant. The one deceives; the other enlightens. The one, by a deceitful appearance of good things, enslaves the minds of those who enjoy them: the other frees our minds by a knowledge that happiness is fragile.... Good fortune draws men from the straight path of true good by her flattery; adverse fortune draws men back to their true good like a shepherdess with her crook. And do you think that this should be reckoned among the least benefits of this rough, unkind, and terrible ill fortune, that she has revealed to you the minds of your faithful friends? Fortune has shown you the friends whose smiles were true smiles, and those whose smiles were false. In deserting you Fortune has taken her friends with her and left you those who were really yours. At what price could you have bought this benefit if you had been untouched and, as you thought, fortunate? Cease then to seek the wealth you have lost. You have found your friends, and they are the most precious of all riches.¹⁷

How much there is in common between Boethius and Maimonides is exhibited by the fact that the heart of Maimonides' thinking about providence is the *Book of Job*. For him the "object of the *Book of Job* as a whole" is to show us the difference between the way we humans govern things and the way God's care for us works. Maimonides writes:

This is the object of the *Book of Job* as a whole; I refer to the establishing of this foundation for belief... that you should not fall into error and seek to affirm in your imagination that His knowledge is like our knowledge, or that His purpose and His providence and His governance are like our purpose and our providence and our governance. If a man knows this, every misfortune will be borne lightly by him and misfortunes will not add to his doubts regarding the deity and whether He does or does not know and whether He exercises

¹⁷ *Cons.* II.viii.

providence or manifests neglect, but will, on the contrary, add to his love. As is said in the end of this book of prophecy: “Therefore I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes” (*Job*, 42.6) and as our Sages say: “The pious do everything out of love, and rejoice in their own sufferings.”¹⁸

When we discover what true providence is, we become free from the fantasy that “the world”, the arena where, according to the *Book of Job*, Satan does what he can, or, in other words, the realm where Fortune holds sway and every up has its down, holds any real power over us. The *Book of Job* aims to turn us away from this “world” and our imagination that we have a knowledge of it which will give us power and control.

Crucially for the teaching Rabbi Moses shares with Boethius, as we recognise the limits of human knowledge and power over the circumstances of existence, and turn instead towards God, we come more and more in line with His will and thus more and more under his good providence. By allowing the “overflow” of the light by which God knows us and all things to illumine our minds and guide our steps, we turn ourselves towards providence:

[Job] said all that he did say as long as he had no true knowledge and knew the deity only because of his acceptance of authority.... But when he knew God with a certain knowledge, he admitted that true happiness, which is the knowledge of the deity, is guaranteed to all who know Him and that a human being cannot be troubled in it by any misfortunes.... While he had known God only through the traditional stories and not by coming to understand their meaning, Job had imagined that the things thought to be happiness, such as health, wealth, and children are the ultimate goal. For this reason he fell into such perplexity and said such things as he did.¹⁹

Misfortune led to turning, turning brought knowledge, and knowledge nourished love.

EXERCISES FOR THE FIRST MEDITATION

Part of the prisoner’s complaint is that chaotic fortune and injustice rule in the human world, but, in contrast, “all other things are governed by reason.”²⁰ When working to cure his mental illness, Lady Philosophy, builds on what is healthy and brings him back time and again by songs to the contemplation of the order of the cosmos. For her, for Maimonides, and the old religious and philosophic teaching, attending to the strong beauty of nature is essential to bringing erring humans under God’s care. This remains true. I offer here some hymns and psalms as subjects for your meditation.

PSALM 19. Caeli enarrant

THE heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handy-work.

One day telleth another; and one night certifieth another.

There is neither speech nor language; their voice cannot be heard;

Yet their sound is gone out into all lands; and their words into the ends of the world.

¹⁸ *Guide*, III.23.

¹⁹ *Guide*, III.23

²⁰ *Cons.* I.vi.

IN them hath he set a tabernacle for the sun; which cometh forth as a bridegroom out of his chamber, and rejoiceth as a giant to run his course.
It goeth forth from the uttermost part of the heaven, and runneth about unto the end of it again; and there is nothing hid from the heat thereof.
THE law of the LORD is an undefiled law, restoring the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, and giveth wisdom unto the simple.
The precepts of the LORD are right, and rejoice the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, and giveth light unto the eyes.

PSALM 104. Benedic, anima mea.

