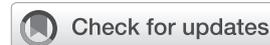


The doctrine of providence in South African theologies: Historical formation

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Dates:

Received: 29 July 2025

Accepted: 27 Aug. 2025

Published: 19 Sept. 2025

How to cite this article:

Kotzé, M., 2025, 'The doctrine of providence in South African theologies: Historical formation', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 46(1), a3610. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v46i1.3610>

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Providence can be described as God's ongoing and enduring relationship to creation, through which God preserves, guides and governs all that exists. Accordingly, it is one of the most personal doctrines through which Christians affirm that God not only remains present and involved in God's creation but also in our own lives. In this article, I examine the doctrine of providence in the South African theological landscape prior to 1994. To start with (first section), I briefly look at the way in which some of the most influential doctrines of providence have been developed throughout history. Thereafter (second section), I then turn specifically to the South African context and the reception of the doctrine of providence in South African theologies prior to 1994.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The Reformed theology of the Cape colony of the late 1600s and onwards, as well as the later belief of the 'Volk' as a category with supernatural meaning through the doctrine of providence that developed in the 1900s, is examined in the third section, as well as different South African responses to these notions. In the conclusion, I turn to the importance and relevance of providence for doing theology in present-day South Africa.

Keywords: providence; reception history; church history; creation; South African theology.

Introduction

Like creation, the doctrine of providence is an article of faith. If creation is God's originating work regarding the universe, then providence can be said to be God's ongoing and enduring relationship to creation, through which God preserves, guides and governs all that exists. In this context, it is one of the most personal doctrines through which Christians affirm that God not only remains present and involved in God's creation but also in our own lives.

Providence has its roots in the Latin *providere*, 'to foresee', which also contains the implication of acting carefully and preparing for the future (Erickson 2013:355). The doctrine of providence reflects on themes, both abstract and dogmatic, that are also profoundly existential in the overlap of philosophy, systematic theology and pastoral theology (Fergusson 2010:261). Rather than biblical language, the influence of ancient philosophy has had a profound influence on both the linguistic eminence and substantial content of providence in Christian theology (Fergusson 2016:262). That is not to say that there are no biblical grounds for the doctrine of providence, with providence as God's preservation and maintaining of creation being found in numerous passages, such as the Son 'sustaining all things by his powerful word' (Heb 1:3), and God also providing for human beings (Mt 6:31–33). Providence as God's governing action is also prevalent in Scripture, and the power of God over nature is extolled in many Psalms:

I know that the Lord is great, that our Lord is greater than all gods. The Lord does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths. He makes clouds rise from the ends of the earth; he sends lightning with the rain and brings out the wind from his storehouses. (Ps 135:3–7)

At the heart of the doctrine of providence Leith (1993) explains that it:

[I]s the conviction that the God whom we know in Jesus Christ is also the God who is personally active in nature and in history and in governing not only the affairs of the world but also the affairs of human life. (p. 82)

In this article, I will be looking at the doctrine of providence in the South African theological landscape prior to 1994. In the first section, I briefly look at the way in which some of the most influential doctrines of providence have been developed throughout history. In the second section, I then turn specifically to the South African context and the reception of the doctrine of providence

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in South African theologies prior to 1994. The Reformed theology of the Cape colony of the late 1600s and onwards, as well as the later belief of the 'Volk' as a category with supernatural meaning through the doctrine of providence that developed in the 1900s, is examined in the third section, as well as different South African responses to these notions. In a future article, contemporary scholarship in South Africa since 1994 on the theme of providence will be expanded on. In the conclusion, I turn to the importance and relevance of providence for doing theology in present-day South Africa.

A (brief) historical account of the doctrine of providence

One of the first earnest efforts of establishing a theology of providence can be attributed to Irenaeus, who set his theology of providence between creation and the final judgement. Irenaeus understood providence as concerning the salvific work of God in Christ, bringing all of creation to its consummation. It is therefore the work of God in history (Dempsey 2016:111). As all things are created through Christ, 'it is Christ who will guide and sustain all creatures to bring to perfection' (Dempsey 2016:112). Providence is also more than individual and extends to the social and political sphere, where not only the lives of individuals, but also political and social institutions are transformed through Christ's redeeming work.

