

Providence in the thinking of Karl Popper and David Jenkins

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It may seem incongruous to give a paper with a theological twist to a group dedicated to philosophy and education, especially in this place dedicated to enlightened atheistic humanism – though I did not note that the Conway Hall was originally a Unitarian Chapel.

However, my two protagonists David Jenkins and Karl Popper both described themselves as philosophers and both too were educationalists. David Jenkins taught in Oxford, directed the William Temple Association, and before becoming Bishop of Durham in 1984, was professor of theology at the University of Leeds. Sir Karl Popper too was of course a distinguished educationalist first in Vienna, then in New Zealand and from 1946-59 at the LSE.

This paper is based around the four Hensley Henson lectures which David Jenkins gave in Oxford in February and March 1987, which were delivered against a backdrop of controversy in the Church of England, particularly over the issue of the ordination of women which came to the General Synod of which Jenkins, by dint of his becoming Bishop of Durham two years earlier, was a member. Jenkins rarely gives citations or quotations in his work so it is often difficult to identify the particular influences on him, but one person he refers to more than once in his treatment of history and theology, and is clearly indebted to, is Karl Popper.

Stuff Happens

In 2004 David Hare's *Stuff Happens* was put on at the National Theatre. It was a play about the invasion of Iraq beginning with the preliminaries, the Bush-Blair meetings, the secret commitments made, the failed UN resolutions; then the invasion itself and briefly the aftermath leading to Abu Ghraib, and to Donald Rumsfeld's verdict on it that "stuff happens". In other words, history is piecemeal and inherently and sometimes darkly unpredictable.

David Jenkins shared this view and his favourite example of the place of chance in history was that of the Emperor Theodosius' horse falling from his horse and dying on the 28th July 450 CE.¹ As a result of this fortuitous event we have the Council of Chalcedon and thus the Chalcedonian Definition and the Christological understanding that is still the recognised template of Christian orthodoxy.² Unless this was somehow a direct divine intervention in history – and this would mean a holding a very crude view of a god who pushes people off their mounts - we owe this to pure circumstance and a related understanding of God and the world.

In this paper I plan to look at this "stuff happening" view of history – that it's just a series of events – through the eyes of Karl Popper and David Jenkins, and to suggest that, though up a point their views coincide, Jenkins, as a Christian philosopher-theologian, has to go beyond this to hold that there is some purpose, some meaning in history, what I will call a belief in providence. The question then is what this means and whether it is compatible with a contingent view of history.

Karl Popper

Karl Popper (1902-1994) saw the winter of 1919-1920 as the most significant of times, not because it was a time of peace after the war to end all wars, nor because it saw the end of the

¹ David Jenkins *God, Miracle and the Church of England* (London: SCM Press, 1987) p.46.

² 'On 16 July 450, Leo sent a Roman delegation to the East to give events a new turn by direct negotiations. To this delegation Leo again gave his *Tomus ad Flavianum*, this time with an anthology of extracts from the Fathers and his Epistles 69-71. The expected change, came however, not through the efforts of the delegation but with the sudden death of the Emperor Theodosius (28 July 450) and the accession of the Empress Pulcheria. The delegation was immediately able to reap the fruits of the new situation, as the *Tome of Leo* was now received with great reverence and carefully translated into Greek along with extracts of the Fathers. In this form it was promulgated at a synod of Constantinople on October 450.... And in Pulcheria, Leo found the help necessary for ordering the church of the empire and clarifying Christological belief'. Aloys Grillmeier *Christ in Christian Tradition* 2nd ed. (London: Mowbrays, 1975) p.529. Quoted in David Jenkins *God, Miracle and the Church of England* op.cit. p.45f..

devastating flu epidemic which had killed as many people as the war itself, but because it marked the real birth of the first Marxist-based state and his own secession from the Marxist party in Vienna after nine of his unarmed colleagues were shot in the street, and in Vienna too it was the time of Sigmund Freud and Alfred Adler. These two, Marxism and modern psychology, embodied all that Popper saw as dangerously false. Marxism for him was the prime example of the metanarrative being imposed on actual events, something which he traced back to Plato and through Hegel to all forms of modern totalitarianism. He called this 'historicism'. For Popper the historian's proper task is not to look for some hidden plot or prescribed course but to deal with history as it has happened, with each unique event: what he called 'situational logic'³. History is not in the business of finding 'The Path on which mankind is destined to walk; nor is it out to discover the Clue to History or The Meaning of History'.⁴ Rather, it is situational and piecemeal. It is to be centred on events, happenings, just as in his view science was concerned with experimentation and falsification and thus every scientific theory was always open to refutation. No scientific theory is written in stone. For Popper, the problem with historical theories was that they could not similarly be refuted.