PRAISE the LORD, O my soul. O LORD my God, thou art become exceeding glorious: thou art clothed with majesty and honour.
Thou deckest thyself with light as it were with a garment, and spreadest out the heavens like a curtain;
Who layeth the beams of his chambers in the waters, and maketh the clouds his chariot, and walketh upon the wings of the wind;
Who maketh the winds his messengers, and his ministers a flaming fire.
HE laid the foundations of the earth, that it never should move at any time.
Thou coveredst it with the deep like as with a garment: the waters stood above the hills.
At thy rebuke they fled: at the voice of thy thunder they hasted away;
They went up as high as the hills, and down to the valleys beneath, even unto the place which thou hadst appointed for them.
Thou didst set them their bounds which they should not pass, neither turn again to cover the earth.
HE sendeth the springs into the valleys; they run among the hills.
All beasts of the field drink thereof, and the wild asses quench their thirst.
Beside them the birds of the air have their habitation, and sing among the branches.
He watereth the hills from above; the earth is filled with the fruit of thy works.
He maketh grass to grow for the cattle, and green herb for the service of men;
That he may bring forth food out of the earth, and wine that maketh glad the heart of man;
And oil to make him a cheerful countenance, and bread to strengthen man's heart.
The trees of the LORD also are full of sap: even the cedars of Lebanon which he hath planted;
Wherein the birds make their nests: and the fir-trees are a dwelling for the stork.
The high hills are a refuge for the wild goats, and so are the stony rocks for the conies.
HE appointed the moon to mark the seasons: and the sun knoweth his going down.
Thou makest darkness that it may be night, wherein all the beasts of the forest do move.
The lions roar after their prey, and seek their meat from God.
The sun ariseth, and they get them away together, and lay them down in their dens.
Man goeth forth to his work, and to his labour until the evening.

God's Care for Us: The Common Doctrine of Holy Scripture, Faith, and Reason
As taught in the *Consolation of Philosophy* of St Boethius and by Moses Maimonides in the
Guide of the Perplexed

SECOND TALK: HE SHALL GIVE HIS ANGELS CHARGE OVER THEE TO KEEP THEE IN ALL
THY WAYS (PS. 91.11)

Our first meditation brought before us the defining characteristic of the old philosophical and religious teaching about God's providence: God cares for each of his creatures according to their own proper nature. Lady Philosophy knew that the prisoner was ill and needed her medicines when she discovered that he had a wrong view of his own nature. To understand God's providence, Boethius and Maimonides ask what is human nature? how is the cosmos structured? where are humans in it? what role do humans play in the divine government?

ENVISIONING THE COSMOS

In answering these questions, we must first learn from Boethius how the cosmos is structured. In order to think with Boethius and Maimonides we must keep in mind that each and every creature, including humans, is, for them, a kind of motion. The universe is an ordered series of motions caused by the God of whom, as the centre point around which all else moves and by which all is moved, Augustine says: "You are always working and always at rest."²¹ Remembering this, listen to what Lady Philosophy tells the prisoner:

The generation of all things, the whole production of all changing natures, whatever is moved in any way, receive their causes, their order, and their forms because they are allotted to them from out of the stability of the divine mind. In the high citadel of its simplicity, the unchanging mind of God establishes a plan for the multitude of things. When this plan is thought in terms of the purity of God's own understanding, it is called Providence. When this same plan is thought of in terms of the manifold different movements which are the life of individual things, it is called Fate or Fortune.²²

Having taken on board the idea that every creature is a distinct kind of motion and that these motions are all connected in a cosmic order, we need one more idea to go forward with our theologians. This idea is the fundamental law of spiritual life. Here it is: how we understand things, how we look at them, the vision we construct of them, is what gives each of them the spiritual force for good or evil that they have for us. Renewal is a matter of the spirit of our minds (Eph. 4.23), repentance is to think again. Growing spiritually, for better or for worse, is fundamentally a matter of how we form our vision of things, with our vision goes our love. Equally with our love goes our vision.

With this fundamental spiritual law in mind let us try to follow Lady Philosophy further. She says:

²¹ *Conf.* 13.37.52.

²² *Cons.* IV.vi.

It will easily be understood that Providence or Fate are two very different ways of looking at things if we consider what distinct force our vision gives each of them. For Providence is the very divine reason itself. It is set at the head of all things and arranges all things.

Eriugena, who deeply pondered the teaching of Boethius and Augustine on Providence, thought that that the Providence of God, the will of God for each of us, is God. The providence of God is God's very self.²³ Boethius and Maimonides are labouring to lead us to see Providence in this way. We need to see Providence in terms of the simple stable beauty of God's goodness. Fate, on the other hand, is inherent in each individual changing creature. The unity and necessity of Fate or Fortune consists in the ways these inherent motions are connected, each in its own allotted place.