Also setting his theology of providence between the Fall and redemption, Origen is the first to address the theodicy problem, although he does not refer to it as such. Providence in Origen's thought is concerned with solving the conflict between the absolute goodness of God on the one hand, and the reality of evil on the other. The two main notions that he employs in this theological vision is God's goodness and equal love for all creatures, and the free will of rational creatures. In endeavouring to resolve these two ideas, he contends that we cannot attribute the presence of both good and evil in creation to God, but that it is the rejection of the good that results in evil (Dempsey 2016:113). Origen sees the compatibility of God's goodness and human free will in providence in that the choices of human result in their punishment or reward: 'Here we see the just judgment of God's providence is taken into account and each is treated according to the deserts of his departure and defection of goodness' (Origen 2013:61). While more complex notions of theodicy such as natural evil are not addressed in Origen's theology of providence, it sets the tone for later grappling with the presence of suffering and evil in the world.

For Augustine, although it remains mostly hidden, God's providence is active in individual lives and history at large. He uses his own biography as an example, noting how through his own free choices and actions, God guided the course of his life to God's purpose. In reflecting on suffering in the world, Augustine notes that these events are a result of creatures abusing their freedom, and not caused by God. However, this does not mean that God does not permit such events to occur or utilises them in order to achieve God's

purpose (Migliore 2004:122). God's sovereignty is such that God can bring good even from that which is evil and damaging; 'By the ineffable mercy of God even the penalty of man's offense is turned into an instrument of virtue' (Augustine *City of God*:13.4.).

Augustine has a dual understanding of providence, with the *providentia naturalis* on the one hand, referring to the natural order of plants and animals, and the *providentia voluntaria* on the other hand, referring to the work of God when it comes to rational creatures such as human beings. God's providence in Augustinian thought works according to the nature of the creature (Dempsey 2016:117). Augustine holds the comprehensive foresight of God in tension with human free will to make decisions and notes that human choices are within the 'order of causes that propel history forward' (Maxfield 2002:357). The affirmation of both God's foreknowledge and human choice is a key component of Augustine's understanding of the fallen nature of humanity. While he emphasises free will and human choice, Augustine also argues for God's direct control of history and the will, which goes against his own claim that the development of history is not the work of providence (Dempsey 2016):

Hence, even if we agree that sin arises from a defective will and that God is not responsible for actions God does not prevent, all the good within history is attributed to the divine benevolence and thus to providence. (p. 120)

For Aquinas, God is the primary cause of everything that exists, and secondary causes, created beings, are unable to act if not by the primary cause. Thus, every action by a secondary cause is produced by the primary cause. In this way, Aquinas stresses God's continued action in creation, without assimilating the actions of creatures into the acts of God (Silva 2014:280). One of the ways in which God acts in nature is through natural agents, sometimes by employing the fundamental power of the natural agent to act in a way that accomplishes a natural effect and others in a way that an effect is accomplished that is beyond the natural agent's causal power (Silva 2014:282). Because God 'orders all beings to its end', God's providence 'reaches all created beings' (Silva 2014:285). This includes the entirety of creation, as well as individual events. Aquinas also connects grace with 'God's larger providential ordering of the cosmos and specific order of the elect to eternal life' (Colberg 2016:192). Aquinas starts his reflection on God's providence by remarking that:

It is necessary to attribute providence to God. For all the good that is in created things has been created by God, as was shown above. In created things good is found not only as regards their substance, but also as regards their order towards an end and especially their last end, which, ... is the divine goodness. This good of order existing in things created, is itself created by God. (Aquinas *Summa Theologiae* 1.22.1 c.)

God, therefore, has a purpose for all creation in Aquinas's view, and accordingly, God directs creation towards that end.

