

Prodigies and Portents: Providentialism in the Eighteenth- Century Chesapeake

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On the morning of All Saint's Day, November 1, 1755, a "dreadful EARTHQUAKE, which laid the Capital of Portugal in Ruins . . . [and a] Fire which thereupon broke out in several Parts at once . . . burning furiously for five successive Days, reduced that whole Metropolis to Ashes; rendering it such a Spectacle of Terror and Amazement, as well as of Desolation to Beholders, as perhaps has not been equalled from the Foundation of the World!" An English merchant's letter, reprinted in the *Maryland Gazette* on May 20, 1756, offered this eyewitness account of the earthquake that all but leveled Lisbon and caused fires throughout the city. When survivors crawled out of the rubble they found a city in ruins and an artificial night created by the dust and smoke of the destruction. Modern estimates of the death toll place it between 10,000 and 15,000, but contemporary estimates ranged as high as 110,000—in a city of 275,000 inhabitants. The disaster had far reaching effects. The earthquake caused damage in southwestern Spain and Algiers, and the tremors were felt in France, Switzerland, Italy, and across North Africa. Although the colonial Chesapeake did not directly experience the cataclysm, the psychological and theological aftershocks reverberated there in sermons and newspaper accounts.¹

On November 18, 1755, before news of the calamity reached the Chesapeake, colonists from New Hampshire to Annapolis felt smaller tremors. In late November and early December, the *Maryland Gazette's* printer speculated that these quakes were "*peculiar Tokens of His [i.e. God's] Anger.*" On January 8, 1756, the first news of the much more destructive Lisbon earthquake appeared in the colony's newspaper. Over the course of the next two months, each issue of the *Gazette* contained more news about Lisbon's tragedy and the tremors felt throughout Europe and North Africa. On January 15, the *Gazette* printed a "short and imperfect but surprizing and melancholy Account" taken from Boston and Philadelphia newspapers. By the end of January the papers contained eyewitness accounts from ship captains who had been in Lisbon harbor on that fateful day. Jonas

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Opposite: Detail from Lisbone abysmée, an eighteenth-century French view of the 1755 Lisbon earthquake.

Green, printer of the *Maryland Gazette*, supplemented these testimonials with encyclopedic articles describing Lisbon's economy and demography, reprints of English sermons, and natural philosophical essays offering explanations of the natural causes of earthquakes. This flurry of concern and speculation occurred at a time when news of poor colonial harvests, famine, and war with the French and their Indian allies preoccupied the minds of the *Gazette's* readers and dominated the newspaper's pages.² Why this seemingly aberrant attention to natural disasters and their causes occurred in a supposedly secular society forms the central question of this essay.

Sermons and reports in the *Maryland Gazette* interpreted the earthquakes of late 1755 either as warnings from God calling his people to repentance or as apocalyptic omens. Neither of these themes of chiliasm or repentance are to be expected. Most historians locate the decline in a providential interpretation of prodigies (unusual events in the natural world) to the late seventeenth century, or in some cases, the first quarter of the eighteenth century.³ Scholars of Chesapeake religion argue that, rather than attempting to interpret every thunderstorm, illness, or earthquake as a message from God, the region's ministers emphasized the order and regularity governing His creation. This emphasis reflected the influence of Newtonian science, which demonstrated the divine design and orderliness of the universe. The rational Christian could comprehend this structured universe and uphold it through moral, orderly behavior. Such a theological bent created in the eighteenth-century Chesapeake a rational religion that replaced fear of nature with an optimistic belief that it was knowable to man.⁴ Reactions to the earthquakes of 1755, expressed through Chesapeake sermons, newspapers, and diaries, illustrate how this standard account of the decline in wonders underestimates the tenacious hold of a providential interpretation of the world.

In a providential universe, God directs all events, whether in the natural world or in human life, from the most trivial occurrences (ordinary providences) to the most awesome aberrations of nature (special providences). These divine interventions or wonders served as signs of His pleasure and judgments of His wrath, from which men could perceive His purpose and favor. Such interventions could be either general providences, those that affected the entire community, or particular providences, those misfortunes that befell the individual.⁵ Eighteenth-century providentialism in regions outside colonial New England and the metropole has received little scholarly attention. Although a few scholars have acknowledged the persistence of providentialism in the eighteenth century, they have not explored the forms this persistence took.⁶ The decline in providential interpretations was not an even one; natural phenomena that are predictable or periodic, like hurricanes or comets, are likely to lose their providential power before others, like earthquakes and epidemics, which are difficult to forecast. Additionally, histories of Chesapeake religion rarely address belief and personal piety, focusing

instead on institutional strength, rise of dissenting denominations, and the paucity of Anglican ministers. Most accounts portray a society in which materialism and secularism reigned and in which a weak established church had little impact on people's lives.⁷

This essay argues, by contrast, that providential interpretation, though under challenge, persisted alongside both a growing body of knowledge about the mechanical laws governing natural phenomena and an increasing emphasis on moral rationalism and order. It explores providentialism in Chesapeake society by focusing on the reactions of white, Protestant settlers to natural disasters and other wonders. It begins by probing the ways in which colonial newspapers, sermons, and diaries invoked and discussed providentialism and the "world of wonders." A second section examines the interplay between secondary and ultimate causes as explanations of wonders and argues that knowledge about the mechanics of secondary causes supplemented rather than replaced the idea that God sent natural calamities as a warning. The final section considers the belief that national sins caused general providences and looks at the role of public fast days as communal responses to such disasters. In each, a providential interpretation of wonders had a much longer lifespan in the colonial Chesapeake than previous scholars have thought. If religion is "the thirst to systematize the unknown," the discovery of a providential worldview promises to uncover an under-explored aspect of Chesapeake society.⁸

When Chesapeake settlers weathered a severe storm, witnessed neighbors dying in epidemics, and found their homes threatened by war, they did not simply marvel at the complexity of creation. Instead, they considered such events as divine punishments or as emblems of the Last Day. Stories of the strange, wondrous, or tragic were frequently reported in Chesapeake newspapers. These same stories became the subjects for sermons, in which preachers used such wonders to encourage moral reformation among their parishioners.

In the seventeenth century, Virginians by all accounts viewed the world in standard providential terms. Colonial leaders believed that the devastating Indian attack of 1622 demonstrated "the Hande of God sett against us . . . for the punishment of our ingratitude in not being thankfull . . . [and] for our greedy desires of present gaine and profit."⁹ After the next major conflict with Indians in 1644, one colonist attributed his family's survival to a fortunate omen. His wife noticed drops of blood in the washtub that failed to stain either hands or linen, and "upon this miraculous premonition and warning from God having some kinde of intimation of some designe of the Indians . . . I provided for defense."¹⁰ Twenty years later another prominent Virginian interpreted bad harvests, unusually frequent run-ins with wolves and bears, and increased threats of Indian attacks as "prognosticks of Gods Judgments." Similarly, in his *Beginning, Progress and Conclusion of Bacon's Rebellion* (1705), Thomas Mathew described a large

Prodigy Reporting in the *Virginia Gazette* and *Maryland Gazette*

	1738 ¹¹	1749*	1752	1766	1772	1784*
comets & celestial phenomena	3	3	—	1	1	3
earthquakes	4	3	4	—	2	6
hurricanes	6	2	2	2	3	1
lightning	2	5	3	5	6	2
monsters & curiosities	4	3	2	—	—	—
providential deaths	—	2	2	—	—	1
Total	19	18	13	8	12	13
Extant newspapers	50	50	52	43	53	52

* Maryland Gazette; remaining entries are from the *Virginia Gazette*

comet, flocks of pigeons that filled the skies, and “Swarms of Flyes . . . coming out of Spigot Holes in the Earth” as signs that prefigured rebellion in 1676.¹² Like their New England and English counterparts, seventeenth-century Virginians interpreted the vagaries of life as direct interventions from God.