When we look at reality in terms of Providence, we see what embraces all things, all at once, however different each thing may be, however varied and even opposed their motions. Simultaneity and immediacy are the modes of Providence which always works in the same way, giving itself as completely to each creature as each one is able and willing to receive God's infinite goodness.²⁴ When, in contrast, we look at reality in terms of Fate or Fortune, we see a series of different, but interconnected, motions. These constitute each of the individuals of the universe assigned as they are to their own appropriate places and times. Dispersion and difference are the modes of Fate. Listen to Lady Philosophy again:

Providence and Fate are different, but the one hangs upon the other...things which God constructs by his Providence are worked out by Fate in many ways and in time. By whatever means Fate operates, [angels, souls, nature]...one thing is certain, namely that Providence is the unchangeable simple form of all creation, while Fate is the movable interlacing and temporal ordering of the activities which the divine simplicity has placed in being.²⁵

GETTING FREE FROM FORTUNE

Having established these two ways of looking at the connection of things, either as Providence or as Fate, Lady Philosophy proceeds to what will enable us not only to position humans in the universe but also will give us the spiritual exercises by which we can come to live more and more under the care of God's good Providence. She goes on:

Everything which is subject to Fate is also subject to Providence, to which Fate is itself subject. But there are things which, though beneath Providence, are above the chain of Fate. These are things which rise above the course of the movement of Fate in virtue of the stability of their position fixed nearest God.²⁶

Our hope for freedom from the merciless turning of the wheel of fortune, depends on these. Philosophy draws an image which will help us enormously in finding our way to freedom. She says:

²³ *De praed.* E.3.

²⁴ See Dionysius, *The Divine Names* IV.5 which has basically the same teaching as Maimonides and Boethius.

²⁵ *Cons.* IV.vi.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

Imagine a set of concentric circles. The inmost one comes closest to the simplicity of the centre, while forming itself a kind of centre around which revolve those which are set outside it. The circle furthest out rotates through a wider orbit. The greater distance a circle is from the indivisible centre point, the greater the space its motion spreads through.

The greater the distance of any circle from the centre the greater is the speed of the change which belongs to its life. What is caught in the furthestmost circles is subjected to rapid change. In contrast, anything which joins itself to the centre is pulled into its peace and stability.

Having drawn this picture of four moving circles with a common centre, Philosophy reveals that the fixed centre and the rotating circles are images for kinds of life, four kinds of knowing, four kinds of spirit. The centre corresponds to the vision of God, the seeing by which he intuits everything he makes in one simple view. Thus, the centre is the providence of God. The first moving circle is the activity of the angels and the governing causes. With their immediate closeness to God, they know and operate by the power of their vision and of his creativity. Below them is the human circle constructed by the movement of our changing reasonings. We make our world by dealing with one thing after another and putting things together, by connecting things into an order as best we can. Outside our proper human circle are the spheres of imagination and of sense produced by animal and plant life. Because humans are partly eating, growing, reproducing bodies, and partly animals who move from place to place interacting with one another, humans are caught up in the movement of the outmost circles. However, because a share of the angelic knowledge and of God's own creative vision overflows to them, they are also connected to the inmost circle and the stable centre.

The particular and unique place of the human is to be in between. Maimonides puts this starkly:

It is of great use that man should know his station, and not erroneously imagine that the whole universe exists only for him as an individual. We hold that the universe exists because the Creator wills it so; that mankind is low in rank as compared with the superior part of the universe, the heavens and the stars, but, as regards the angels, there cannot be any real comparison between man and them. Man is the most noble of all beings on earth; that is of all the beings formed out of the earth. Man's existence is nevertheless for him a great good and a benefit on the part of God because of the properties with which he has singled him out and perfected him.²⁷

Crucially, because we are on the horizon between bodies and incorporeal spirits, we are able to move up or down by choice. Thus, Aristotle defines the human as a reasoning choice or a choosing reason.²⁸ When we choose what we make our primary business and on what we fix

²⁷ *Guide* III.12.