There are two elements to God's providential action in the thought of Aquinas, planning and executing the said plan.

'The planning, ordering, or disposition corresponds to God's intelligence, while the execution corresponds to God's will' (Silva 2014:287). God continues to be active in creation through God's will and intelligence, and divine action is therefore always intentional.

Calvin's doctrine of providence emphatically confirms God's rule over all events, challenging any notion that events take place by fortune, accident or impulse (Migliore 2004:122). 'God's secret plan', Calvin remarks, governs all events and 'nothing happens except what is knowingly and willingly decreed by God' (Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, 1.16.2). In Calvin's understanding, not only does God 'nourish us by his goodness', but God also 'supports us by his power', 'governs us by his providence', and 'attends us with all sorts of blessings' (Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, 1.2.1). Both nature and the course of history is decreed by God, directing everything through God's impenetrable wisdom and towards God's own purpose (Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, 1.16.4). This, however, does not mean that providence is akin to fatalism for Calvin, and although God remains the 'first cause' of all that exists, we should also look to the 'second causes'. Human beings have the God-given reason to foresee and act with prudence (Migliore 2004:122). For Calvin, life should be lived with the cognisance that all events, whether ordinary or a more direct act of God, is God's act (Leith 1993:85). God's providence is in fitting with the creation over which God exercises it; God does not deal in a similar way with human beings as with inanimate aspects of creation like stone or wood, but God treats us as persons with free will, minds and affections (Leith 1993:86). This echoes the similar notion found in the work of Augustine, as mentioned earlier.

Initially, Calvin discussed providence together with predestination. However, in the final edition of the Institutes:

[H]e discussed predestination at the conclusion of the Christian life. This location seems to suggest his conviction that predestination is best understood as one looks back over one's experience and reflects that God's grace preceded every human action. (Leith 1993:83)

Closely related to the doctrine of providence is the theodicy problem, where God's omnipotence and God's goodness appear in contrast to our lived reality; the classical understanding of God's omnipotence is that nothing is impossible for God to do, while God's goodness implies that God wants what is good for God's creation, including human beings. If God then wants what is good for us, and is able to do anything, there is no rational answer to the question of why evil exists and bad things happen for seemingly no reason. The theodicy problem is a problem of how providence, God's maintaining and preserving of creation, is understood. For the purposes of this article, taking note of this is important, but it will not be further examined, as it is not a main focus in the doctrine of providence in South African theologies discussed in the following section.

The doctrine of providence in South African theologies prior to 1994

Providence in the 1600–1800s

The implications of theological interpretations, including that of the doctrine of providence, in South Africa prior to 1994 were extensive and far-reaching. Particularly the political consequences and the effect that these interpretations had on racial relations, leading to the eventual legislation of racial separation in the form of apartheid, is of note in this section. While the seeds of what would later become apartheid and Apartheid theology are mostly found more explicitly in the interpretations of other doctrines, most notably the doctrine of creation and the doctrine of ecclesiology, including the sacraments, the doctrine of providence often overlaps these other loci.

Christianity, in particular Reformed theology and church life, was a formative factor in the development of South African society after the Dutch East India Company's establishment of a half-way station at the Cape in 1652 and the arrival of the first permanent minister in 1665. The newly established Dutch Reformed Church practised a near monopoly of the new colony's Christian representation (Gerstner 1997:16). This included the way that the doctrine of providence was understood. In this regard, the related doctrines of God's sovereignty and predestination are of special note. While predestination might be discussed in more detail under the heading of soteriology, inasmuch as it can be viewed as the theological anthropological expression of providence, God being in control also of human history, it bears a mention here.