Eighteenth-century Chesapeake residents continued to be interested in stories of freak accidents, providential deliverances, and deformed animals, if the *Virginia* and *Maryland* newspapers are any indication. Nevertheless, a sampling of the newspapers over the eighteenth century suggests that the emphasis shifted over time. In its first decades the *Virginia Gazette*, first published in 1736, covered a wide range of wonders. Extant papers from 1738 included nineteen entries of the strange, coincidental, or marvelous. Of these, two referred to death or property destruction by lightning, four to earthquakes, six to “extraordinarily” violent storms or hurricanes, one to an apparition in the sky, two to comets, and four to “monsters.” Likewise, the *Maryland Gazette* for 1749 reported three “monsters” (a six-legged horse, a giant with wings, and “frightful sea monster”), three celestial phenomena, two hurricanes, five destructive lightning strikes, and two providential deaths. The thirteen reports of marvelous or providential nature in the *Virginia Gazette* in 1752 represent a similarly eclectic group. By the 1760s and 1770s, however, reports of curiosities or monstrous births declined, though those of unpredictable wonders—men killed by lightning, unusually violent hurricanes or thunderstorms, and earthquakes—continued. While the range and frequency of prodigies waned, fascination with the workings of providence through natural means was constant throughout the eighteenth century.¹³

Although Chesapeake newspapers reported aberrations that, in the traditional canon of wonders could have been interpreted to have moral meanings, most appeared in the newspaper without commentary or interpretation. A letter from London printed in the *Virginia Gazette* in 1738 reported a female workhouse inmate who miscarried three times, “the first time with a Male Child, the next Day

with a Female Child, and the third Time with a Monster, which had a Head and a Body like a Toad, and a Tail like a Rat." Such a story of a monstrous birth traditionally would have been explained in terms of the immorality of the child's parents or as a warning for the community to repent. The *Virginia Gazette*, though, left the reader free to draw any meaning or simply to read it for entertainment. Reports of wonders, once assumed to be divine messages, could be merely curiosities.¹⁴ With their focus on describing, rather than explaining, the curiosity, such reports fell into the Baconian tradition of collecting facts unencumbered by theories. The records of the early Royal Society are full of similar descriptions of rarities—monstrous births, earthquakes, dwarfs and giants—with few explanations offered. Once enough samples had been collected, Bacon suggested, the natural pattern would become evident.¹⁵

Nevertheless, news items could serve as a springboard for providential interpretations in ministers' weekly sermons. When Presbyterian minister Samuel Davies of Hanover County, Virginia, and Anglican minister Thomas Cradock of St. Thomas Parish in western Baltimore County, Maryland, addressed their respective congregations on the lessons of the Lisbon earthquake, both assumed that many of their parishioners were familiar with the details of the disaster. Davies began his sermon with a disclaimer that "such of you as have read the public papers, need not be informed of that wide-spreading earthquake," and briefly reviewed the details. Cradock argued that since news of the earthquakes and "the monstrous and shocking barbarities" of the French and Indians "have already often from their place made your ears to tingle and struck your souls with the most horrid amaze" he need not review what happened but could move directly to interpretation.¹⁶

Cradock found the meaning of the earthquakes in a combination of millenarianism and a need for moral reformation. He warned his congregation that the "shakings" in Lisbon suggested the end of the world was near:

The day of the Lord seems indeed to be at hand. Within this year what terrible signs and forerunners have we not had of it? Let whole nations almost [be] destroyed . . . and this hath not happen'd only in one part of corner of the world, but all parts of it have offer'd more or less . . . earthquakes alone have not been the only forerunners of this terrible day, wars, famine, storms, burnings, such as have scarcely ever been heard of before, join their united force, and seem to declare to us the near arrival of that tremendous period.¹⁷

Cradock believed that the sins of the people of the Chesapeake, in particular blasphemy, Sabbath-breaking, and dissolute living, had provoked divine judgment in the form of earthquakes and war. Although the signs pointed to the Apocalypse, he left open the possibility that

if we will continue to endeavour by our good lives, by our obedience to his laws and walking in the way of his commandments, still to deserve his mercy and protection, there is no doubt but that he will still permit us [to] enjoy what he hath so long graciously bestowed upon us, and our children and our children's children will possess it after us.¹⁸

Central to either reading was an urgent need to repent, in order to avert further punishment or to prepare for Judgment in the Second Coming.

Likewise, Davies called his congregation to “humble yourselves before God, for your past conduct; and prepare, prepare to meet him, in the midst of a burning world.” Davies told his parishioners that the destruction of Lisbon should cause them to consider the majesty and power of God, to reflect on the sinfulness of the world, and to reform the sinful ways under which the world “has groaned.” For every part of the globe that felt an earthquake, Davies identified the sinners responsible: “deluded Mahometans” in Morocco, superstitious and licentious Catholics in Portugal, Spain, and France, and deists and libertines in England and the Netherlands.¹⁹ Like Cradock, Davies also warned his Hanover congregation that the four classic signs of the Second Coming, “the famine, sword, pestilence, and earthquake,” seemed manifest. Uncharacteristically, Davies was more restrained than Cradock, referring to the signs, particularly the earthquake, as “lively representations” rather than evidence of imminent Judgment.²⁰

A similar mix of eschatology and calls for repentance characterized the English sermon reprinted in the *Maryland Gazette*. The front page of the March 11, 1756, issue featured this jeremiad inspired by the Lisbon earthquake. It argued “that Earthquakes generally happen in populace Places, in the richest Cities; and it is well known, that where there is most People and most Wealth, there Iniquity commonly most abounds.” Readers should not infer “that *Lisbon* exceeded in Wick-edness all other Christian Cities,” but they would do well to remember “the Advice in the Gospel, that if we do not Repent, we also shall perish.” Britain might have been spared from the earthquake, but if her people did not purge corruption, irreligion, and superstition, God would “sink” the country “by gradual Decays of Trade; by long, expensive, successless Wars; or by intestine Broils.”²¹ Although Cradock, Davies, and the anonymous author of the *Gazette*'s sermon were divided by geography and denomination, they each interpreted the earthquakes as a call for their respective congregations to repent and as indications that the Second Coming might be at hand.

Like earthquakes, epidemics seemed to some a sign that repentance was necessary to avert further punishments. In 1721, Virginia gentleman William Byrd II anonymously published a pamphlet, which discussed an outbreak of plague as a sign of the sinfulness of the English people. The London plague, like that sent upon Egypt in the book of Exodus and the pestilence sent to chastise David, was a mani-

festation of God's displeasure. Even the pagan, wrote Byrd, believed that Apollo sent sickness to the Greeks, but first warned them by infecting their dogs and mules, giving them time to repent and avert further disaster. If the London plague fell within this tradition of pestilence as divine judgment, then "we may . . . venture to believe . . . that this mortal arrow is shot from the quiver of the Almighty: and then surely the most reasonable remedy we can use against it, will be a sincere repentance and reformation."²² If there was any hope of natural remedies curing the sick and preventing the further spread of the disease, Londoners first would have to examine their collective consciences and repent of the sins that had brought this calamity upon them.

In the second half of the century, Davies and Baltimore's Anglican minister Joseph Bend similarly interpreted disease as a manifestation of the Almighty's displeasure. Davies interpreted a "raging distemper," combined with the French and Indian war and a "threatened famine," as "the effects of the corrective and vindictive providences of God towards our land."²³ Likewise, when Philadelphia experienced "a malignant fever" in 1793, Bend urged his listeners, "by fasting, humiliation, & prayer to stay the hand, which afflicteth your brethren, & to avert from yourselves the calamity, under which they are mournfully groaning."²⁴ War, poor harvests, famine, severe storms, and even the power of thunder inspired Chesapeake ministers to write sermons, and occasionally even hymns, addressing the sinner's need to repent.²⁵

The political and economic affairs of men, in addition to natural calamities, stimulated providential interpretations. Britain's enemies could be the instruments with which God corrected his people. Preaching to his Hanover congregation on the occasion of a fast day during the French and Indian War, Davies discerned the chastising hand of God behind British military losses and the drought plaguing Virginia farmers. He warned his flock,

I know not what a provoked God intends to do with us and our nation. . . . It seems but too likely, though it strikes me with horror to admit the thought, that a provoked God intends to scourge us with the rod of France, and therefore gives surprising success to her arms.²⁶

Similarly, John Moncure of Overwharton Parish, Stafford County, Virginia, preaching on the occasion of the same fast day, warned his congregation that further judgments, in the form of war, would befall the people of America unless they repented of their wickedness.²⁷ Like disease or earthquakes, wars could represent the rod with which God smote his people.