²⁸ *Nico. Ethic.* VI.2

our love, we come to be moved by it. When we turn to what is below or outside, we become subject to its motion and are enchained by Fortune. So Lady Philosophy tells the prisoner:

That which goes farther from the first knowing becomes enmeshed in ever stronger chains of Fate, and everything is freer from Fate the closer it seeks the centre of all. And if it cleaves to the steadfast mind of God, it is free from movement and so escapes the necessity imposed by Fortune. The relationship between the ever –changing course of Fate and the stable simplicity of Providence corresponds to the relation between human reasoning and divine understanding, between that which is coming into being and that which is; between time and eternity, between the moving circle and the still point in the centre.²⁹

OUR LINK TO GOD

By means of the picture Philosophy drew for the prisoner, we can work out answers to the questions Boethius and Maimonides asked when thinking about how God cares for us: how is the cosmos structured? where are humans in it? what is human nature? and what role do humans play in the divine government? Lady Philosophy is clear that we come under God's good Providence by turning towards it. Rabbi Moses teaches the same. He writes:

Understand my opinion up to its final implications. I do not ascribe to God ignorance of anything or any kind of weakness; I hold that Divine Providence is related and closely connected with the intellect, because Providence can only proceed from an intelligent being, from One who is an intellect perfect with a supreme perfection, than which there is no higher. [Out of its superabundant perfection this intellect overflows without any diminution of itself]. Accordingly everyone with whom something of the intellectual overflow is united will be reached by providence to the extent to which he is reached by God's self-revelation.³⁰

He continues, to follow him we need to keep in mind the picture Lady Philosophy drew:

When we see that some men are preserved from calamities, whilst others perish by them, we must not attribute this to a difference in the properties of their bodies, or in their physical constitution, “for by strength shall no man prevail” (I Samuel 2.9); but it must be attributed to the degrees...to which some approach God [moving towards the centre, towards the stable simplicity of Providence], whilst others are moving away from Him [towards the rapidly moving realm of images and sensations]. Those who approach Him are best protected, and “He will keep the feet of his holy ones”; but those who stay far away from Him are left exposed to what may befall them; there is nothing that could protect them from whatever might happen; they are like those who walk in darkness, and are certain to stumble. The protection of the pious by Providence is also expressed in the following passages:- “He keepeth all his bones, so that not one of them is broken. But misfortune shall slay the ungodly” (Psalm 34.19&20). “The eyes of the Lord are over the righteous,

²⁹ *Cons.* IV.vi.

³⁰ *Guide* III.17. In the following chapter Maimonides tells us that he believes this is also the teaching of the philosophers like Plato and Aristotle and of al-Farabi.

and his ears are open to their prayers” (Psalm 34.16). “He shall call upon me, and I shall hear him; yea I am with him in trouble” (Psalm 91.15). There are in Scripture many more passages expressing the principle that men enjoy Divine protection in proportion to their spiritual advance and piety. The philosophers have dealt with this subject in the same way.³¹

When teaching about the operation of Providence, where Boethius places Lady Philosophy’s picture of the concentric circles, Rabbi Moses composes a parable of the ruler and his habitation.

A king is in his palace, and all his subjects are partly in the city, and partly outside the city. Of those who are within the city, some have their backs turned towards the king's palace, and their faces in another direction. Others seek to reach the ruler’s habitation, turn toward it and desire to enter it and to minister before him, but have not yet seen even the wall of the house. Of those that desire to go to the palace, some reach it, and go round about in search of the entrance gate; others have passed through the gate, and walk about in the antechambers. Some of them have entered the inner court and have come to be with the king, in one and the same room with him in the royal palace. But even these do not therefore see the king, or speak to him; for, after having entered the inner part of the palace, another effort is required before they can stand before the king at a distance, or close by hear his words, or speak to him.³²

When he is interpreting his parable Maimonides tells us:

I have made clear to you that the knowledge which overflows from God unto us is the link that joins us to God. You have the choice: either to strengthen and fortify this bond, or to make it weaker gradually until you cut it, if you prefer this. It will only become strong when you employ it in the love of God, and seek that love: it will be weakened when you direct your thoughts to other things. You must know that even if you were the wisest man in respect to the true knowledge of God, you would break the bond existing between you and God if you would empty your thought of God and busy yourself totally with ... necessary business. You are then not with God, and He is not with you: for that connection between you and Him is interrupted in those moments.³³

BUILDING COMMUNITY WITH THE AGENTS OF PROVIDENCE: THE ANGELS

In the third and final meditation we shall occupy ourselves with Maimonides’ directions for strengthening God’s bond with us, his care for us. However, in what is before us now we have an essential means by which the knowledge and love of God overflows to us, the angels. Part of our work in coming under God’s good providence is building up our community with them.

