

# Evil and suffering



“ If Only there is No God then there is No Problem:” A Theological Reflection On the Mystery of Evil And Uniqueness of God For a theologian or an ordinary person concerned with the problem of theodicy, human suffering appears to be inconsistent with the notion of a God who is all-powerful and good.

It is rationally inconceivable to claim belief in such a God when people are faced with senseless suffering in their day-to-day-life. How do we respond to the events of suffering that challenge our relationship with God and call into question our whole identity as human beings? A friend once wrote to me:” When I think about the problems that I face currently in my life I roll tears and cry bitterly to God for testing me and treating me in the way God does. If God were visible to me I would talk to him bitterly about the illnesses and sufferings I’m experiencing in my day-to-day life since the beginning of last year. Yet I cry and bend down on my knees begging God to forgive me in case I have transgressed. Similarly, when he was asked to share his experience regarding the present war crisis in the Sudan at a conference with the Archbishop of Des Moines, one Sudanese “ lost boy” said; “ How do you expect us to think that God loves the people of Southern Sudan who suffer the adversity of war and famine every single day of their lives? We pray everyday, but God does not pay attention to our prayer; everyday innocent people are killed. What do you expect us to think about God? Love Him? ” Yet on the other hand, if you watched the collapse of the World Trade Center on September 11 2001, you would recall the believer’s cry “ Oh my God, Oh my God” as suffering and death loomed imminent on the victims of the terrorist attack.

Here in Chicago you may recall the words of Dorothy Myers on the scene of destruction, as the E2 regulars saw troubles of severe suffering and death brewing when fire broke out in the nightclub. “ We need answers,” she cried. “ What is going on? Our kids are gone. Oh Jesus give us some answers.

[1]Whether Jesus gave them an answer we don’t know, we know that the problem of evil and suffering in the world has vexed theologians and ordinary people since before the time of Job. Suffering on Job’s trash heap, demanded an audience with God. The questions raised by the conditions of personal and social sufferings continue to challenge the faith of most believers, and some suggest that the apparent failure of theology and religion to adequately account for evil and suffering is the greatest source of atheism in the modern age. Struggling with the problem of suffering and evil may lead to atheism, but still for one who believes, s/he is faced with the question of God and the appropriate response to suffering. Sooner or later the question becomes: “ If there is God that we believe in, why then all this suffering? Or a more radical approach would claim: “ if only there is no God, then there is no problem. ”[3] When people suffer they cry out to God.

They wonder why God allows such suffering to occur to them. They wonder about the evil they have done to deserve such a punishment. In a sense, true suffering and hopelessness such as the endless war in Sudan, the September 11 terrorist attack, individuals suffering with terminal illnesses, distort people’s image of and belief in God as well as of as their understanding of the person as created in the image and likeness of God. They wonder whether God is such a blind force of destiny without any feeling, or God is simply being apathetic.

They also wonder whether the human person, the masterpiece of God's beautiful creation is endowed with any spark of goodness as does claim Karl Rahner. On the other hand there is an increasing tendency in Western societies to consider suffering as evil in itself and thus something to be banished as quickly as possible without considering its source or meaning. More troubling, however, are those people and societies that deny suffering which is part of a great passion, and deny it the opportunity to communicate the source of pain. People such as those, who desire to live completely, painlessly happy, repress suffering and deny it its true possibilities.

Although suffering as such is never ennobling, it is part and parcel of our being creatures. Put in Moltman's words, " Life without passion is a poor thing. Life without the preparedness for suffering is thin and poverty-stricken. The fear of passion has to be got over just as the fear of suffering.

[5] True suffering, says Weil, is the subjective human response to physical pain, psychological anguish, and social alienation. [6] One can confront the source of pain or as individuals and societies we can attend only to the symptoms. The later approach leads to self-medication with alcohol and drugs especially among the youth, or to consumerism, especially in the western cultures, and to music, dance and sex, as alternative defense mechanisms in some African cultures, when people are faced with the painful situation of suffering. From this perspective suffering is no longer a theological or philosophical question, but a problem to be controlled through some sorts of behavior or addictions. But still suffering and evil endure and break into the lives of all and the questions of source and meaning persist and emerge in the minds of many who have abandoned God and religion as

irrelevant. My purpose of dealing with this issue of evil and suffering is to see the relationship between sin and suffering as St.