Rather than interpret events as evidence of divine judgments for previous sins, strange occurrences could be interpreted as indications that the end of the world was quickly approaching. Eyewitnesses to unusual phenomena reported in

Chesapeake newspapers believed that they signified the Apocalypse. In 1756 a red sky in Edinburgh caused many to believe the end was approaching. According to the *Maryland Gazette's* correspondent,

The Sky towards the North had a most terrible Appearance, being the Colour of Blood, the Reflection of which gave every Object the same Colour; this Appearance continued from four in the Morning 'til Sun Rise, to the great Amazement of many Spectators. It has given Rise to a Number of Prophecies concerning the End of the World, so that the Streets are now filled with Pamphlets, which are cried up and down, signifying the Time is just at Hand.²⁸

A report from Halifax County, Virginia, ten years later demonstrated a similar concern, noting “an amazing shower of hail . . . the noise which preceded the shower, and the shower itself, which lasted near an hour, were so dreadful that many people began to apprehend the last day to be at hand.”²⁹ No matter how imminent, millennial interpretations shared a belief that the appropriate response to such wonders was moral reformation.

How to interpret a particular wonder remained open to debate. Although Edmond Halley's study of comets was published in 1705 and confirmed in 1758, comets continued to have portentous associations for many people. A comet visible in Virginia in 1769 caused such unease that the *Virginia Gazette's* publisher, Alexander Purdie, chose a piece for the “Poet's Corner” that explained the appropriate “enlighten'd” response to these celestial bodies. Purdie dedicated the piece “to such as are under apprehensions about the present Comet let them hear what the immortal Thompson sings of those rare phenomena.” According to Thompson, at the sight of a comet sinking below the horizon,

The guilty tremble. But (above
Those superstitious horrors that enslave
The fond sequacious herd, to mystick faith
And blind amazement prone) th' enlighten'd few,
Whose godlike minds philosophy exalts,
The glorious stranger hail: They feel a joy
Divinely great, they in their power exult.³⁰

The 1769 comet caused unease among the “superstitious” that “gentlemen astronomers” attempted to quell through precise descriptions of the phenomenon. A letter from London dated August 29 reported that,

For some nights past a comet has appeared in the hemisphere, of a livid blue colour, situate to the right of the Pleiades, a little below Taurus. As there is

none expected at this time, it gives rise to various conjectures; and it is hoped the Gentlemen astronomers will give a fuller account of its dimensions, situation, and progress.³¹

Gentlemen astronomers in England, New Jersey, and Virginia complied, contributing an additional four accounts of the comet that detailed its estimated length, exact position, and conjectures about its trajectory.³² Both Thompson's poem and gentlemen astronomers' reports attempted to draw a distinction between the wise who exalted at the power of God in comets and in their own knowledge, and the credulous who trembled in fear. By setting their own dispassionate investigations against the "superstition" of the vulgar, colonial astronomers laid claim to their status as gentlemen.³³

The prevalence of repentance and chiliasm among the responses to the Lisbon earthquake and other natural calamities demonstrates areas in which a providential understanding of the world persisted. Although under siege, providentialism remained a powerful way to make sense of disaster, especially an earthquake or plague that affected large numbers of people. The flexibility of providential thinking is even more evident in its capacity to incorporate new discoveries about the laws of nature while upholding the traditional explanatory function of wonders.

In the aftermath of the 1755 disaster, a report in the *Maryland Gazette* suggested that earthquakes were the "effects of the extraordinary Raging of vast subterraneous Fires." It was commonly believed that earthquakes, like volcanoes, were the result of the violent reaction of various liquids and vapors in underground caverns.³⁴ Such a theory about the natural laws governing geological phenomena was part of a larger intellectual movement inspired by the work of Newton and embodied in the institution of the Royal Society, which sought to use human reason to unravel the secrets of nature. Critics argued, however, that focusing on natural laws ("secondary causes") could detract from God's role as the ultimate cause of natural calamities. Yet the *Maryland Gazette* printed mechanistic explanations of earthquakes alongside depictions of an angry, interventionist divine force.³⁵ Although secondary and ultimate causes were often found side-by-side, debate continued about the appropriate use of such knowledge. Rather than see mechanical knowledge as axiomatically in conflict with the providential direction of God, the two mingled.³⁶

Some theologians went to great lengths to reconcile providentialism with mechanical philosophy. They argued that portents were an ingenious part of the original plan of creation, set to go off as warnings to men at the exact moments God knew them to be necessary.³⁷ Samuel Davies took this tack to reconcile secondary and ultimate causes of the earthquakes of 1755 when he asked his Hanover congregation,

May not the wise Contriver of the machine of nature have placed in it certain *hidden* springs, which, like the stroke of a clock at the hour, will move and operate at the appointed period, and rouse the attention and admiration of a stupid world? Besides the causes of the *daily familiar* phenomena of nature, may there not be causes *in reserve* for some grand purposes to produce some strange unusual phenomena, adapted to the exigencies of some extraordinary periods?³⁸

Such an interpretation allowed Davies to reconcile providential warnings with the doctrine of predestination. As a New Light Presbyterian, his theology leaned more toward Calvinism than his Church of England counterparts, who generally acknowledged that secondary causes did not limit the ultimate cause without resorting to a complicated scheme built into original creation.

Natural explanations of secondary causes could also explain portents and even Biblical miracles. Virginia planter Landon Carter noted in his diary that “the great [William] Whiston,” who was a cleric and natural philosopher, took his interest in understanding secondary causes too far when he argued in *A New Theory of the Earth* (1696) that a comet’s effect on the tides explained the biblical flood.³⁹ Carter remained committed to the investigation of secondary causes as a godly and useful enterprise, since “the carrying a conjecture too extravagantly forward does not in my Opinion lessen a presumed Philosophy in any Natural Cause.”⁴⁰

Although the master of Sabine Hall thought Whiston overextended himself in trying to reconcile natural philosophy with revelation, Carter constantly attempted to balance his active participation in the world of Newtonian science with his pious understanding of the world as under the direct control of God. When one of his ewes bore twin lambs sharing one common neck and head, Carter had his slave Nassau “open the bodies of this extraordinary production through the one mouth.” The only conclusion he recorded after the autopsy was that “perhaps it is not in the power of man to assign a cause for such a perversion of nature.”⁴¹ He approached the conjoined lambs as an area of scientific investigation of the power of God in nature. In this instance, Carter concluded, even understanding the secondary cause was beyond the power of man.

Chesapeake ministers urged their congregations to use explorations of the natural world, such as Carter’s autopsy, for religious inspiration. Carter’s experiment and reflections would have illustrated for Thomas Chase, Anglican minister of Somerset (and later Baltimore) County, the religious value of the pursuit of natural philosophy. For the men “who study, & contemplate the Phaenomena of Nature, which are the works of God,” Chase noted,

the further they carry their inquiries, & the deeper Discourses they make, the

more, & the more undeniable evidences they perpetually find, that the works of Nature are not the Blunders of Chance, or the blind Effect of unintelligent Fate; but the continual operations of God, who governs all things by the uninterrupted of care & interposition of an all wise Providence which neither slumbers, nor sleeps, & from whose Directing nothing exempted at any time, or in any Place.⁴²

Virginia commissary James Blair and botanist John Clayton voiced similar beliefs that the marvels of creation inspired men to religious contemplation and evidenced the continual presence of God in the world.⁴³ Rather than at opposition, natural philosophy supported religion, these men believed, and encouraged a providential worldview.