³¹ *Guide* III.18, Maimonides tells us that he believes this is also the teaching of the philosophers like Plato and Aristotle and of al-Farabi, the Islamic philosophical theologian.

³² *Guide* III.51.

³³ *Ibid.*

The angels belong, in the language of Maimonides, to the intellectual overflow from God. The angel of the Lord is his messenger whether we have in mind his announcing to Hagar: "Behold, thou [art] with child, and shalt bear a son, and shalt call his name Ishmael; because the Lord hath heard thy affliction" (Gen. 16.11) or to Mary "Behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name Jesus" (Luke 1.31). Their company are seen intermediating between God and us. Consider what Jacob dreamed: "Behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it" (Gen. 28.12) and Jesus promised: "Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man" (John 1.51). Their form in the vision of Ezekiel reappears in the Revelation to St John the Divine. The prophet beheld:

four living creatures...they had the likeness of a man. And every one had four faces, and every one had four wings. As for the likeness of their faces, they four had the face of a man, and the face of a lion, on the right side: and they four had the face of an ox on the left side; they four also had the face of an eagle (Ezek. 1.5-10)

The vision of the seer was of:

four beasts full of eyes before and behind. And the first beast [was] like a lion, and the second beast like a calf, and the third beast had a face as a man, and the fourth beast [was] like a flying eagle. And the four beasts had each of them six wings about [him]; and [they were] full of eyes within: and they rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come. (Rev 4.6-9)

Christians, who took these as symbols of the four gospels, and Maimonides, who found here a parable of the operation of providence,³⁴ are agreed that the mode of the divine intellectual overflow is shown in the mystical beasts.

Between us and God come the angels. They are our way upward because the way up and the way down are the same.

EXERCISES FOR THE SECOND MEDITATION

Use some of the following to move into the company and care of the angels.

The visions of Ezekiel and John the Divine.

Much of Maimonides' teaching about Providence comes from Psalm 91 and it should be on our lips and in our minds:

WHOSO dwelleth under the defence of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.

I will say unto the LORD, 'Thou art my refuge and my stronghold; my God in whom I will trust.'

FOR he shall deliver thee from the snare of the hunter, and from the noisome pestilence.

³⁴ *Guide* III.1-7.

He shall defend thee under his wings, and thou shalt be safe under his feathers; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.
Thou shalt not be afraid for any terror by night, nor for the arrow that flieth by day; For the pestilence that walketh in darkness, nor for the sickness that destroyeth in the noonday.
A thousand shall fall beside thee, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee.
Yea, with thine eyes shalt thou behold, and see the reward of the ungodly.
BECAUSE thou hast said, 'The LORD is my refuge', and hast made the Most High thy habitation,
There shall no evil happen unto thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling.
For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways.
They shall bear thee in their hands, that thou hurt not thy foot against a stone.
Thou shalt tread upon the lion and adder: the young lion and the dragon shalt thou trample under thy feet.
BECAUSE he hath set his love upon me, therefore will I deliver him; I will set him up, because he hath known my Name.
He shall call upon me, and I will hear him: yea, I am with him in trouble; I will deliver him, and bring him to honour.
With long life will I satisfy him, and show him my salvation.

The power of Psalm 91 in drawing us into God's care is made clear by Jesus. It was on his lips when he struggled with Satan in the wilderness:

THEN was Jesus led up by the Spirit into the wilderness, to be tempted by the devil. And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterward an-hungred. And when the tempter came to him, he said, If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread. But he answered and said, It is written,
Man shall not live by bread alone,
But by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.
Then the devil taketh him up into the holy city, and setteth him on the pinnacle of the temple, and saith unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down; for it is written,
He shall give his angels charge concerning thee,
And in their hands they shall bear thee up,
Lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone.
Jesus said unto him, It is written again,
Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.
Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and showeth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; and saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me. Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan; for it is written,
Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God,
And him only shalt thou serve.
Then the devil leaveth him, and behold, angels came and ministered unto him. (St Matthew 4. 1-11)

O EVERLASTING God, who hast ordained and constituted the services of Angels and men in a wonderful order: Mercifully grant that, as thy holy Angels always do thee service in heaven, so by thy appointment they may succour and defend us on earth.

Psalm 8: O LORD our Governor, how excellent is thy Name in all the world, thou that hast set thy glory above the heavens!

Out of the mouth of very babes and sucklings hast thou ordained strength, because of thine enemies, that thou mightest still the enemy and the avenger.

WHEN I consider thy heavens, even the work of thy fingers; the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained;

What is man, that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man, that thou visitest him?