Augustine points it out, but more importantly, to realize that the issue of evil and suffering is a live issue in various pastoral settings not only in hospitals where people are faced with questions of physical pain, but also in family and group dynamics, in ministering with the displaced and the landless refugees, and the poorest, most abandoned and marginalized of society. It is for them that I find a mystical theodicy not a solution to their situation, but a possible model for inviting re-engagement with the question of God and our human response to personal and social suffering. In this paper I wish to propose mystical theodicy as a viable response to the question of evil and suffering in the world, not just for those alienated from God but for anyone who finds traditional theodicy either lacking or simply inadequate. After defining the terms relevant to this discussion I will consider the question of evil, its origin and its operation in the human life, and how traditional Christian theodicy understood it. Finally I will look at the features of mystical theodicy and examine how it offers an alternative way to delve into the question of evil and suffering in the world. Definition of some relevant terms: Before examining mystical theodicy as a suitable response to the theological questions raised by evil and suffering in the life of people, it is necessary to define some important terms used here.

Theodicy is generally understood as the religious effort to defend God's justice and power in the face of a world marred by suffering. [7] In simple terms it is how we respond to the question of how God who is omnipotent and good could allow the pain and evil and suffering that occurs in the life of

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individuals and society. Within Christianity theodicy is inseparably tied up with images of God and the nature and purpose of suffering. [8] As such, those elements will be important aspects of the model of mystical theodicy. However, it should be noted that although the justification of God is necessary to theodicy, other aspects of the problems are often neglected in traditional theodicies. An adequate theodical response to the challenge of evil and suffering also needs to provide positive or affirmative consolatory elements.

Mysticism or mystical theodicy on the other hand, has a deep meaning in Christian spirituality. Bernard McGinn defines Christian mysticism as “ that part of Christianity’s belief and practices that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God. [9] This definition apparently says nothing about an extraordinary experience of the divine. It also says nothing about mystical experiences as a gift given to a chosen few. Although Christian tradition tends to think of mysticism as a religious domain of the extraordinary saints who have reached the zenith of their contemplative life, in fact, there is the growing awareness that the mystical consciousness is present in all people, Christians and non Christians alike. Perhaps that is yet another reason why the traditional African and some other non-western cultures give great reverence to their ancestors who are not necessarily extraordinary people; they are not mystics in the restricted sense of the term, but people who lived a life full of God’s presence.

True mysticism is not piety, neither is it a life of isolation and escape; rather it is a different way of being in the world, in which the direct presence of God

is sought and recognized in the ordinary aspects of life, and in sharing our day-to-day social political and economic life, but also in the experience of suffering and evil. What about evil, what is it? In order to define evil, it is important to look at traditional Christian theodicy and how it has dealt with this issue in the human history. Traditional Christian Theodicy and the mystery of Evil The most common theodicy that remains operative within the beliefs of even the most sophisticated Christians is the theme of divine retribution. This is the view expressed most critically in the book of Job, which presents the idea that God's blessings are rewards for the righteous, while pain and suffering are the divinely just punishment for the sinful and wicked. Job challenged this theodicy in his protest and claim of innocence and faithfulness to God before and during the plague of troubles that visited upon him and his family and property.

Even though the author of the book of Job seemingly rejects the retributive explanation given by Job's friends, he still shows Job's day in court with God, only to Job's questions sidelined by God's recitation of his mighty deeds of creations. The court ends with Job's confession, as we all must at certain point in our confrontation with evil forces, " I have dealt with great things that I do not understand. " (Job42: 3) This retributive model is widespread and prevalent in the operative theologies of many Christians and perhaps non-Christian, due mainly to the images of God we inherited from Hebrew Scriptures. Some modern theologians have criticized this view recently. Dostoevsky in *Brothers Karamazov* is one of the many who expose the inadequacies of a retributive theodicy.

He points out to the incidences of suffering children and ask: what sin could a young child have done to merit such painful suffering? Ivan Karamazov, like so many today rejects any God that could allow such unjust misery. However it is not God that is inadequate in this model, but the image of God and the resulting theodicy. Another theodicy that is operative in many personal and Christian philosophies is the free will model in which evil and suffering are considered inevitable consequences if people are to be free. This model finds its roots in the Hebrew Scriptures and for the modern Christians it has been developed by St. Augustine, particularly in his development of the idea of the fall of humanity and the concept of original sin.