Ministers such as Blair, Davies, and Chase usually referred to the natural laws behind the wonders that were the subjects of their sermons, but they went to great pains to stress that the secondary cause in no way eclipsed the ultimate one. In his sermon on “The Religious Improvement of the Late Earthquakes,” Davies hypothesized that,

Our globe is stored with subterranean magazines of combustible materials, which need but a spark to produce a violent explosion, and rend and burst it to pieces. What huge quantities of these sulphurous and nitrous mines must there be, when one discharge can spread a tremor over half the world, bury islands and cities, and shatter wide-extended continents!⁴⁴

Davies then used this natural explanation of earthquakes, similar to the explanation found in the *Maryland Gazette*, to set his hearers in mind of the tremors that will be felt at the end of the world. In another sermon from the same period Davies cited the “calculation of that great philosopher, Doctor Halley” predicting a comet in two years, which “according to Sir Isaac Newton’s calculation, [is] two thousand times hotter than red-hot iron” as an additional indication of God’s judgment.⁴⁵ The “huge quantities of these sulphurous and nitrous mines” that, through natural philosophy, man has discovered, offered testimony to the means that God could employ when judgments and warnings were necessary.

Acknowledging secondary causes did not lessen the providential import of a wonder. As Landon Carter wrote after a severe hail and thunderstorm, “the Storms of Elementary confusion though natural in their causes and not uncommon, may nevertheless be exercised on man as instruments of divine wrath.” Following the report of earthquakes felt along the eastern American seaboard, Jonas Green, printer of the *Maryland Gazette*, argued that “doubtless various natural Causes may be assigned for these extraordinary Convulsions; but surely no one will question the Agency of the supreme Power, who *maketh the Earth to tremble, and whose*

Voice shaketh the Wilderness."⁴⁶ Likewise, a report from New Haven combined mechanistic theory and apocalyptic thinking. The report noted, "as Earthquakes are undoubtedly the Effects of the extraordinary Raging of vast subterraneous Fires, they ought to put us in Mind of the general Conflagration and future punishment."⁴⁷ Natural philosophers might claim to understand how an earthquake functioned, but it still was the voice of God that "maketh the Earth to tremble."

Understanding secondary causes of providential judgments led to some concerns about the proper use to which such knowledge should be put. With divinely provided scientific knowledge at mankind's disposal, William Byrd argued that it was sinful not to use it for the improvement of the world. In Byrd's discourse on the plague, repentance and reform were necessary first steps, but they did not preclude pursuing the recourses available through medicine and natural philosophy. On the contrary, Byrd reserved his greatest condemnation for the Turks, who "will tell you, that if the Plague be writ by fate in their foreheads, all the precautions in the world can't prevent it." Such fatalism dishonored God who "is pleas'd to send this great calamity upon us by natural ways, so it seems agreeable to his wise providence, that we should endeavour both to prevent and cure it by natural applications."⁴⁸ Since God worked through natural channels, men could hope to remedy the resulting misfortunes through these same natural means. At the end of the century Joseph Bend preached a similar theme in response to the "malignant fever" raging on the eastern seaboard. This epidemic, warned Bend,

will prove that "where the Lord keepeth the city," its safety cannot be endangered. Let not this, however, deter you from using any of the human means for preserving you from the grievous malady now raging in our land . . . altho' without the blessings of Providence, we vainly expect to be preserved from disease; yet our own care, prudence, & exertions, are necessary on our part.⁴⁹

Although faith in natural philosophy must never replace faith in God, to ignore God-given remedies was an insult to the mercies He provided.

Yet to use knowledge as protection from nature's potentially destructive power was to risk usurping divine will. William Johnson, who sold lightning rods in addition to lecturing on electricity, was concerned enough to defend his product in the Virginia newspaper. He argued that, "instead of having any just objection thereto, from a persuasion of its being presumptuous, we have the utmost reason to bless GOD for a discovery so important and eminently useful."⁵⁰ In a similar vein, an essay on the natural causes of lightning and the "most approved method of securing a house or vessel" included a defense of the investigation of natural causes.

To those who neglect using the means of safety which Providence has put into their hands, from a notion that it is presumption to attempt averting it,

feeling it cannot hurt nor annoy us unless commissioned by the all-wise Governour of the universe, it may be answered that the plague, or any epidemical disease, is certainly as much commissioned as lightning; and there are few or no Christians who account it presumption to consult the physician, or use the proper remedies for prevention or recovery.⁵¹

Although theories about how to treat a disease and how to avoid a lightning strike became commonplace, the appropriate application of this expanding body of knowledge continued to be a source of concern throughout the eighteenth century.

Although there was no consensus on the proper uses to which natural philosophy could best be put, there was general agreement that such knowledge did not necessarily endanger a providential interpretation of the world. Newtonian science illustrated the order and design of creation, but it also could support a providential causality of disasters. The presumption was that God was active in this world, capable of working through secondary causes to comment on the sins of people and, particularly of nations.

When earthquakes rumbled in late 1755, ministers, pamphleteers, and newspaper printers in the Chesapeake, New England, and throughout Europe called for nations to repent to avert further punishments. Since large-scale disasters were divine judgments on the community, they required communal action. The response often took the form of public fast days. According to Bishop Thomas Sprat's *History of the Royal Society* (1667), "whenever therefore a hevvy calamity falls from *Heven* on our *Nation*, a *universal Repentance* is requir'd; but all particular applications of privat men, except to their own hearts, is to be forborn."⁵² The types of wonders that elicited providential interpretations in the eighteenth-century Chesapeake paralleled the distinction Sprat drew between general providences and particular providences. Particular providences encouraged individuals to find moral meaning in the daily occurrences of their lives. After the Restoration, English philosophers and theologians, especially those linked to the established church, associated such uses of providentialism with religious enthusiasm. To many contemporaries, such enthusiasm had contributed to, if not caused, the English civil wars. The widespread nature of general providences such as epidemics or earthquakes, however, seemed to offer such an unmistakable divine message that Anglican theologians continued to recognize their providential meanings throughout the eighteenth century.

John Tillotson, perhaps the most widely read theologian in the eighteenth-century Chesapeake, drew a similar distinction between punishment for nations and for individuals.⁵³ Like most of his late-seventeenth-century contemporaries, Tillotson warned against individuals interpreting wonders as particular providences because of the potential for such practices to challenge the authority

of the state. Tillotson emphasized God's dealings with the nation, rather than the individual. He taught that general providences were the only forum in which nations could be punished, "because publick bodies and communities of men, as such, can only be rewarded and punished in this world." In the course of his providences, Tillotson argued, God rewarded virtuous nations with "temporal blessings and prosperity . . . but the general and crying sins of a Nation cannot hope to escape publick judgments, unless they be prevented by a general repentance."⁵⁴ Even those theologians, such as Tillotson, who discouraged individuals from interpreting personal misfortunes in terms of particular providences, believed that providential judgments explained disasters that affected the entire community.

Interpreting events as particular providences seems rare in the Chesapeake. William Byrd was unusual in interpreting the death of twelve of his slaves in terms of particular providence: "these poor people suffer for my sins; God forgive me all my offenses and restore them to their health if it be consistent with His holy will."⁵⁵ Byrd assumed responsibility for the sickness infecting his entire household. Only through Byrd's personal repentance was there any hope for the recovery of the rest of his slaves.