Thou hast made him but little lower than the angels, and dost crown him with glory and worship.

Thou makest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; and thou hast put all things in subjection under his feet;

All sheep and oxen; yea, and the beasts of the field;

The birds of the air, and the fishes of the sea; and whatsoever moveth through the paths of the seas.

O LORD our Governor, how excellent is thy Name in all the world!

IT is very meet, right, and our bounden duty, that we should at all times, and in all places give thanks unto thee, O Lord, Holy Father, Almighty, Everlasting God, Creator and Preserver of all things.

THEREFORE with Angels and Archangels, and with all the company of heaven, we laud and magnify thy glorious Name; evermore praising thee and saying:

HOLY, Holy, Holy, Lord God of hosts, Heaven and earth are full of thy glory. Glory be to thee, O Lord Most High.

Our Father who art in Heaven: Thy will be done on earth as it is done in Heaven.

WE praise thee, O God; we acknowledge thee to be the Lord. All the earth doth worship thee, the Father everlasting. To thee all Angels cry aloud, the Heavens and all the Powers therein. To thee Cherubim and Seraphim continually do cry, Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of hosts; Heaven and earth are full of the Majesty of thy glory. The glorious company of the Apostles praise thee; The goodly fellowship of the Prophets praise thee; The noble army of Martyrs praise thee; The holy Church throughout all the world doth acknowledge thee, The Father, of an infinite Majesty; Thine honourable, true, and only Son; Also the Holy Ghost, the Comforter.

WE beseech thee, O Lord, pour thy grace into our hearts; that, as we have known the incarnation of thy Son Jesus Christ by the message of an angel, so by his cross and passion we may be brought unto the glory of his resurrection; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

God's Care for Us: The Common Doctrine of Holy Scripture, Faith, and Reason
As taught in the *Consolation of Philosophy* of St Boethius and by Moses Maimonides in the
Guide of the Perplexed

THIRD TALK: BECAUSE HE HATH SET HIS LOVE UPON ME, THEREFORE WILL I DELIVER
HIM (PS. 91.14)

Our first two meditations have laid the foundations for this final talk which is straight-forward and practical. We have learned that providence is not a static predetermination of everything; such a totalitarian regime would only be appropriate to a dead universe. Universal predestination of this kind would make God responsible for every evil and exclude human hope and prayer. God adapts his care to us. He works in each creature according to its own way of being. In us, who know by reasoning and love by choosing, God works by moving us to turn toward his goodness, the stable centre of every circling quest. So we pray with Jeremiah: "Turn us unto thee, O Lord, and we shall be turned." (Jer. 5.21). In terms of this picture of our cosmos, we have undertaken two contemplative exercises designed to draw us towards God, our centre. We have meditated on what is "governed by reason"³⁵: nature and the angels.

A STEP BY STEP GUIDE FOR STUDENTS

Besides the image of God as the centre of moving concentric circles, we have another way to depict God's good government, a parable told by Maimonides. According to it, God cares for us by guiding us into the joy of his presence at the heart of his city. Our last meditation will be straight-forward and practical because we shall follow the directions Rabbi Moses gives his student so that he can find the gate in the king's palace, pass through it into the outer rooms, from these enter the inner chamber where the king is close at hand, and finally engage in face to face conversation with the king himself. It will be essential to remember that Maimonides wrote a guide for a student, just as the *Consolation* was for man who had been nursed by philosophy and, although he was a politician and statesman, lived as much as he could in her company. Consequently, the first direction Maimonides gives is to be serious and diligent in your studies.

Rabbi Moses lays out a step by step curriculum beginning with Mathematics and Logic, describing the students of these preliminary subjects as going "round about the palace in search of the gate."³⁶ After laying this basis Rabbi Moses tells his student "When you understand Natural Science, you have entered the hall; and when, after completing the study of Natural Philosophy [which is needed to understand the account of the Beginning in the Book of Genesis], you master Metaphysics [which you need to think rightly about God, his angels, and his providence], you have entered the innermost court, and are with the king in the same palace."³⁷ I am not at all demanding this particular course of studies so that you and I can enter the kingdom of heaven, God's rule, but, nonetheless, essential truths are given us in Maimonides' directions.

³⁵ *Cons.* I.vi.