[11] It is the free will theodicy that spells out the relationship between suffering and sin as we shall see. In order to get to his doctrine of original sin Augustine first describes the pre-sin, pure state of grace in which Adam and Eve were created and lived. He summarizes their condition as people “uniquely endowed with supernatural gift of sanctifying grace, together with other blessings of preternatural gifts. By virtue of this they were immune from concupiscence, endowed with special gift of knowledge and freedom from death.

”[12] He went on to say that the supernatural gifts given to our proto parents included the gifts of immortality, impassibility, integrity, miraculous knowledge, and freedom from error. [13] Augustine’s view of the pre-sin state of affairs clearly indicates an absence of evil and suffering at certain time in the history of creation. How the fall of such moral giants came about is a question of concern of Augustine’s theological discourse. In the first place



Augustine takes seriously the pre-modern scientific worldview narrated in the genesis account of the fall of humanity. He sees it an actual state of affairs somewhere on this earth.

14] He contends that the paradisaal state of grace in which human beings were first created was disrupted by sin, so much so that “ through sin Adam lost not only the sanctifying grace, but all the preternatural gifts, not only for himself, but for his posterity as well. The world was changed from the place of idyllic harmony to one of pain and agony. Immortality was lost and the painful existence would be capped with the fearful death. ”[15] Evil, for that matter, is deeply rooted in sin and in the created free will of the person and must not be seen as something outside of him or her. Under Augustinian thought God is not responsible for evil or sin: pain and suffering are allowed as punishments and means of purification for those who look for the final reward in the afterlife.

[16] The only Evil for Augustine is sin, the refusal to comply with the will of God. Out of this sin come the miseries inflicted upon humanity. Augustine denies natural evil, asserting that all creation is fundamentally good, as God declared in Genesis. What suffering we experience at the hand of nature results from lack of appreciation for the goodness of creation or from God’s punishment for sin.

17] With regards to fundamental goodness, Augustine claims a hierarchical order through which it unfolds: there is a higher and a lower good. The human person, because of his free will is free to choose between the higher and lower good. But rather than looking upward to the higher scale of

goodness the created free will of the human person chooses to look downward to the lower good, which keeps him or her away from the higher good, and consequently from the Absolute Good, and thus the unavoidable consequence of alienation that leads to pain, suffering and death. Thus evil is fundamentally a moral problem; it should not be seen merely as a question of limitation or a simple imperfection in the created world.

The account of the fall of man in Genesis 3 indicates the fact that the human person has to suffer and die on account of his or her sin. This fact is stated more precisely and distinctly in Roman 5: 12, “ Therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all [people] because all [people] sinned. ” This perspective on evil liberates God from the responsibility of evil in the world and puts human being accountable for their moral behavior. On the other hand it creates a tendency to look at every evil suffered as punishment for some wrongdoing. The resulting concern is how to place into perspective the suffering that strikes the innocent as well as the unrighteous. A rather spiritualized response to the second concern is the tendency to relate the suffering of the righteous ones to the salvific plan of God; and that in the long run the suffering of the innocent ones is redeeming, and thus it becomes a means through which divine love is manifested and realized in the world of sin.

18] To say the least, Augustinian understanding of evil is a “ privation,” a radical distortion, and a negative manifestation of that which is fundamentally good. Evil is “ never positively willed by God, but only always permitted, always with a higher good in mind, of which evil is the inevitable counterpart. ”[19] Free-will theodicy, while historically influential in Christian

theology, offers a limited explanation of moral evil. It also proves to be inadequate for contemporary people of faith seeking to explain the evil of natural disaster such as flood, earthquakes, etc.

On the other hand, Augustine's analysis of evil and its origin has been valued as a shield against the manichaeistic dualistic response to the problem of evil, which interprets evil as the opposite of good, so much so that all that exists, all of creation falls into one of the two general categories of being: that which is spiritual and good and that which is material and evil. The spiritual alone can be properly called God's creation and the material world stands over and against the primeval and permanent principle of evil. The dualistic tendency frees people from the responsibility for the evil that exists in the world; evil is beyond our control, it is part of nature, because all that exists, exists as spiritual and material, light and darkness, good and evil, life and death. The problem with the dualistic view, however, is that it undermines the freedom of people and the authority of God to combat evil. So far we can claim that the traditional explanation of evil as a privation, or an absence, or a lack of goodness, makes quite a bit of sense even though it does not offer a viable solution to the problem. This is simply an indication that evil is a problem.