The Presbyterian Henry Patillo worried not at the afflictions shown to him, but at their absence. In his surviving diary fragments Patillo, who was studying under Davies to prepare for the ministry in the 1750s, wondered why his family had been spared from the flux raging in Hanover County, Virginia, which occasioned a fast day on October 21, 1756. Rhetorically he asked, "Am I a being of such Importance as to hope the Almighty will work a Miracle in purifying the air of its noxious Particles for me?" With a resounding "No" Patillo prayed that God would prepare him to meet the coming chastisement and not to think of himself as beyond such afflictions. Reflecting on the fast day service, Patillo mused that the call to be "humble under the Hand of God implies a Sense of his immediate Agency in all our Afflictions — A Sense of our need of Correction and our own Demerit." Like Byrd, Patillo believed there was an intimate connection between sin and God's chastisements on both the individual and corporate levels. Patillo, however, rejected the particular providential idea that his family's health reflected their unique favor over the rest of the congregation.⁵⁶

The absence in diaries and letters of providential interpretations of individual misfortunes is striking. More typical than blaming oneself was Byrd's response to the death of his young son in June 1710. Rather than interpret the loss in terms of his moral failings, Byrd simply recorded "God gives and God takes away; blessed be the name of God." Similarly, Landon Carter referred to sicknesses among family members, slaves and neighbors as trials under which the believer must submit to God's mercy, not as judgments.⁵⁷ Devereux Jarratt also refrained from invoking a providential interpretation when he reported that the house of Mr. Ashburn,



Lisbone abysmée. Eighteenth-century French copper engraving of the 1755 Lisbon earthquake. Boats filled with refugees sink as a terrifying wall of water engulfs the city. (Regents of the University of California and the National Information Service for Earthquake Engineering.)

with whom he had a major disagreement, burned to the ground. Akin to the nonjudgmental reports of monstrous births in colonial newspapers, misfortunes affecting only the individual rarely invoked the idea of particular providences.

The notion of general providences, however, provided a powerful way to explain the successes and failures of the polity. Although a violent hurricane in Bengal in 1738 destroyed all of the British ships in port, it left unscathed the entire French fleet. No coincidence, the report in the *Virginia Gazette* claimed, this divine intervention seemed intended as a rebuke to the British nation. The report from Bengal concluded that, “it must, indeed, be confess’d, that it looks something like a Miracle, or at least something Ominous to Us, that we who may with Justice look upon our selves to be the best Seamen in the World, should suffer so much, and the French so little, by that Storm.” The reason for divine displeasure, the correspondent argued, lay in a proposal to allow the French to mediate peace between Spain and England. The military successes and imperial ambitions of the British Empire depended, under such interpretations, on the collective morality of her people.⁵⁸

Like Tillotson, Samuel Davies preached that “national judgments are inflicted for national sins, and therefore reformation from national sins is the only hopeful way to escape them.” Davies interpreted British losses during the French and Indian War, the Lisbon earthquake, the “flux” raging in his congregation, and poor harvests as corporate judgments on the colony of Virginia that required the repentance of every individual. Citing the deliverance of England from the Spanish Armada, the Gunpowder Plot, and the protection of the Protestant character of the nation through the Glorious Revolution, Davies warned his congregation that, although he was “not enthusiastic enough to look upon every event as the effect of an immediate Providence . . . but when some important design is in agitation, for the advantage of one nation and the chastisement of another . . . must we not own that it is the finger of God?”⁵⁹ Davies believed that he could discern God’s hand in the combination of war, pestilence, and earthquakes of late 1755. Virginia was granted an exemption from the destructive effects of the Lisbon earthquake, but if this mercy was not repaid with repentance, “will we constrain him to pour out his judgments upon *us* also, at last.” Only through communal penance, Davies urged his congregation, could these judgments be stayed.⁶⁰

Public fast days institutionalized this need for collective penitence in the face of divine judgment. From the early decades of Chesapeake settlement, famine, disease, and the threat of Indian attack prompted colony-wide fasts, following an English tradition dating back to the late sixteenth century of public fasts in times of crisis and thanksgiving. Such observances expressed communal repentance and supplication during critical times in recognition that communal sins provoked God to punish. They rested on an understanding of the Almighty as active in the world and on a belief in the efficacy of prayer. Public fast days were designed as a ritual which made manifest the repentance of the community, a time when adults abstained from labor, recreation, food, sleep, and sex, and dressed in “mean apparel.” In both England and the Chesapeake fast day services used special liturgies, adding petitions and suitable scripture passages to the Book of Common Prayer’s office for a holy day.⁶¹ Such public rituals cemented group loyalties and bolstered communal resolve in uncertain times.⁶²

A sampling of Virginia newspapers, diaries, and official correspondence reveals both the diversity of causes for the proclamation of public fasts and their popularity throughout the eighteenth century.⁶³ During this period the colonial government declared at least eighteen fasts.⁶⁴ The three Byrd diaries provide perhaps the best insight into the frequency of these observances. During the three and a half years covered by the first of the Byrd diaries, February 1709 to September 1712, Virginia declared four public fasts, the first two to stop epidemics, the third in commemoration of the martyrdom of Charles I, and the last to pray for the success of the British expedition to Canada. Yet in the remaining two diaries, spanning the years 1717 to 1721 and 1739 to 1741, Byrd failed to mention any fast

VIRGINIA FAST DAYS, 1700–79

Date	Reason	Source ⁶⁵
April 1700*	plague of caterpillars	CSP
Aug 1701*	“weighty measures” before Assembly	CSP
May 18, 1709	epidemic	Byrd & CSP
Jan 11, 1710	epidemic	Byrd
Jan 30, 1711	martyrdom Charles I	Byrd & CSP
Sept 7, 1711	Canadian expedition	Byrd & CSP
Spring 1728*	plague of caterpillars & bad harvest	CSP
Feb 26, 1746	1745 Jacobite rebellion in Britain	VaGaz
Sept 24, 1755	French and Indian war & famine	VaGaz
June 19, 1756	Lisbon earthquake & French and Indian war	Davies
Oct 21, 1756	“flux” raging	Patillo
March 8, 1760	thanksgiving for success on land & sea	Gordon
Aug 25, 1763	thanksgiving for peace with France	Gordon
June 1, 1774	“to preserve liberties of America”	Carter & VaGaz
July 20, 1775	[presumably conflict with Britain]	Carter
May 17, 1776	“frustrate our enemies”	VaGaz
Feb 28, 1777	implore heaven’s protection	Carter & VaGaz
May 1779*	“shield in battle” against Britain	VaGaz

* exact date of fast uncertain

days.⁶⁶ This sample also reflects the reasons commonly given for these holidays during the first half of the eighteenth century. Of the eleven fasts declared between 1700 and 1756, three were inspired by political events, two by military encounters, and the remaining six for natural “wonders”—epidemic disease, plagues of caterpillars, and the Lisbon earthquake. The seven fasts observed between 1757 and 1780, however, all reflected political concerns or military engagements. Landon Carter recorded that the 1774 fast day was declared to ask God “to remove from the Loyal People of America all cause of danger from such measures as are Pregnant with their ruin.” In the place of “God Save the King” at the conclusion of the holy day service, Carter recorded that his parson “cried out God Preserve all the Just rights and Liberties of America.”⁶⁷ Through public fast days Virginians asked God to remove dangers to the community, regardless of whether those dangers took the form of plagues of caterpillars or imperial policies.

William Byrd was convinced of the importance of public fasts in response to general providences. In his “Discourse on the Plague,” Byrd’s first recommendation was that Parliament should declare a public fast, “to humble our selves, and deprecate the vengeance of an offended God, and his Pestilence not let loose upon us.” Only then, Byrd recommended, should quarantine and public sanitation measures be established.⁶⁸ Long before penning this pamphlet, Byrd had attended council meetings where public fasts were decreed, heard sermons specifically prepared for the occasion, and gave his “people” (his slaves and white servants) a day

off work. On May 18, 1709, for example, Byrd recorded, “this was [a] fast day to pray to God to remove the fatal sickness with which this country has been of late afflicted. There was the most people at church I ever saw there.”⁶⁹ Byrd thought public fast days an appropriate response to general providences.

Faced with poor harvests and conflicts with the French and Indians, Chesapeake governors shared Byrd’s belief in the power of public fasts. Robert Dinwiddie, Virginia’s governor, declared in September 1755 that “we have but too much Reason to fear, that our Sins have justly provoked the Almighty to send down upon us his heavy Judgements of War and Famine.” Accordingly, “as national Repentance is the only Remedy for national Guilt,” he declared a general fast “for the solemn and public Humiliation of ourselves before Almighty GOD.”⁷⁰ The following year, with terrible earthquakes adding to the pressures of war and poor harvests, the colonial Maryland government issued a similar proclamation,

For imploring a Blessing from Almighty GOD upon his Majesty’s Fleets and Armies in the present important Situation of public Affairs; as also for humbling ourselves befor Him in a deep Sense of His late Visitation, by a most dreadful and extensive EARTHQUAKE, more particularly felt in some neighbouring Countries, in Alliance and Friendship with us, and in some Degree by ourselves, and in order to the obtaining the Pardon of our crying Sins, to the averting of His judgments.