[Likewise psychology at least as practised by Freud and Adler was based on the belief that what we call free rational thought was always controlled by inner unresolved conflicts and repressed desires. This he dubbed 'psychologism'. Jenkins was to follow Popper in his critique of Marxism and in his desire to stress the responsibility of the person.]

Popper laid out his ideas on history and psychology in the two volume *The Open Society and its Enemies* (1945) and in the more particular *Poverty of Historicism* (1944). In the latter he gives a series of reasons why history can never be regarded as a science, chief of which is that, unlike a scientific experiment, no historical event is repeatable; each is unique. It follows from this that history is unpredictable. He admits the possibility of discerning trends, but rules out the all-determining metanarrative of historicism, with its understanding of an overarching purpose or law working itself out in history and leading to a definite end. For Popper there are no laws of

³ On "script", Popper suggests that Hegel, for instance, looked on history as a lengthy Shakespearean play. (Karl R. Popper *The Open Society and its Enemies Vol.2* (4th edition, London: Routledge, 1962) p.258.

⁴ Karl Popper *ibid.* p.256.

history. So he quotes H.A.L. Fisher, writing after the cataclysm of the First World War, 'Men...have discerned in history a plot, a rhythm, a predetermined pattern...I can see only one emergency following upon another..., only one great fact with respect to which, since it is unique, there can be no generalizations...' ⁵ - a case, in other words, of 'stuff happens'. The historian writes with her or his point of view in interpreting events. This is inevitable but needs to be acknowledged, but contrary to the case with science, it can never be properly tested. In fact Popper saw all historical theories as circular in that they dictate that historical research must fit in with a preconceived point of view. ⁶ You might say the same is true in science – you begin with the hypothesis and then test it out – but the difference for Popper is that in the latter testing can be repeated and findings will always remain tentative and thus can always at some stage be falsified. As far as Popper sees it, this is not true of history or certainly of what he calls "historicism". We may challenge Popper's view. After all, it neglects the existence of sources and in the case of modern history, multiple sources, which can be compared and assessed, and tentative conclusions reached, and overridden by subsequent evidence. But his more fundamental point, and the one which David Jenkins was to embrace, was that much went under the name of history attempted to do more than look critically at happenings; it was concerned to make overarching claims and utopian predictions, and in doing so it was guilty of imposing an overt or concealed ideology on us. In doing so it took away the openness of the future and therefore our freedom to choose.

In some ways Popper's thought on history chimes with features of later post-modernism. In recognising the place of the point of view of the historian and the impossibility of having an Archimedean vantage point from which to assess historical events, he is rejecting the certainties of modernism with its concern for objectivity, disinterestedness, for the "facts", for "the truth". All history is interpretive and never literally true –so Gibbons' work tells us as much about Edward Gibbon as about the rise and fall of the Roman Empire. Along with this Popper is adamant that there is no place for the metanarrative: there is no overall or intrinsic meaning to be discovered. Also Popper and postmodernism share a suspicion of those historical

⁵ (H.A.L.Fisher A History of Europe (1935) vol.1 p.vii).

⁶ Karl R.Popper *The Open Society and its Enemies* Vol.2 op.cit p.263.

interpretations which are disguised forms of special interests and plays for power. Popper's weakness is in failing to see that this is not just true of what he calls historicism, the grand ideological narratives to which he is so opposed, but is also true of any form of history, so for instance the only form of history which he has time for, the more piecemeal and situational, could well be a guise for an individualistic capitalist society. The irony is that Popper is postmodern only up to the point when it comes to his own assumptions – for him these remain secure.