³⁶ *Guide* III.51.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

First, our studies, religious duty, and movement by God's will are not opposed; they belong together. If our vocation lies in or requires study, we take this up as a calling from God. Second, the currently pervasive opinion that the sciences, indeed critical reason, have nothing to do with religious life, because it is all about doing and feeling not thinking, is false. Essential to our religion is a teaching, a doctrine, getting it right requires all the resources of revelation and reason. Third, because God and his angels are spiritual beings and address themselves to us as living souls, developing our powers of understanding is part of religion. Our studies, both by their character and by their content, teach us that the sensible and material are not the primary realities. True religion requires the reversal of our natural bias to confuse the bodily with the real; thinking about the causes and laws of nature begins this conversion. Aquinas, who follows Maimonides on the order and place of intellectual work for religion, tells us that, because it strengthens our reason, God uses the work of understanding to raise our minds to what is yet more difficult, what is above our reasonings, Himself.³⁸

In consequence, advance through the city and the palace to God can be represented, as Maimonides does, in terms of an order of scientific study, but for him, Boethius, their pagan predecessors, and their medieval successors, this intellectual progress must be paralleled by steps in the religious acts revealed by God. A part of the religious community will take both ways, most believers will practice religion without being intellectuals. Right worship of God requires that some members of the religious community bring serious devoted intellectual work and religion together, because images alone do not give us the truth about God. The reason for this will appear if we attend to the first direction Maimonides gives his student so that he may attain his goal. To be occupied with God, to have our attention filled with Him, or, in terms of the parable, conversing with the king face to face in his palace, Rabbi Moses directs: "The first thing you must do is this: Turn your thoughts away from everything while you read Shema."³⁹

The six Hebrew words of the Shema are familiar to every Jew because they form the centre of morning and evening prayer, their recitation is a religious obligation, and these words define Jewish faith. Significantly they are repeated by Jesus in rehearsing "the first and great commandment." The Shema is the first words the priest addresses to the congregation in the Anglican Eucharist: "Hear O Israel, The Lord our God is One Lord." (Deut. 6.4 and Mark 12.29).

There are two reasons that the faithful performance of this essential religious act requires that at least some members of the religious community unite intellectual labour with religion. First, and foremost, because attaining the idea that God is one, and understanding Scripture through this idea, require hard philosophical work. Literally, Scripture speaks of "gods" as well as the one God, and describes God in terms which imply division and multiplicity. He is portrayed in bodily terms as a figure with hands, arms, feet, a backside and a voice. He occupies a place in which he sits, and so on. Only hard reasoning will teach believers how to interpret this language as metaphorical, likenesses given to assist the weakness of our

³⁸ *Summa theologiae* 1.1.5 ad 2.

³⁹ *Guide* III.51.

understanding. So much for the first words “Hear O Israel, The Lord our God, the Lord is One.”

The second part of the Shema goes: “Thou shalt love the Lord with all thy heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy strength.” (Deut. 6.4&5 and Mark 12.29). The reference to mind was added by St Mark, and, evidently, Maimonides has it in its original form. Nonetheless, his doctrine makes the work of mind essential. He writes:

The Torah distinctly states that the highest kind of worship...is only possible after the acquisition of the knowledge of God. For it is said, “To love the Lord your God, and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deut. 11.13), and, as we have shown several times, man’s love of God is proportionate to his apprehension of Him. [What ‘apprehension’ means here we shall discover shortly]. The Divine worship enjoined in these words must, accordingly, be preceded by the love of God. Our Sages have pointed out to us that it is a service in the heart, which explanation I understand to mean this: we must concentrate all our thoughts on [God as what is the Highest] and first to be known, and devote ourselves exclusively to this as far as each of us has capacity.⁴⁰

Why? Well, to come to what we have spent these hours together seeking, because God’s care is his giving us ways to know and love him. As the benediction has it: the peace of God keeps our hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of him.⁴¹ This is the reward of our turning to him and his being our ward and protection from all evil. Hear Rabbi Moses:

Divine Providence is constantly watching over those who have obtained that blessing which is prepared for those who endeavour to obtain it. If man frees his thoughts from worldly matters, obtains a knowledge of God in the right way, and rejoices in that knowledge, it is impossible that any kind of evil should befall him while he is with God, and God with him. When he does not meditate on God, when he is separated from God, then God is also separated from him; then he is exposed to any evil that might befall him; for it is only this link with God that secures the presence of Providence and protection from evil accidents. Hence it may occur that the perfect man is at times not happy, whilst no evil befalls those who are imperfect; in these cases what happens to them is due to fortune. This principle I find also expressed in the Law: “And I will hide my face from them, and they shall be devoured, and many evils and troubles shall befall them: so that they will say in that day, Are not these evils come upon us, because our God is not among us?” (Deut. 31.17). It is clear that we ourselves are the cause of this hiding of the face, and that the screen that separates us from God is of our own creation. This is the meaning of the words: “And I will surely hide my face in that day, for all the evils which they shall have wrought” (Deut. 31.18). There is undoubtedly no difference in this regard between one single person and a whole community. It is now clearly established that the cause of our being exposed to fortune, and abandoned to destruction like cattle, is to be found in our separation from God. Those who have their God dwelling in their hearts, are not touched by any evil whatever.... “Acquaint now thyself with