Like Dinwiddie, Maryland governor Horatio Sharpe urged the colonists to “a sincere Desire and hearty Endeavour to reform our Lives, and by a strict Conformity to our Duty towards him, regain his Favour, that he may remove from us those Evils which at this Time so manifestly threaten us.”⁷¹ If plagues, earthquakes, and drought resulted from the immorality of a people as a whole, then only general repentance could restore God’s favor.

Public fast days embodied the idea that the fortunes of a nation in the temporal world revealed God’s pleasure (or displeasure) with a people’s morality. General providences remained particularly susceptible to providential interpretations, since nations only exist in this world, and must also be punished in it. To avert such punishments, public fast days ritually expressed the collective repentance of the community.

In 1800 when the city of Baltimore was crippled by an epidemic of yellow fever, Joseph Bend interpreted this affliction in standard providential ways as a judgment from an angry God. But, rather than drinking, Sabbath-breaking, and licentious living—the usual sins said to provoke God’s anger—he singled out a decline in providential interpretation itself.

It is much to be lamented, that mankind in general neglect or refuse to

consider the adverse dispensations of Providence in their true light. Their reflections upon their origin terminate in natural causes, & rise not to a Superior Being, "without whose knowledge not a sparrow falleth to the ground. . . ." Does the awful lightening put a sudden stop to the pulse of life, or the dreadful tempest commit wild havock & ruinous devastation? Instead of seeing the Almighty in the clouds, & hearing him in the wind, we ascribe the effects wholly to the constitution of nature.⁷²

The stridency with which Bend attacked disbelief in providence suggests the extent of the decline in such thinking.

Nevertheless, providentialism continued to have explanatory power, especially for certain types of wonders. In the seventeenth century comets and flocks of birds portended Bacon's Rebellion, but in the eighteenth century such prodigies generally failed to elicit providential interpretation. Wonders such as comets, eclipses, and even hurricanes, which had predictable patterns in their timing, were the first to lose their portentous associations. Thus, by the late seventeenth century in New England, comets no longer generated public fast days, because they were understood to be a natural, and knowable, component of God's universe.⁷³ Unpredictable general providences, such as epidemics, were more likely to be interpreted as providential. Accordingly, in the first half of the nineteenth century large segments of the population continued to interpret cholera outbreaks as divine judgments. Although nineteenth-century natural scientists and historians rejected the dichotomy between special and ordinary providences in order to focus on God's total sovereignty, they continued to invoke providential interpretations in nature and in the history of the young nation.⁷⁴

At the same time, the observance of fast days did lapse. In both England and the young United States, the political uses of fast days eventually undermined their popularity. Fast days called in observance of controversial treaties or military engagements drew fire as perverting religion by employing it as a political tool. As a response to natural disasters, rather than governmental policies, fast days had a longer lifespan. Although Andrew Jackson refused to call a national fast day during the 1832 cholera outbreak, eleven state governments, including Maryland's, declared statewide fasts. Similarly, during the 1849 epidemic, Zachary Taylor declared a national observance. By 1866 the third major cholera epidemic of the nineteenth century gave rise to no fast days, reflecting a growing confidence in science rather than providence to explain and prevent such epidemics.⁷⁵

In the eighteenth century, however, ministers, pamphlet writers, and editors in the Chesapeake and in other parts of the British Atlantic world employed providentialism with only minor differences. In both Massachusetts and England some ministers portrayed earthquakes as a natural part of the operations of a benevolent deity, that all things "under the direction of infinite wisdom, power

and beneficence, [are] . . . productive of an over-balance of good."⁷⁶ They argued earthquakes were beneficial physically, as an enrichment to the earth's natural minerals and a purge of subterranean vapors, and morally, for men to endure the suffering they had caused.⁷⁷ No such positive reading has been found in the Chesapeake. Also absent was anti-Catholic rhetoric condemning Portugal's official religion for its tragedy. Although ministers in Massachusetts were reluctant to blame Catholicism explicitly for the earthquake, lay writers demonstrated less restraint. But in the Chesapeake, even Davies, whose Hanover parish was a battleground for Britain's war with the preeminent Catholic power, found Lisbon's religion no more damning than the deism rampant in England. The timing of the earthquake—on All Saint's Day—provided a perfect target for denunciations of Catholicism. Although the *Maryland Gazette* reported that the destructive power of the earthquake and resulting fires was intensified because large numbers of people crowded into churches for holy day Mass and lit an extraordinarily high number of candles, anti-Catholic interpretations were left to the reader's inference.⁷⁸ Perhaps the distance separating the Chesapeake from New France and, in Maryland, the prominent Catholic minority helps explain the absence of this rhetoric. Despite these differences in interpretation, ministers and printers invoked providentialism in remarkably similar ways.

In the final analysis, providentialism was a powerful way to interpret life's misfortunes and successes in the eighteenth-century Chesapeake, as elsewhere. Earthquakes, lightning strikes, and plagues were signs of God's displeasure, but repentance promised a merciful stay from chastisement. God frowned, but also smiled, upon his people. In the reactions to disasters such as the Lisbon earthquake, eighteenth-century Chesapeake ministers, newspaper editors, and laity demonstrated the persistent hold of providentialism. In such tenacity lies a glimpse of how they explained their place in the world and understood their relationship with the divine.

NOTES

1. For more about the disaster and the reaction in Europe, particularly in Portugal and England, see T. D. Kendrick, *The Lisbon Earthquake* (London, 1956); for the New England response see Charles Edwin Clark, "Science, Reason, and an Angry God: The Literature of an Earthquake," *The New England Quarterly*, 38 (1965): 340–62.
2. *Maryland Gazette*, November 20, December 4, 18, and 26, 1755; January 1, 8, 15, and 29, February 19 and 26, March 11, April 15, 22, and 29, and May 6, 20, and 27, 1756. Unfortunately the corresponding issues of the *Virginia Gazette* do not survive. The December 12 and 19, 1755, issues refer to the smaller earthquakes felt along the northern parts of the eastern seaboard, but the next extant issue is dated August 27, 1756, and like the *Maryland Gazette* in the late summer of 1756, does not mention the Lisbon earthquake.
3. Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750* (New

York: Zone Books, 1998); David Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989); Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971); Sara Errington, "Wonders and the Creation of Evangelical Culture in New England, 1720–1820" (PhD. diss., Brown University, 2000); Michael P. Winship, *Seers of God: Puritan Providentialism in the Restoration and Early Enlightenment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Peter R. Eisenstadt, "The Weather and Weather Forecasting in Colonial America" (PhD. diss., New York University, 1990); Margaret C. Jacob, *The Newtonians and the English Revolution, 1689–1720* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1976); Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

4. John K. Nelson, *A Blessed Company: Parishes, Parsons, and Parishioners in Anglican Virginia, 1690–1776* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 205–10; Donald K. Enholm, David Curtis Skaggs, and W. Jeffrey Welsh, "Origins of the Southern Mind: The Parochial Sermons of Thomas Cradock of Maryland, 1744–1770," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 73 (1987): 200–18; Richard Beale Davis, "The Sermon and Religious Tract," *Intellectual Life in the Colonial South, 1585–1763*, 3 vols. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1978), 2:703–800. Although Edward Bond notes that "nature fascinated Virginians" and could function as a call to repentance, he places much greater emphasis on the importance of moral behavior and the orderliness of nature. Bond, "Anglican Theology and Devotion in James Blair's Virginia, 1685–1743," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 104 (1996): 335–36.

5. For further discussion of the distinctions between special and ordinary, or general and particular providences, see Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century*. (1939; repr. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1954), 224–31 and Winship, *Seers of God*, 37–40.