David Jenkins on History

As we have seen, David Jenkins followed Popper in the latter's refutation of historicism with its various attempts to give absolute weight to any overriding theory of history, whether that was Hegelianism or Marxism. As Jenkins says, such attempts at overarching views, demonstrate 'the impropriety of any argument which seeks to establish claims about the way things are going – or are being made to go – in history, "what is really going on" in history'.⁷ But it could be argued that the prime suspect here is Christianity with its overarching history of God and the world, evident in the New Testament, for instance in St. Paul's time of law, time of grace, time of waiting and final redemption, and in more recent understandings of salvation history. So inevitably in adopting Karl Popper's argument that history could not in itself be seen as having an overarching meaning or purpose would seem to put Jenkins at odds with a mainstream Christian understanding. Is there any way in which it is still possible to speak of providence or of God's working out his purpose, if history is nothing but a chapter of accidents, or at least without any discernible meaning outside very particular subsets?

As we have also seen, the danger of starting with some overall historical scheme is that we then choose the evidence to corroborate it. Jenkins, again turning to Popper, this time with the latter's scientific hat on, quotes him: '[i]f we are uncritical we shall always find what we want: for we shall look for, and find, confirmations, and we shall look away from, and not see, whatever might be dangerous to our pet theories. In this way it is only too easy to obtain what appears to be overwhelming evidence in favour of a theory which, if approached critically,

⁷ David Jenkins *God, Miracle and the Church of England* op.cit. p.65.

would have been refuted'.⁸ All history is necessarily selective, but church history for Jenkins, has been particularly so – 'all church history is bound to be propaganda', and consists in 'selective raids on the past'.⁹ Not only is it selective, but most of it is made up.¹⁰

Jenkins pleaded in Popperesque fashion that we use something akin to scientific discrimination in reading church history and recognise that all historical verdicts are always approximate and provisional. Without such a critical reading, we can easily fall into the temptation of taking one interpretation of history as absolute. So, for instance, many of the current disputes within the Church of England can be traced back to the Evangelical and Anglo-Catholic revivals of the nineteenth century. Both have often been lauded as having contributed to revivifying a fairly dormant church, but on the other hand from a modern perspective they could be seen as the progenitors of a divisive and generally inward-looking approach to faith: divisive because they were based on two very different interpretations of history, one which claimed a continuing faithfulness to Scripture, the other which stressed a doctrinal and ecclesiastical line of development; inward-looking because they were closed to critique (this is one of Popper's main contentions with historicism). As Jenkins saw it, the church was thus deprived '[o]f a central and community capacity to change and adapt to the realistic demands of Christian mission in an increasingly secularised and industrial century'.¹¹

So far Jenkins and Popper have walked together, but the former could not go along entirely with the latter's verdict on most Christian understandings of history – for Popper, speaking as an awowed rationalist and humanist, 'There is little in the New Testament to support this, but it is often considered a Christian dogma that God reveals himself in history; that history has a meaning, and that its meaning is the purpose of God'. 'This view', Popper concluded, 'is pure idolatry and superstition'.¹² History had no intrinsic meaning; only we could give it a meaning. So, '[i]nstead of posing as prophets, we must become makers of our faith'.¹³ As we have seen,

⁸ Karl Popper *The Poverty of Historicism* (2nd ed. London: Routledge, 1961) quoted in David Jenkins *God, Miracle and the Church of England* op.cit. p.51.

⁹ David Jenkins *God, Miracle and the Church of England* op.cit. p.50 & 54.

¹⁰ 'All history is made up and Christian history is made up more than most.' David Jenkins *ibid* p.56.

¹¹ *Ibid* p.53.

¹² Karl Popper *The Open Society and its Enemies* Vol.2 op.cit.p.258.

¹³ *Ibid* p.266.