The Dutch settlers in South Africa, facing uncertainties in a new land, were spiritually strengthened by their trust in a sovereign God, a God who remains in control of eternity, as well as the slightest minutiae of life. The Heidelberg Catechism (1563), one of the prominent confessional documents of both the early and modern Dutch Reformed Church, voices this perspective, noting that:

[H]erbs and grass, rains and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, yea, all things come not by chance, but by his fatherly hand.¹

Similarly, salvation was also not perceived to come by chance, but by the sovereign God who guides all things to God's eternal purpose and who also elects those who are to be saved (Gerstner 1997:17–18). As a result of their understanding of predestination, Dutch colonists were convinced of their eternal salvation because of God's covenant with their ancestors and God's sovereignty and providence. Accordingly, they 'embraced Christianity as an exclusive and inherited religion which shored up their group boundaries, nurtured their sense of superiority, and laid the basis of a white-dominated racial order' (Elphink 1997:2).

Being Christian was viewed as closely related to ethnic descent and together with the concept of the 'thousand-

1. Heidelberg Catechism, 1563, answer to question 27.

generation covenant', which held that any child born with a Christian ancestor within the past thousand generations was considered part of the elect, virtually all people of European descent were seen to be included in God's covenant and, by God's providence, redeemed. Exceptions to this included those of Jewish descent and those labelled 'heathens' (Gerstner 1997:24–25). As all indigenous people in South Africa were categorised as heathens by the translation of the States Bible, widely used in this period (Gerstner 1997:22), the implications for racial relations in the early church and colony are clear.

The thousand-generation covenant is also clear in the different baptismal practices for infants and adults in the early Dutch Reformed Church. As opposed to the requirements for infant baptism, where parents were asked to follow the faith of Scripture and the Apostles' Creed and in a public confession affirm their adherence to Christian doctrine, adults were asked to make an extensive statement, which also included a statement on God's providence (Gerstner 2021:199). The doctrine of providence thus played an important role in the understanding of salvation, both for those who were understood to be saved by providence through coming to the faith as adults.

The influence of Reformed piety was not only visible in the church life of the early colony, but also held political sway. For example, a day of public confession for sin was proclaimed by Jan Van Riebeeck when an epidemic was perceived as punishment of the sovereign God (Gerstner 1997:24). A similar notion of God's providence being enacted through God's direct involvement in human affairs, and more specifically, God's punishment for unfaithfulness was still held towards the end of the following century. Early London Missionary Society missionaries Johannes Theodorus Van Der Kemp and James Read viewed God's providence as involving God also acting and punishing through nations. Van der Kemp in particular described the Third Frontier War (1799) as the vengeance of God, where the indigenous people became the instruments of God's wrath (Elbourne & Ross 1997:37).

In 1833, after the abolishment of slavery, many disenchanted Afrikaners made the decision to move further inland, away from British rule. Anna Steenkamp provided her reasons for participating in this Great Trek as 'the shameful and unjust proceedings with reference to the freedom of the slaves'. She clarified, however, that (De Gruchy & De Gruchy 2005):

[I]t is not their freedom that drove us to such lengths, as their being placed on an equal footing with Christians, contrary to the laws of God and the natural distinction of race and religion, so that it was intolerable for any decent Christian to bow beneath such a yoke; wherefore we withdrew in order to preserve our doctrines in purity. (pp. 18–19)

The laws of God and the natural order as part of the doctrine of providence would come to fore again much stronger in later interpretations in South African theology, where the doctrine of creation was utilised to make what Steenkamp referred to

as the natural distinction of race into legislation. During the Great Trek, however, providence was also understood as the deep correlation between the exodus of Israel and their experiences of challenges in the wilderness and the hindrances faced by the trekkers. Doubting in the divine providence that made it possible for them to overcome any obstacle by their determination and weaponry, was viewed as blasphemy (De Gruchy & De Gruchy 2005:20). Similar to the way that providence was seen as tied to the salvation of a particular group of people in the early Cape colony, providence during the Great Trek was seen as God's guidance and protection for a particular group at the expense of others.