6. For New England see David Hall, *Worlds of Wonders*; Errington, "Wonders and the Creation of Evangelical Culture"; Winship, *Seers of God*; Douglas L. Winiarski, "'Pale Blewish Lights' and a Dead Man's Groan: Tales of the Supernatural from Eighteenth-Century Plymouth, Massachusetts," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d series, 55 (1998): 497–530; and Erik R. Seeman, *Pious Persuasions: Laity and Clergy in Eighteenth-Century New England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999). For colonial New York see Sara Gronim, "Ambiguous Empire: The Knowledge of the Natural World in British Colonial New York" (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University, 1999). For England see Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of the World*; Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England*; Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*.

7. Edward L. Bond, *Damned Souls in a Tobacco Colony: Religion in Seventeenth-Century Virginia* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2000); Patricia Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society and Politics in Colonial America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 15–17, 21–24, 42–50, 97–102, and 181–86; Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 37–55, 68–70, 77–88, and 99–102; Patrick Henry Butler III, "Knowing the Uncertainties of This Life: Death and Society in Colonial Tidewater Virginia" (PhD. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1998); Michael Graham, "Meetinghouse and Chapel: Religion and Community in Seventeenth-Century Maryland," *Colonial Chesapeake Society*, ed. Lois Green Carr, Philip D. Morgan, and Jean B. Russo (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 242–74; Beatriz Betancourt Hardy, "Papists in a Protestant Age: The Catholic Gentry and Community in Colonial Maryland, 1689–1776" (PhD. diss., University of Maryland, 1993); James Horn, *Adapting to a New World: English Society in the Seventeenth-Century Chesapeake* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 381–418; Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982); Arthur Pierce Middleton, *Tercen-*

tenary *Essays Commemorating Anglican Maryland, 1692–1792* (Virginia Beach: Donning Co., 1992); Nelson, *A Blessed Company*; Carol Van Voorst, *The Anglican Clergy in Maryland, 1692–1776* (New York: Garland, 1989).

8. Darrett Rutman, "Magic, Christianity, and Church in Early Virginia," in *Small Worlds, Large Questions: Explorations in Early American Social History, 1600–1850* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994), 138.

9. "A Brief Declaration of the Plantation of Virginia duringe the first twelve years . . . by the Ancient Planters nowe remaining alive in Virginia," *Journals of the House of Burgesses of Virginia, 1619–1658/9* (Richmond, 1915), 35; Bond, *Damned Souls in a Tobacco Colony*, 53.

10. Quoted in James Horn, *Adapting to a New World*, 381. Also discussed in Bond, *Damned Souls in a Tobacco Colony*, 151–52.

11. The years chosen for systematic analysis had the most nearly complete run of the paper in each decade. I also tried to avoid the height of the Stamp Act crisis and the Revolutionary conflict when almost the entire paper was dedicated to political questions.

12. Colonel John Catlett's 1664 letter to his cousin quoted in Horn, *Adapting to a New World*, 416. Thomas Mathew's "Beginning, Progress and Conclusion of Bacon's Rebellion, 1675–1676" (1705) in *Narratives of the Insurrections, 1675–1690*, Charles M. Andrews, ed. (New York, 1915), 15–16. The "Strange Newes from Virginia, being a true Relation of a Great Tempest in Virginia" (London, 1667) argued that the recent hurricane was a judgment from God wherein "he admonisheth and warneth us of our sins" (my thanks to Matt Mulcahy for this reference).

13. For prodigy reporting in colonial American newspapers in general, see Charles E. Clark, *The Public Prints: The Newspaper in Anglo-American Culture, 1665–1740* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), esp. 222–42; and David A. Copeland, *Colonial American Newspapers: Characters and Content* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1997), esp. 69–90, 212–15. Clark identified curiosity about nature and its aberrations, combined with a continued belief in the providential governance of the world, as assumptions common to both colonial and English newspapers, evident in the popularity of articles on such subjects (242). I find a similar interest in the *Virginia Gazette* and *Maryland Gazette* continuing in the half-century after the end of Clark's study, although the range of the types of wonders reported contracted over the course of the century.

14. *Virginia Gazette*, October 6, 1738; Katharine Park and Lorraine Daston, "Unnatural Conceptions: The Study of Monsters in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century France and England," *Past and Present*, 92 (1981): 32–34.

15. Lorraine Daston has shown that such a focus on facts rather than theory was intended to meliorate the problem of dissent within the natural philosophy circle. See Daston, "Baconian Facts, Academic Civility, and the Prehistory of Objectivity," *Annals of Scholarship*, 8 (1991): 337–63; Gronim, "Ambiguous Empire," 109–15; Michael Hunter, *Science and Society in Restoration England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 13.

16. Samuel Davies, "The Religious Improvement of the Late Earthquakes," June 19, 1756, *Sermons on Important Subjects*, 3 vols. (New York, 1811), 3:164; Thomas Cradock, "Santifie ye a fast," c.1755, xerox copy in Cradock Papers, Maryland Episcopal Diocesan Archives, original ms. in possession of St. Thomas Parish, Baltimore County, 1.

17. Cradock, "Santifie ye a fast," 3–4.

18. *Ibid.*, 14.

19. Davies, "The Religious Improvement of Late Earthquakes," *Sermons on Important Subjects*, 3:169, 170–71, 177.

20. *Ibid.*, 163–65.

21. *Maryland Gazette*, March 11, 1756.

22. William Byrd, *Another Secret Diary of William Byrd of Westover, 1739–1741*, ed., Maude H. Woodfin, trans., Marion Tinling (Richmond, Va.: The Dietz Press, Inc., 1942), 420.
23. Davies, “The Crisis: Or the Uncertain Doom of Kingdoms at Particular Times,” *Sermons on Important Subjects*, 3:75.
24. Joseph G. J. Bend, “For the Fast on account of the Malignant Fever prevailing in Philadelphia in 1793,” October 2, 1793, Bend Papers, Maryland Episcopal Diocesan Archives, 1–2.
25. The hymn Davies composed in reaction to the Lisbon earthquake is particularly interesting. The earthquake inspired him to meditate for eight stanzas on “how great, how terrible that God, who shakes creation with a nod . . . Crush’d under guilt’s oppressive weight, this globe now totters to its fate.” Davies, *Sermons on Important Subjects*, 3:177.
26. Davies, “The Crisis,” *ibid.*, 3:66.
27. Sermon discussed in Davis, “The Sermon and Religious Tract,” *Intellectual Life in the South*, 737.
28. *Maryland Gazette*, May 13, 1756.
29. *Virginia Gazette*, December 11, 1766.
30. *Ibid.*, September 28, 1769.
31. *Ibid.*, November 2, 1769.
32. *Ibid.*, September 14 and November 9 and 23, 1769. Rind’s *Virginia Gazette*, September 1, 1769.
33. Katie Whitaker. “The Culture of Curiosity,” in N. Jardine, S. A. Secord, and E. C. Spary, eds., *Cultures of Natural History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 75–90; Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, 304, 321–50.
34. *Maryland Gazette*, December 18, 1755. The competing theory, that earthquakes were caused by an underground build-up of electricity, was advocated by Thomas Prince in Massachusetts and William Stukeley in England but does not appear in any Chesapeake discussions of the earthquakes of 1755. For Prince, see Clark, “Science, Reason and an Angry God,” 344, 354, and Errington, “Wonders and the Creation of Evangelical Culture,” 162. For Stukeley, see Kendrick, *The Lisbon Earthquake*, 6, 64.
35. Secondary causes, also called immediate causes, did not have to be related to natural philosophy, although that is their most common source in the documents examined for this paper. See Fred Anderson, *A People’s Army* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 196–223, for an examination of providentialism in the context of New England soldiers during the Seven Years’ War. Anderson finds military professionalism as a common immediate cause given for military successes and failures, which New England’s soldiers interpreted in providential ways.
36. John Redwood, *Reason, Ridicule, and Religion: The Age of Enlightenment in England, 1660–1750* (London, 1976); Eisenstadt, “Weather and Weather Forecasting in Colonial America,” 168–73; Hunter, *Science and Society*, 162–87; Winship, *Seers of God*, 42–43.
37. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 91–92.
38. Davies, “Signs of the Times,” *Sermons on Important Subjects*, 3:98.
39. Hunter. *Science and Society*, 188–89.
40. Landon Carter, *The Diary of Landon Carter of Sabine Hall, 1752–1778*, ed., Jack P. Greene (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1965), 2:660 (March 22, 1772); Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 78–112; Daston, “Facts and Evidence”; Park and Daston, “Unnatural Conceptions.”
41. Carter, *Diary*, 1:353 (February 6, 1770).
42. Thomas Chase, “The Home at Bethany,” 1748, Chase Papers, Maryland Episcopal Diocesan Archives. Chase’s authorship of this sermon is not certain, but the inclusion of this

sermon with others known to be composed and delivered by Chase suggests that if he did not write it, he probably at least preached it. For more on Chase see Rosamond Randall Beirne, "The Reverend Thomas Chase: Pugnacious Parson," *Maryland Historical Magazine*, 59 (1964): 1–14.