Jenkins too is aware of the idolatry inherent in a historicism in which theologians claim to be able to interpret divine providence in some overall schema. Yet Jenkins as a Christian theologian cannot escape from giving particular weight to particular events and claiming that they have more than a subjective hold on us. The stories about Jesus and God's involvement in them are, Jenkins says, 'definitive for the Christian churches'.¹⁴ If this is so, then it is impossible to reconcile this with Karl Popper's view, encapsulated in Jenkins' own words warning against 'the impropriety of any argument which seeks to establish from the observation of unique or singular historical events a claim about the way things are going – or are being made to go – in history'.¹⁵

Providence

So how can a doctrine of providence – of God's purpose being worked out – be married with a 'stuff happens' view of history? Jenkins' answer is to suggest a 'weaker' view of providence, which would allow it to be acknowledge the unpredictability and accidents of history, including Theodosius's fatal fall. It would be one which ceased to think of God who "interferes" in the evolutionary process or in the outworkings of history. Instead he envisages some form of what he calls a 'structured space' in which interaction and transactions between persons and God can personally really occur'.¹⁶ I assume here that he is suggesting that the interaction between God and the world lies primarily (solely?) in the realm of human subjectivity, although I am sure that Jenkins would want to enlarge this to include interpersonal relations – God is both within and between persons. If we looked for biblical corroboration it would be found in such statements as 'the kingdom of God is within (or among) you' or 'Where two of three are gathered together, there am I in the midst'. Within Jenkins' 'structured space' the relationship between God and us is a co-operative enterprise of bringing about God's kingdom on earth. I would want to query whether we need such a 'structured space', especially if we cease to think of God as somehow a person separate from us, and instead opt for the intimacy of the Spirit within, or the indwelling motif of John's Gospel. Jenkins, as we have seen was faced with the

¹⁴ David Jenkins *God, Miracle and the Church of England* op.cit.p.68.

¹⁵ Ibid. p.65.

¹⁶ Ibid. p.73.

fundamental question of how any Christian doctrine of providence – of God’s purpose being worked out ‘as year succeeds to year’ – be married with a ‘stuff happens’ view of history?¹⁷ Jenkins’ answer is first to suggest a ‘weaker’ view of providence, which would allow it to be acknowledge the unpredictability and accidents of history, including Theodosius’s fatal fall. He proposed we should envisage some form of ‘structured space’ in which interaction and transactions between persons and God can personally really occur’.¹⁸ What this means to Jenkins is slightly opaque. It suggests that any human interaction with God lies in human subjectivity, though the weakness of this is that “ it’s all in the mind”, whereas Christian faith emphasises God’s universal presence, in the world in its entirety, and one belongs to the whole of creation and which predates the evolution of humanity, and also one which does not separate mind from body. In fact Jenkins’ own foundational belief in incarnation suggests that the “structured space”, must have an embodied form. This, for instance, is reflected in Jenkins’ oft-repeated emphasis on the necessity for the sciences and the arts to walk hand-in-hand; each needs the other, and a good theology enfolds both.¹⁹ Owen Barfield in one of his essays takes the analogy of prisoners in adjacent cells, one which may help illuminate this seeming dichotomy:

Perhaps each needs the clasp & support of the other in his half-blinded staggering towards the light. Perhaps there is not one prison cell but two: the non-objectifying subjectivity in which the humanities are immured, and the adjoining cell of subjectless objectivity, where science is locked and bolted; and maybe the first escape for the two prisoners...is to establish communication with one another.²⁰

¹⁷ Hymn: ‘God is working his purpose out’ Arthur C.Ainger, 1894.

¹⁸ Ibid. p.73.

¹⁹ ‘...the effects and products of the sciences have very often been understood and applied...in a fashion which implies a conflict between “scientific activity” and “imaginative activity”. Such an understanding and application is inhuman both in the sense that it does not do justice to the basic nature of these human activities, and in the sense that an acceptance and application of science which both lacks imagination and ignores the imaginative threatens human development.’ David E.Jenkins *What is Man?* (London: SCM Press, 1970) p.95.

²⁰ Owen Barfield ‘The Language of Discovery’ in *The Rediscovery of Meaning & Other Essays* (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan UP, 1977) p.140.

