

Evil and suffering

[Religion](#), [God](#)



“ 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-today-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.[2]

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.[4] 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 individuals and society.