43. Bond, *Damned Souls*, 278–79.

44. Davies, "The Religious Improvement of the Late Earthquakes," *Sermons on Important Subjects*, 3:172.

45. Davies, "Signs of the Times," *Sermons on Important Subjects*, 3:96.

46. Carter, *Diary*, 2:660 (March 22, 1772); *Maryland Gazette*, December 18, 1755.

47. *Maryland Gazette*, December 18, 1755.

48. Byrd, *Another Secret Diary*, 421, 423.

49. Bend, "For the Fast on account of the Malignant Fever prevailing in Philadelphia in 1793," Bend Papers, Maryland Episcopal Diocesan Archives, October 2, 1793, 28–29.

50. *Virginia Gazette* October 17, 1766.

51. *Ibid.*, February 19, 1767. Both pieces implied the circulation of an argument against lightning rods as interfering with divine providence, although that argument is not articulated in any of the extant issues of the *Virginia Gazette*.

52. Quoted in Winship, *Seers of God*, 38.

53. Davis, *Intellectual Life in the Colonial South*, 714; Nelson, *A Blessed Company*, 200–207.

54. John Tillotson, "Sermon III: The Advantages of Religion to Societies," *Works* (London, 1696), 44.

55. Byrd, *Secret Diary*, 278 (December 29, 1710).

56. Henry Patillo, "Diary Fragments," Patillo Papers, 1726–1801, Union Theological Seminary and Presbyterian School of Christian Education.

57. Byrd, *Secret Diary*, 186–87 (June 3, 1710); Carter, *Diary*, 1:220 (April 22, 1758). Devereux Jarratt, *The Life of the Reverend Devereux Jarratt, Rector of Bath Parish, Dinwiddie County, Virginia, Written by Himself, in a Series of Letters Addressed to the Rev. John Coleman . . .* (Baltimore, 1806), 181. For a discussion of the difficulty of applying providentialism to personal tragedies see Martin Fitzpatrick "Enlightenment, politics and providence: some Scottish and English comparisons" in Knud Haakonssen, ed., *Enlightenment and Religion: Rational Dissent in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 96–98.

58. *Virginia Gazette*, October 6, 1738. These types of providential interpretations of war and empire have been discussed in terms of New England, rather than the Chesapeake. See Fred Anderson, *A People's Army*, 196–223.

59. Davies, "The Crisis," *Sermons on Important Subjects*, 3:76; Davies, "God the Sovereign of all Kingdoms," *Sermons on Important Subjects*, 3:221.

60. Davies, "The Religious Improvement of the Late Earthquakes," *Sermons on Important Subjects*, 3:172. Bend preached on similar themes of the need for the community as a whole to repent to avert the chastisement of plague. "For the Fast on account of the Malignant Fever prevailing in Philadelphia in 1793," esp. 13.

61. For an example of such a special liturgy see the *Maryland Gazette's* front page reprint of the service used for the February 6 fast day in England in response to the Lisbon earthquake, *Maryland Gazette*, May 20, 1756.

62. Richard J. Janet, "Prayer and Politics: General Fasts in the Early American Republic," *Mid-America: An Historical Review*, 67 (1985): 97–107; Roland Bartel, "The Story of Fast Days in England," *Anglican Theological Review*, 37 (1955): 190–200; W. DeLoss Love, Jr., *The Fast and Thanksgiving Days of New England* (Boston, 1895); Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 170–172; Walsham Providence in Early Modern England, 143. For seventeenth-century Virginia fast days see Wil-

liam Waller Hening, *The Statutes at Large: Being a Collection of all the Laws of Virginia from the First Session of the Legislature, in the year 1619*, 1:289–90, 2:264, 399.

63. Byrd, *Secret Diary*, *Another Secret Diary*, and *The London Diary, 1717–1721*, ed. Louis B. Wright and Marion Tinling (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958); Carter, *Diary*; James Gordon, “Journal of Col. James Gordon, of Lancaster County, Va.,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 11, No. 2 (Oct., 1902): 88–112, No. 3 (Jan., 1903), and No. 4 (April 1903): 217–36; *ibid.*, 12, No. 1 (July 1903): 1–12; Lester J. Cappon and Stella F. Duff, eds., *Virginia Gazette, Index, 1736–1780*, 2 vols. (Williamsburg, Va.: Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1950), also available on microfilm; Karen Ordahl Kupperman, John C. Appleby and Mandy Banton, consultant eds., *Calendar State Papers, Colonial: North America and the West Indies, 1574–1739*, CD-ROM (New York: Routledge, 2000).

64. A wider survey of diaries and official correspondence probably would have yielded a larger group of fast days.

65. References for fast days, in *Calendar of State Papers*, [CSP] April 6, 1700; August 6, 1701; April 15, 1709; January 15, 1710; August 6, 1711; and June 8, 1728. Byrd, *Secret Diary*, 36, 128–29, 293–94, and 401–2. *Virginia Gazette* [VaGaz] January 16, 1746; September 12, 1755; May 26, 1774 (Purdie & Dixon); May 11, 1776 (Dixon & Hunter); January 31, 1777 (Dixon & Hunter); and April 9, 1779 (Dixon & Hunter); Patillo, “Diary Fragments,” 26; Davies, *Sermons on Important Subjects*, 3:163; Gordon, “Diary,” Vol. 11, No. 3, 198 and Vol. 12, No. 1, 8; Carter, *Diary*, Vol. II, 818–19, 924–25, and 1087.

66. Byrd, *Secret Diary*, 36, 128–29, 293–94, 401–2. Also noted in *Calendar State Papers*, April 15, 1709, January 15, 1710, and August 6, 1711. Byrd, *Another Secret Diary*, *passim*. and *London Diary*, *passim*.

67. Carter, *Diary*, 2:818.

68. Byrd, *Another Secret Diary*, 436.

69. Byrd, *Secret Diary*, 36.

70. *Virginia Gazette*, September 19, 1755.

71. *Maryland Gazette*, May 20, 1756.

72. Bend, “Occasioned by the third visitation of Baltimore by the Yellow Fever,” October 10, 1800, Bend Papers, Maryland Episcopal Diocesan Archives, 1–2.

73. Errington, “Wonders and the Creation of Evangelical Culture,” 42; Matt Mulcahy, “A Tempestuous Spirit Called Hurri Cano: Hurricanes and Colonial Society in the British Greater Caribbean,” in Steven Biel, ed., *American Disasters* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).

74. Charles E. Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years: The United States in 1832, 1849, and 1866* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 40–54, 121–32; Jonathan Tucker Boyd, “This Holy Hieroglyph: Providence and Historical Consciousness in George Bancroft’s Historiography” (Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1999).

75. Janet, “Prayer and Politics”; Bartel, “The Story of Public Fast Days in England”; Rosenberg, *Cholera Years*, 40–54, 121–32, 220–22.

76. Quote by John Winthrop, minister and Harvard professor of mathematics, cited in Clark, “Science, Religion and an Angry God,” 352.

77. Clark, “Science, Religion and an Angry God,” 351–57; Kendrick, *The Lisbon Earthquake*, 119–41.

78. *Maryland Gazette*, February 26 and May 27, 1756; Clark, “Science, Reason, and an Angry God,” 359–61.