If Barfield and Jenkins are right then theology is best located in the in-between land that is neither wholly objective nor wholly subjective. This place where the objective and the subjective meet is of enormous importance. For Barfield this is analogous to a “game” in which experiment and theory (objective and subjective) can ‘escape from the prison of our fragmented language and our fragmented science – and ultimately the fragmented civilization they have produced’.²¹ Games and play are also central to the thought of Donald Winnicott, the child psychoanalyst, who talks of a “transitional” world, a space that is “outside, inside, at the border”.²² For Winnicott this is a space for play, one which begins with the interaction between mother and child, where the imagination is engaged and where the inner and external realities come together. It is this space, one Winnicott sees as replicated in good psychotherapy between therapist and patient, One that continues to be the place of creative activity. It is the space from which art, scientific inspiration and religion come. We could say that it is the place where good theology is done. It is, says Winnicott, the basis of all our experiential existence.²³ For Winnicott the space includes ‘transitional objects’ such as a ball of wool, or a blanket, or a tune or a rhyme, which serve to symbolise and make concrete the imaginative interplay between mother and child. He himself compares it to such symbolic transitional phenomena in religion, for instance the bread and wine of communion, which within the imaginary play-space of a church become the body and blood of Christ.²⁴ This links with Jenkins own understanding of his ‘structured space’ as being ‘located’ both within the individual’s own interior world, but also within the worship of the church community.

This “structured space” between mother and child is also the source of story, and as Jenkins sees it, the only way that this ongoing interaction between God and humanity and God and the world can be expressed is not in philosophical terms, but in narrative, through realising the human propensity for story and the basic instinct that we are all caught up in a personal story,

²¹ Owen Barfield *ibid* p.138.

²² D.W.Winnicott *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 1991) p.41.

²³ Donald Winnicott *ibid*.p.64.

Winnicott adds, ‘No longer are we either introvert or extrovert. We experience life in the area of transitional phenomena, in the exciting interweave of subjectivity and objective observation, and in an area that is intermediate between the inner reality of the individual and the shared reality of the world that is external to individuals’. *Ibid*.

²⁴ Donald Winnicott *ibid* p.6.

but one which is much wider than ourselves, in fact a story about the whole universe.²⁵ Jenkins goes on to say that '[T]he Christian story is one which leaves room for accident, for happenings, even for catastrophe, but always sets these within the framework of the establishment of the divine kingdom, to a 'divine-human project which is of lasting significance and promise'.²⁶

Such a story does not contradict history, but simply adds to our understanding of it. To substantiate this Jenkins turns to Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, in which MacIntyre wrote:

Unpredictability and teleology therefore coexist as part of our lives; like characters in a fictional narrative, we do not know what will happen next but nonetheless our lives have a certain form which projects itself towards our future. Thus the narratives which we live out have both an unpredictable and a partly teleological character'.²⁷

MacIntyre goes on to suggest that the real question is not that we live within a story – we all do so - but what particular story that is. There is no escape from narrative. MacIntyre quotes Barbara Hardy's words:[w]e dream in narrative, day-dream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative'.²⁸ But this all coexists with a world in which things just happen, with no clear meaning or end.

One of the problems of theories of providence is that they smack of the "best of all possible worlds" of Leibniz – "the world may be in an awful mess but it's all going to be all right", which easily becomes a case of the end justifying the means. As Karl Barth said: 'The doctrine of providence needs to work on bad days as well as good'.²⁹ This is where the turn to narrative helps for it enables us, as Jenkins realizes, to see God's involvement as dynamic, personal and

²⁵ 'The Christian story is ...not basically a religious story. In its basic insight and in its authentic movement it is a story about the whole universe and the possibilities of personal beings, including men and women, who emerge within that universe in relation to that divine possibility, presence and promise who is encountered or glimpsed in the God of the universe.' David E. Jenkins *God, Miracle and the Church of England* op.cit. p.94.

²⁶ Ibid p.93

²⁷ Alasdair MacIntyre 'After Virtue' (London: Duckworth, 1981) p.216 quoted in David Jenkins op.cit.p.96.

²⁸ Barbara Hardy *Towards a Poetics of Fiction: An Approach Through Narrative* (Novel, 2, 1968) p.5 quoted in Alasdair MacIntyre op.cit. p.211.