There is no adequate language to probe into the mystery of it, except to acknowledge its presence and its effect on the quality of human dignity. But how we can adequately talk about the mystery of evil alongside the mystery of the uniqueness of God has been the challenge of traditional Christian theodicy. There is yet another area of theodicy that offers response to the question of evil and suffering in the life of people. This model, which we may

name “ eschatological” or better teleological model, looks to the future for the justification of present suffering. It supposes that evil or suffering is a necessary component in the process of transformation of present circumstances to some future, improved state of affairs.

20] While this theodicy seems to offer satisfying and mainly consoling answers to most people, it is not without its difficulties. The main drawback of the teleological theodicy is that by focusing on the end-time scenario, there is a diminished compulsion to work to change the present evil conditions. [21] In other words, it argues that if evil and suffering serve a greater good in the future, why strive to stop its operation? Karl Marx critiqued this theodicy, calling such religious tendencies “ an opium of the poor,” and the suffering. The problem that I perceive with this theodicy is that, by adopting such a lazy and passive approach to suffering and evil in the world, it might deprive the sufferer of his or her prime concern to determine the level of his or her strengths and the emotional energy, and the measure of continuity, stability, and predictability that can enable him or her to survive the shock of suffering, but more importantly it might deprive the sufferer of his or her human capacity to transcend the present moment and discover an adequate guiding truth to live by. Because of these objections, one may want to turn to some contemporary philosophers and theologians regarding the destiny of the human person in relation to evil and suffering. Among these is the perspective offered by John Hick and his theory of a “ soul- making theodicy.

” He turns to Iraneaus rather than to Augustine and adopts the view that men and women are created in the image of God, and our journeys through

life are part of a process in which we adopt the likeness of God. 22] We move toward perfection and toward fulfillment of God's design by responding to the divine presence in the universe and choosing to be in fuller relationship with God. Thus the world and its travails contribute to the soul-making of individuals, transforming the raw materials of humanity into a perfected state of divinized children of God. [23] Moral evil involves a free will and the person's capacity to freely choose to respond to, or reject God's call for relationship and the building of the Kingdom on earth. Natural evil exists as necessary obstacle that contribute to the soul-making endeavor by pushing us forward in our spiritual development. Although John Hick's theodicy is intellectually more satisfying than many others, there are still weaknesses with this teleological perspective.

Father Zosima in the Brothers Karamazov expresses such a soul-making theodicy when he tells a grieving mother that her sorrows "in the end will turn to quiet joy, and her bitter tears will be, but tears of quiet tenderness, purifying the soul and absolving it from sin. [24] But from a pastoral standpoint it offers limited consolation for the suffering endured in the here and now. A child's illness and death may make sense in the larger picture, and may teach the parents empathy and compassion, but what parent would not reject the benefits of those lessons for the sake of sparing their child such suffering? All through often struggling with severe illnesses or great evil such as torture during war, or lack of food often experienced by displaced people and refugees, results not in "soul-making", but in "soul destruction. Still, there are variations in this teleological soul-making theodicy that offer the hope for understanding, as well as consolation.

Returning to *Brothers Karamazov* we find a mystical theodicy of present in the thoughts and action of Alyosha. For Dostoevsky, active love and compassion are the ways by which one reaches the spiritual ideal of a mystical sense of the interdependence of all creation with God as the unifying force. [25] In this perspective love and compassion are more powerful than forces of evil and suffering. The problem, however, might be that the mystical understanding of the world, though open to all, may not be readily understood or realized by many. A mystical theodicy is situated within the teleological framework in which a person understands suffering to be a part of the soul-making process of conforming to the image of God. Indeed the classical first stage of mystical life is purgation or purification, which in the writings of the mystics always involves detachment, renunciation, and invariably personal suffering.

Unlike most teleological theodicies, telos for mystics is not located in the after life, but is it recognized as being an attainable goal that can be realized at least in part in the here and now, both individually and socially. Union with God, the aim of mystical life, means union with a Trinitarian God, the realization of which informs the mystics' relationship to suffering and theodicy.