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ See Num. 6.23-26.

him, and be at peace” (Job 22.21); i.e., turn unto Him, and you will be safe from all evil.⁴²

Everything depends on our strengthening the bond God gives us by his “overflow,” his binding himself to us by his endlessly variform revelation. We must lay hold of that that bond by love: “It will only become strong when you employ it in the love of God, and seek that love.”

One mode of turning to God is serious study, another is worship. However, religious acts build up our bond with God only when we perform them mindfully. We must actually attend to the meaning of what we do and to the God to whom we are offering them. Consequently, Maimonides gives his student lessons in paying attention. Attentiveness is the heart of spiritual life for him. We have already quoted his first direction: “Empty your mind of everything else while you read Shema [Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One].” Knowing how hard paying attention is Maimonides goes on: “When you have successfully practised this for many years, try, in reading Scripture or listening to it, to have all your heart and all your thought occupied with understanding what you read or hear.”⁴³ The realism Rabbi Moses exhibits here is comforting. If once a day we attended with our whole heart and mind to a single prayer like the Shema or the Lord’s Prayer, we would make extraordinary progress, but try it and you will discover why he says that attentive prayer takes years of work! On the simple foundation of a single attentive prayer repeated, mindfulness can be extended, first to other acts of worship and then to a further step: “When you are alone with yourself, when you are awake on your bed, be careful to meditate in such precious moments on nothing but the mental worship of God, viz., to approach Him and to minister before Him in the true manner which I have described to you.”

Beyond this there is a stage not ordinary, one which Bishop Jeremy Taylor in the 17th century called “erecting a chapel in your heart.” Gradually, by interior worship, we may be liberated from our external circumstances: “There may be an individual, who through his apprehension of the true realities and his joy in what he sees, achieves a state in which he talks with people and is occupied with his bodily necessities while his mind is wholly turned toward Him, may he be exalted...in a way described in the *Song of Songs*: ‘I sleep, but my heart waketh: it is the voice of my beloved that knocketh.’” (Song 5. 2).⁴⁴

Finally, our guide speaks of what may come in old age to a mind long exercised in worship: “The more the forces of his body are weakened, and the fire of the passions quenched, in the same measure does man’s spirit increase in strength and light; his knowledge becomes purer, and he is happy with his knowledge. When this perfect man is stricken in age and is near death, his knowledge mightily increases, his joy in that knowledge grows greater, and his love for the object of his knowledge more intense, and it is in this great delight that the soul separates from the body.” Thus death is said to happen by the kiss of God. In such a state, death itself is the work of God’s good Providence.

⁴² *Guide* III.51

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

The last two books of the *Consolation* are also devoted to Providence and, like the *Guide*, they too conclude with directions about prayer. In them we are reminded that precisely because our good and evil acts contain their own reward, faking will not work. Our prayer must be for what God wills, our hope must be rightly placed. Every recitation of the Lord's prayer reminds us of the structure of religious hope. "Our Father," we pray, "*thy* will be done." To be children of God we must make his will our own. Prayer and hope are indissolubly linked to right will: "*Thy* will be done, *thy* Kingdom come, on *earth* as it is in heaven."

As Boethius puts it: "Hope and prayers are not placed in God in vain; if they are of the right kind, they must be efficacious. . . . Lift up your mind to the right hopes, and put forth humble prayers on high." Boethius continues: "A great necessity is laid upon you, if you do not wish to deceive yourself, a great necessity for honesty when you act before the eyes of the judge who discerns everything."⁴⁵

God's care for us, his Providence is not external to our search for Him, our quest to know, and the urgency of our love. What God gives is Himself and his gift summons ours. This is a prayer to be governed by God's good Providence:

ALMIGHTY and everlasting God, give unto us the increase of faith, hope, and charity; and, that we may obtain that which thou dost promise, make us to love that which thou dost command. Amen.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ *Cons.* V.vi.

⁴⁶ Collect for the 14th Sunday after Trinity.