²⁹ Karl Barth *Church Dogmatics* III/3, p.297. Barth adds: 'For all we can tell, may not we ourselves praise Him more purely on bad days than on good, more surely in sorrow than in rejoicing, more truly in adversity than in progress?'

relational, such that God cannot be seen as dictating a plan according to some prior blueprint but as rather responding, and helping set right what has gone wrong. God is the mender, the rescuer, or, in an image from Thomas Aquinas which Jenkins develops, God is the artist who can somehow incorporate the contingent events of history, including the mistakes and imperfections, into a greater work of art - an analogy which Michael Langford also uses.³⁰ In other words, God becomes reactive to and in some respects dependent upon what has been made, and there is a genuine openness and unpredictability about the future. But, to use the analogy again, a Christian believes that we can trust the artist without having to see the whole picture; the problem with historicism including any religious grand narrative is that it claims more than we possibly know. All we can go on is our own experience where we can see God's work in the grace discovered in our lives, in friendship and compassion, in transformed lives, in righting of wrongs, in courage and patience and love.

The other problem with many doctrines of providence is that they suggest a gradual, even smooth, progress towards the fulfilment of God's purpose, whereas the actual experience is of individual lives and a wider world full of crises and discontinuities, of 'stuff happening'. Our lives are interrupted and according to John Baptist Metz, 'the shortest definition of religion is interruption'.³¹ It is perhaps at the level of the interruptions, the cracks, that we can find God, and with that something we might at least from the point-of-view of our own lives see as purposeful. Theology does not need to be wedded to the historicism inherent in now seemingly dated grand progressive views of Christian history of God working his purpose out as year succeeds to year. Such views have necessarily disintegrated with the traumatic events of the Twentieth Century. However, this does not mean that we are left bereft in a meaningless succession of events. Jenkins himself spoke of God ("meaning" or "hope" we might say) being fragmented in the world: 'It is precisely because God is involved in one damned thing after another that we have gospel'.³² In other words we find God in the particular events and

³⁰ Michael Langford *Providence* (London: SCM Press, 1981) p.89f. The image of God as an artist goes back to Thomas Aquinas: 'Since [God's] knowledge is related to things like that of an artist to his works of art...it must be that all things are set under his ordering'. Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologiae* 1a.22.1.

³¹ John Baptist Metz quoted in Lieven Boeve *Lyotard and Theology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014) p.125

³² David E. Jenkins *Still Living with Questions* op.cit. p.156.

happenings where in, as David Kleinberg-Levin has written on Samuel Beckett's plays: 'small epiphanies, hints and intimations, tiny traces, tiny openings, easily overlooked, ... something we might call "promise", is actually taking place'.³³

Conclusion

Popper followed by Jenkins ruled out any form of history based on an overriding theory or ideology. With this many formulations of providence can no longer be maintained. Yet people of faith at least, will continue to claim that they find a meaning and purpose in their lives which is not simply self-created. They will evidence happenings, events, relationships which reinforce this. Some no doubt will be dismissed as mere superstition, but it cannot be denied that this small-scale, personal understanding of providence continues to transform lives. This is in turn reinforced by the biblical suggestions, not only that God's ways are hidden and inscrutable, but are also to be discerned primarily in what is weak and powerless and in the paradigm of the crucified Christ. This emphasis is far from the historicism that Popper inveighed against and where the individual and the personal barely accounts at all. There are indeed theologies of providence which give an inevitability to history, but the one which Jenkins espouses has the tentative provisional character which Popper sees in science though with the hope, though not certainty, that finally all will be well.

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** The Conway Hall, Holborn, London is owned by the charity [Conway Hall Ethical Society](#) and was first opened in 1929. The name was chosen in honour of Moncure Daniel Conway (1832 – 1907), anti-slavery advocate, out-spoken supporter of free thought and biographer of Thomas Paine.*

The Hall now hosts a wide variety of lectures, classes, performances, community and social events. It is renowned as a hub for free speech and independent thought

³³ David Kleinberg-Levin *Beckett's Words: The Promise of Happiness in a Time of Mourning* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015) p.27.