Providence in South African theology in the 1900s

Prior to 1994, the way that the doctrine of providence was understood contributed to profound socio-political implications. The role played by interpretations of providence in the growth of so-called Christian nationalism in Germany in the 1930s has been widely remarked on (Berkouwer 1952:162ff; Erickson 2013:276; Ziegler 2009:314–317). The notion of the 'Volk' as a category with supernatural meaning through the doctrine of providence can be seen in, for example, the composing of new psalms, commending the 'Nazi revolution as God's providential gift' (Ziegler 2009). Lyrics included such statements as:

You have led us throughout our history according to your counsel and your will [...] lately you have saved us from the enslaving chains of people of alien blood and alien race; send us the Führer to lead his Germany in faith into the young dawn. (p. 315)

Providence was used as propaganda in a similar manner in the 1940s and 1950s in South Africa. The rise of apartheid and Apartheid theology included its own stress on the 'Volk', where moral and spiritual capital was drawn from an understanding of providence captured by ideology (Deist 1994:16, 20). Political figures such as J.B.M. Hertzog and D.F. Malan were certain that Afrikaner Nationalism was the way to a safe future and endeavoured to uphold and preserve a separate Afrikaner identity that was distinct from both the English community in South Africa and those of 'non-European descent' (De Gruchy & De Gruchy 2005:28). Malan, a former Dutch Reformed minister who became Prime Minister in 1948, pronounced the history of the Afrikaners in South Africa as 'the greatest masterpiece of the centuries', noting that (De Gruchy & De Gruchy 2005):

[W]e hold this nationhood as our due for it was given to us by the Architect of the universe ... The last hundred years have witnessed a miracle behind which must lie a divine plan. Indeed, the history of the Afrikaner reveals a will and a determination which makes one feel that Afrikanerdom is not the work of men but the creation of God. (p. 30)

The doctrine of providence, in particular the acknowledgement that God governs and guides and remains actively involved in God's creation through natural laws overlaps with the doctrine of creation in an essential development in theology in South Africa. H.G. Stoker's 'Skeppingsidee' (Idea of Creation)

established in the 20 years leading up to 1948, when apartheid was formally legislated was the focal notion of his theological and philosophical understanding of creation. Knowledge and morality in this all-inclusive way of considering the world conforms to the order of creation. In Stoker's view, apartheid education determinedly maintained the comprehensive philosophy of lawful creation and as a result, he also encouraged separate universities for different racial groups, speaking out against what he perceived as liberal notions of freedom, which to his mind restrained 'group relations' by misguidedly emphasising individual autonomy and racial integration (Klaaren 1997:372–373). In this perspective, the doctrine of providence was primarily understood as all of creation existing under God's law.

Stoker's view of creation, which included a particular emphasis on the preservation and providence of God, offered the structure for the theological legitimization of Afrikaner Nationalism, but also the racial policies it would put into place (De Gruchy & De Gruchy 2005):

God willed the diversity of Peoples. Thus far He has preserved the identity of our People. Such preservation was not for naught, for God allows nothing to happen for naught. He might have allowed our People to be bastardized with the native tribes as happened with other Europeans. He did not allow it [...] He has a future task for us, a calling laid away. (p. 31)

It would be amiss to not mention, however, that there were also White theologians at the time, including Afrikaner theologians,² who did not conform to these views. One such example is Johan Heyns, who in his perspective on the church 'shared the traditional Afrikaner emphasis on creation' (Klaaren 1997:374), although he differed in the interpretation thereof. Heyns emphasised three prior means of the always active Word of God, namely creation, providence and salvation, and in doing so, highlighted the sovereign kingdom of God in which no particular group of people or nation can be termed 'an ordinance of creation' (Klaaren 1997:374).

Within the English-speaking Christian community, a prominent voice was that of John De Gruchy. The presence of God in history also featured in De Gruchy's discussion of the kingdom of God, which he defines as the reign of God in the human heart, as well as in the person of Jesus Christ and human history. The kingdom of God, he continues, 'is both present and future, inward and outward, spiritual and apocalyptic' (De Gruchy 1986:198).³ Where this interpretation differs from that of, for example, Stoker, is that rather than focusing on God's providence on the preservation of a particular group, De Gruchy discusses the kingdom of God as an eschatological concept. He also voices his criticism against the manner in which 'the kingdom of God has been distorted, not only in South Africa but also in America and

2. Individuals such as Nico Smith, Beyers Naudé and Willie Jonker serve as striking examples in this regard, but because of the focus on the doctrine of providence in this article, their work will not be elaborated on further.

