



THE VIGILANT GOD

HORTON
DAVIES

Providence in the Thought of
Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, and Barth
SECOND EDITION

The Vigilant God by Horton Davies, a non-conformist minister who taught in the Religion Department of Princeton University and attended church regularly, is a reconsideration of the belief that God is still active in history. It is a reassessment of the theology of Providence in the thought of four major Christian theologians (Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, and Barth) and of their views on predestination, theodicy, and free will, leading the author to consider the role it might have for the future of humanity.

The book starts with a sketch of the biblical sources relating to Providence, predestination, election, and reprobation. Davies sees Augustine's doctrine of Providence and his view of evil as *privatio boni*, as greatly influenced by Plato and his followers. He dwells on Aquinas the man, his life and his character, open to Aristotle and his Jewish and Arab commentators, before plunging into the structure of his encyclopedic thought and works. Davies appreciates Calvin's regard for Scripture as a means of illumination of the Spirit, but rejects the pastor's views on predestination as tyrannical and unjust, and believes that Barth's positive insistence on God's universal mercy is necessary against the horrors perpetrated in the twentieth century.

"Horton Davies was a remarkably wide-ranging historian of the Christian Church, one who was just as alert to the roles of liturgy and arts and music as he was to doctrinal controversies. This little book is a masterful account of how an earnest Christian scholar has been shaped by, and has struggled with, his theological inheritance."—David B. McIlhiney



HORTON DAVIES (1916–2004), D.D., D.Phil., D. Lit., Edinburgh and Oxford, ministered in London during the war, and founded the Religion Department at Grahamstown, South Africa (1946–1953). Invited, he first returned to Mansfield College, Oxford, to chair its Department of Ecclesiastical History and then to Princeton University's Religion Department until he retired in 1984. The author of some thirty-five books, including the six-volume *Worship and Theology in England*, for which he was given the prestigious Oxford D.Phil. degree, Dr. Davies started painting in his free moments, a hobby that he took up full time from 1984 to 2004.

Advance Praise for *The Vigilant God*

"*The Vigilant God* is a mature scholar's return to the theological traditions that shaped his life and work. Horton Davies focuses on four great figures of that tradition—Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, and Barth—giving particular attention to the place of Election in each. This book comes most fully alive in the last two sections, those on Calvin and Barth, for these two biblical theologians have had the greatest influence on the author's own formation. Calvin is a better expositor of Scripture than Augustine, Davies argues, partly because the Genevan makes Scripture, rather than the Church, the final authority for Christian theology. But the admirer of Calvin is left with the burden of double predestination, a doctrine that, at least to modern sensibility, makes God seem unjust and that ultimately makes human virtue impossible. Davies believes that Barth has largely resolved this dilemma by moving the focus of God's Election from the individual soul to Christ himself.... Davies was a remarkably wide-ranging historian of the Christian Church, one who was just as alert to the roles of liturgy and arts and music as he was to doctrinal controversies. This little book is a masterful account of how an earnest Christian scholar has been shaped by, and has struggled with, his theological inheritance."—*David B. McIlhenny*

"Horton Davies, one of the most distinguished church historians in his generation, is best known for his multi-volume magnum opus, *Worship and Theology in England*. Among his many lesser-known books, *The Vigilant God*, stands out as perhaps the most enduring and moving. Its topic is the providential governance of humankind in an essentially good world that has been set out of whack by sin. Its conversation partners are among the greatest theologians who have put pen to paper over the ages."—*Jeffrey L. Stout, Princeton University*

"'Providence,' God's careful ruling the course of the world and the life of every person, is one of the most underestimated topics in contemporary theology and philosophy of religion but eminently significant when people must face disturbing times and inscrutable incidents. Horton Davies, the internationally renowned theologian and historian, evaluates in his comprehensive comparison four outstanding conceptions, clarifies misleading ideas, and rediscovers indispensable questions to be answered in trustworthy ways."—*Gerhard Sauter, Professor Emeritus of Systematic and Ecumenical Theology, University of Oxford*

"In a balanced and judicious critique of four major Christian theologians, Horton Davies probes the viability of faith in a supposedly omnipotent and benevolent God who presides over a world full of corruption and suffering. He thoughtfully highlights ideas that offer not solutions to perennial questions but rather encouragement for further reflection on human existence, compassion, and wisdom."—*Henry Warner Bowden, Rutgers University*

"This welcome new edition of *The Vigilant God*, a title invited by Psalm 121, is not without a touch of irony, at any time, least of all in our own. Horton Davies declares, '...in these days of our confusion.' The concern is theodicy in terms of the doctrine of Providence in Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, and Barth. Davies boldly, unpretentiously, and wisely offers the approachableness of the giants."—*David Cain, University of Mary Washington*

The Vigilant God

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Horton Davies

The Vigilant God

Providence in the Thought
of Augustine, Aquinas,
Calvin, and Barth,
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Compiled by Marie-Hélène Davies



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FOREWORD

Horton Davies, born in 1916, was raised a Calvinist, and to the end of his life he never abandoned the central doctrine of that conviction—the vast chasm between God and God’s creation. Yet unlike many Calvinists, he brought to his study of the Church a deep aesthetic sensibility, an appreciation for the roles that music, art, and drama play in transcending that chasm. In his first book, *The Worship of the English Puritans* (1948), Davies showed British free churchmen that, far from abandoning ritual, had developed a rich liturgical tradition of their own. Understanding worship as the central expression of the Christian faith became the theme that animated many of Davies’s thirty-five books.