3. I deliberately make use of the second edition of De Gruchy's *The church struggle in South Africa*, published prior to 1994. The first edition was published in 1979, a mere 3 years after the Soweto Uprising of 16 June 1976. In the publication of the second edition, the bibliography and notes were expanded, but the text remained unchanged.

other countries' (Dreyer 2019:5). Referring explicitly to the way that the doctrine of providence has been twisted by imperialism and nationalism, De Gruchy refers to the 'quasi-sacred' sacred character that is placed on national history where particular groups are viewed as having a divine calling. This is carried out from a place of power and keeping racial and ethnic groups separate is seen as obeying the providence as God, whereas going against this line of thinking is categorised as 'unchristian' (De Gruchy 1986:201–202). Following Barth, De Gruchy also remarks that in separating the doctrine of providence from Christology, we arrive at 'a false belief in our own history' (Dreyer 2019:5). Unlike other dominant theologies of the time in South Africa, where providence was interpreted as the election of a specific group of people to rule over others, De Gruchy (1986) emphasises the:

[T]he church is not called to rule the world, neither is the church called to redeem the world. The church is not the kingdom, nor is it the Christ; its responsibility is to bear witness to, not to replace them. (p. 223)

Also, particularly worth noting is his statement that in serving the kingdom's interest in the world, 'the church is called to identify with the powerless' (De Gruchy 1986:224). In this manner De Gruchy goes very much against the grain of dominant White theology in South Africa in placing the church's identification not with the powerful, but with the oppressed. De Gruchy drew particularly on Bonhoeffer's understanding of providence 'as God's passionate activity in Christ's suffering' (Klaaren 1997:376) in this regard. Unlike the emphasis on God's sovereignty in other South African theologies of providence at the time, De Gruchy contests associating God with the Absolute and the Lawmaker in favour of emphasising God's liberty to choose to be on the side of the oppressed (Klaaren 1997:377).

This notion is also seen in Black South African theology⁴ of the time. Unlike the early Dutch settlers, who saw their salvation and that of their children as the result of God's providence, Boesak notes that people realise their own responsibility in history when they understand that the position they hold in life is not simply, whether for good or bad, because of providence (1976:6). While the doctrine of providence does not feature very explicitly in Boesak's theology, in an indirect manner one could argue that it becomes the very starting point for his theology, as Boesak defines theology as the 'critical reflection on historical praxis' (1976:12). By this he means both the active participation of the church in the world, and the manifestation of faith, or 'the action of love in the world', evaluated by the 'liberating gospel of Jesus Christ' (Boesak 1976:12). Boesak, speaking about God's involvement in history, mentions that 'God's history with Israel is a history of liberation' (1976:17). For Boesak, writing within the South African context prior to 1994, this is especially the liberation of Black people, and he

4. A number of important voices could be mentioned here, such as Manas Buthelezi's theological anthropology focused on creation or Simon Maimela's liberation theology that takes creation as its point of departure, but again, because of the focus on the doctrine of providence, these will not be examined here.

notes that Black Theology focuses on the Black experience and locates itself on the side of the oppressed, calling for liberation. This is vocally against policies such as apartheid (Boesak 1976:16). God being on the side of the poor and the oppressed is also a central notion in the Confession of Belhar, a confessional document of the then Dutch Reformed Mission Church, of which Boesak was a member. He also played an important role in the drawing up of the Confession.