The Vigilant God is this mature scholar’s return to, and re-evaluation of the theological traditions that shaped his life and work. He focuses on four great figures of that tradition—Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, and Barth—comparing their views, giving particular attention to the place of providence and election in each.

While he celebrates Augustine as “the greatest theological teacher of Western Christianity,” as any Protestant scholar must, Davies criticizes the saint for his negative view of sexuality and his resultant legalism. He acknowledges Aquinas as “the greatest theologian of the Middle Ages who is still

widely read,” but while he deeply appreciates the glory of Catholic worship, he is clearly less sympathetic to St. Thomas’s grounding in natural and philosophical theology.

This book comes most fully alive in the last two sections, those on Calvin and Barth, for these two biblical theologians have had the greatest influence on the author’s own formation. Calvin is a better expositor of Scripture than Augustine, Davies argues, partly because the Genevan makes Scripture, rather than the Church, the final authority for Christian theology. But the admirer of Calvin is left with the burden of double predestination, a doctrine that, at least to modern sensibility, makes God seem unjust and that ultimately makes human virtue impossible.

Davies believes that Barth has largely resolved this dilemma by moving the focus of God’s Election from the individual soul to Christ himself. In Barth’s words, “[Christ] is rejected in order that we might not be rejected.” This is a far less individualistic reading of Scripture, as well as one that leaves open the possibility of universalism. Davies writes, “The immense relief that Barth’s reconsideration of Predestination brings is almost entirely due to this removal of the tyranny or the injustice of God.”

Horton Davies was a remarkably wide-ranging historian of the Christian Church, one who was just as alert to the roles of liturgy, and arts, and music as he was to doctrinal controversies. This little book is a masterful account of how an earnest Christian scholar has been shaped by, and has struggled with his theological inheritance.

David B. McIlhiney
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Horton Davies, Princeton
January, 1992

INTRODUCTION

If the road to Hell is paved with good intentions, then the road to Heaven is paved with failed theodicies discarded by faith. Milton, even in the mid-seventeenth century, felt able to “justify the ways of God to man” despite his suffering through blindness, while most recent theologians have abandoned the task, at least in the traditional terms advanced by Augustine, Aquinas and Calvin.

This book is an investigation of the strengths and weaknesses of the traditional defenses of the rule of God, views which many contemporary theologians have discarded too rapidly. The latter argue that it is not in natural theology amenable to reason, but in the revelation of God in Christ and in His Incarnation, Cross and Resurrection, that faith is warranted and sustained despite sin, suffering, doubt, and death. Anselm’s conviction: *Credo ut intelligam* (I believe that I may understand) seems much more convincing in our day than the parading of five arguments for the existence of God, which Aquinas provided in his *Summa Theologiae*—itself an admirable rational and philosophical theology which has not outlived its medieval usefulness, as the twentieth century Thomists have shown. These five “ways” (*quinque viae*) at best led to the conviction that it was reasonable to believe in the existence of God, but they said little positively about the nature of God whose

existence they affirmed. However, in medieval civilization, they corroborated the Biblical assertion "The fool hath said in his heart there is no God." This was good for the three monotheistic faiths of the Middle East and Europe—Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Moreover, Aquinas showed convincingly that the works of 'the philosopher', Aristotle, many of whose writings were rediscovered in the thirteenth century, were not necessarily a menace to faith, but could be employed in Christian apologetical theology.

The difficulties of both a Platonic-Augustinian and an Aristotelian-Thomist doctrine of providence, in our time, have, however, forced many believers to become rigid fideists, basing their conviction on the infallibility of Holy Writ, while others find the problem intellectually insoluble, but practically acceptable through faith.

John S. Whale, a Neo-Orthodox Congregationalist, in his book, *The Christian Answer to the Problem of Evil*, says flatly: "... strictly speaking the problem is insoluble."¹ Albert Outler, a noted American Methodist theologian, outlines some of the difficulties in a doctrine of providence formulated on the old lines: "We can no longer argue for a doctrine that portrays providence as a divine genie, favoring the favored, or unrolling the script of history, with sneak previews as special service for the sharp-eyed and knowledgeable."² Even a Reformed theologian, proud of his Calvinist heritage, Theodore Plantinga, confesses: "I do not believe that those who seek a theodicy or a theoretical solution to the problem of evil will find it in Calvinism—or anywhere else for that matter ... Thus Calvinism responds to the problem of evil with an eschatology rather than a theodicy."³

It will be observed that the appeal to eschatology is an appeal not to reason, but to special revelation based on the promises of life in the hereafter. The Anglican theologian Maurice Wiles, after asserting that the problem of evil is the Achilles heel of Christian theism, insists that the atrocities of the twentieth century have exacerbated the problem psychologically, if not theoretically, and asks: "Is it possible ... to do theology after Auschwitz and Hiroshima? And if it is, must not that theology eschew the task of theodicy altogether?"⁴ The term 'theodicy', it should be recalled, etymologically means to affirm the righteousness of God, and it is used by thoughtful Christians who believe that they must affirm the inscrutability and mystery of God's ways. The French Reformed theologian Paul Ricoeur, referring to the Book of Job, which encourages accepting what cannot be understood, asserts that the death of providence must be accepted and hence "the path of theodicy has been closed off."⁵ But even he, while denying that God controls every