The Confession of Belhar (1986) opens with a statement about belief in the triune God 'who gathers, protects and care for the church through Word and Spirit. This, God has done since the beginning of the world and will do to the end'.⁵ The Belhar confession continues to voice its dissent to the nationalist theologies discussed earlier, and explicitly states that it rejects any doctrine:

[W]hich absolutizes either natural diversity or the sinful separation of people that this absolutization hinders or breaks the visible and active unity of the church, or even leads to the establishment of a separate church formation.⁶

In the theology of former Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the doctrine of providence is articulated as God's guiding hand in the quest for reconciliation in a fractured society. Tutu's understanding of providence underpins his vision of the church as an agent of healing, particularly in post-apartheid South Africa, where racial tensions persist. Tutu argued vehemently against racial injustice, positing that reconciliation is integral to God's design for humanity, reflecting the original intentions found in the Eden narrative (Ndlovu 1999:72). Through this lens, Tutu's work encourages believers to engage actively with societal issues, demonstrating how theological principles can foster transformative change.

While African Independent Churches provided support to Black Africans, especially in deprived economic circumstances, the criticism has often been raised that they were not critical enough towards the then South African apartheid state (Bompani 2015:105). A number of other Black theologians also reflected on the doctrine of providence prior to 1994, and while the term 'providence' may not always appear explicitly, the writings of these theologians addressed the subject under the broad rubric of God's involvement in history, God's solidarity with the oppressed and faith in God's sustaining presence, which are core elements of the doctrine of providence. For example, the activism of Frank Chikane, who was active in the Christian Institute and public theology in South Africa prior to 1994, was consistently informed by a belief in God's ongoing guidance of history. Chikane, cited by Masuku (2024):

[A]cknowledged that this theology has always provided him with the tools through which to reflect and direct his practical struggles ... [and] ... understood that these struggles were always connected to other black people for liberation. (n.p.)

This testimony highlights the providential themes in his theology without explicitly referring to it as the doctrine of providence.

5. Confession of Belhar, 1986.

6. *Ibid.*

Conclusion

Exploring the doctrine of providence remains a critical and relevant endeavour within contemporary South African theologies, particularly as it grapples with the unique socio-political landscapes shaped by historical injustices. This doctrine, which underscores God's sovereignty and sustaining power in the world, invites theological reflection that resonates with the lived experiences of South Africans today.

In this article, the doctrine of providence in the South African theological landscape prior to 1994 was examined. In the first section, the doctrine of providence in historical development was briefly discussed. In the second section, the focus was on the South African context and the reception of the doctrine of providence in South African theologies prior to 1994. I examined the Reformed theology of the Cape colony of the late 1600s and onward, as well as the later belief of the 'Volk' as a category with supernatural meaning through the doctrine of providence that developed in the 1900s, as well as different South African responses to these notions. To conclude, I now turn to the importance and continued relevance of providence for doing theology in present-day South Africa.

The doctrine of providence holds significant implications for the trajectory of future theological developments in South Africa, especially within the context of postcolonial and modern challenges. This doctrine, which underscores God's sovereignty and active involvement in the world, invites theologians to re-examine the intersections between faith and societal issues, such as justice, reconciliation and community resilience. As South Africa continues to grapple with the legacies of colonialism and apartheid, reflecting on providence encourages a critical engagement with both historical and contemporary contexts, fostering a nuanced understanding of divine action within a pluralistic society. This article has shown how the development of ideas relating to providence has not only influenced theological thought, but also resulted in mindsets and social and political implications. As such, the doctrine of providence and its reception in history remain relevant to both understanding the roots of the complex South African theological landscape and its present realities.

In contemporary South Africa, the doctrine of providence serves as a vital theological framework that informs social justice and ethical practices within the diverse socio-cultural landscape. Rooted in the understanding of a God who governs creation with purpose and care, this doctrine compels believers to actively engage with issues such as poverty, inequality and environmental degradation.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

Author's contribution

M.K. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval to conduct this study was obtained from the Theology Research Ethics Committee of North-West University (No. NWU-01343-25-A6).

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

The author confirms that the data supporting this study and its findings are available within the article and its references.

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