

SECURITY BUT NO CERTAINTY: TOWARD A CHRISTIAN THEODICY

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Few things break the heart and boggle the mind like the problem of evil, that "universal theme that accompanies man at every point on earth."¹ Mark Twain observed that human beings "belong to a singular race. Every man is a suffering machine and a happiness machine combined."² For many, he went on to note, life is not a blessing but a disaster. For others evil poses an intractable obstacle to belief in an all-powerful and all-loving God.³

Gratuitous evil, both moral and natural, rampages through every level of our existence. On the cosmic level we see the unending growth and power of militarism, politics and statism, both east and west, left and right, which oppress the human spirit.⁴ Every year forty million to fifty million people created in God's image for fellowship with him are aborted.⁵ The nightly news reminds us of millions starving to death, while the world's abundant food supply piles up on borders. Thus Pope John Paul writes of the "incomparable accumulation of sufferings" in our world today.⁶ Beyond this cosmic level, though, there is the personal level, and each person and family, as Tolstoy observed, suffers despair in its unique and private way.⁷

What, exactly, is "the problem of evil"? First, we need to remind ourselves that there is no final agreement on the formulation of the problem, which means of course that there is no unanimity as to an answer. For some the

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¹Pope John Paul II, "Salvifici Doloris, The Christian Meaning of Suffering," *Origins* 13 (February 1984) 611.

²M. Twain, "The Mysterious Stranger," in *Great Short Works of Mark Twain* (ed. J. Kaplan; New York: Harper, 1967) 325.

³See John Stuart Mill, as but one example, in his *Autobiography* (New York: Columbia University, 1944) 29. Twain opts for a type of nihilism due to the problem of evil; cf. *Works* (ed. Kaplan) 365.

⁴For but one example see A. Valladares, *Against All Hope: The Prison Memoirs of Armando Valladares* (New York: Knopf, 1986).

⁵Reported by B. Couzinet in *Time* (December 29, 1986) 64.

⁶John Paul, "Salvifici" 612.

⁷L. Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, n.d.) 1: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." While the first half of this sentence may not be true, I think Tolstoy rightly hints at the intensely private nature of suffering evil.

problem is the fact that God allows any evil in the world, while for others the problem is not simply that evil exists but that too much evil exists. For our purposes we can say that the problem concerns the apparent contradiction between the reality of evil and the affirmation, demanded by the Scriptures, that God is both all-powerful and all-good. Theodicy (*theos*/God plus *dikē*/justice), then, becomes an attempt to reconcile this dilemma and to justify God's ways. Boethius (c. 480 to c. 524) struggles with this "greatest of all mysteries, one which can hardly be fully explained,"⁸ and provides a classic formulation of the problem:

Here, though, is the greatest cause of my sadness: since there is a good governor of all things, how can there be evil, and how can it go unpunished? Think how astonishing this is. But it is even more amazing that with wickedness in full control, virtue not only goes unrewarded, but is trampled underfoot by the wicked and is punished instead of vice. That this can happen in the realm of an all-knowing and all-powerful God who desires only good must be a cause of surprise and sorrow to everyone.⁹

The problem of evil is not just a Christian dilemma, of course, although it poses special challenges for the Christian. We find ourselves obliged to address the issue for several reasons. People suffer more deeply due to false solutions to the problem of evil. Further, both pastoral care and evangelism make good theology at this point an outright necessity. In the past several years I have grappled with theodicy as both a pastor and a theologian. Let me proffer six affirmations that, it seems to me, prescribe the parameters in which Christian theodicies must move.

First, we acknowledge the severe limitations of rational argumentation or philosophical analysis to solve the issue, and that for two reasons. On the one hand, human reason operates with inherent restrictions. All theodicies operate with their own a priori beliefs. As David Griffin notes, there is no such thing as pure reason unaffected by faith.¹⁰ No theodicy will ever be entirely adequate, and we can never hope for a universal solution—a situation that, among recent writers, both John Roth and Frederick Sontag recognize.¹¹

William James makes a related point. Philosophers often claim to reason to truths that, it is claimed, are universally valid and authoritatively binding. J. L. Mackie and H. J. McCloskey illustrate this tendency in theodicy when they conclude that the application of the canons of logic to the problem of evil

⁸Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1981) 91.

⁹Ibid., p. 75. Boethius' statement focuses on moral evil caused by sin. Other types of evil that must be included are natural evil (earthquakes, famine, floods, etc.) and metaphysical evil or the inherent limitations and imperfections of finite beings. For another classic formulation of the problem see D. Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (New York: Hafner, 1961) 66: "Epicurus' old questions are yet unanswered. Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?"

¹⁰D. Griffin, "Creation out of Chaos and the Problem of Evil," in *Encountering Evil* (ed. S. Davis; Atlanta: John Knox, 1981) 115.

¹¹J. Roth, "A Theodicy of Protest," in *ibid.*, p. 20; F. Sontag, "Anthropodicy and the Return of God," in *ibid.*, p. 141.

proves without a doubt that traditional theism (God as all-good and all-powerful) requires the affirmation of a logical contradiction and that therefore it is positively irrational.¹² In reality, James writes, such claims to elicit universal assent are almost never successful:

I need not discredit philosophy by laborious criticism of its arguments. It will suffice if I show how that as a matter of history it fails to prove its pretension to be "objectively" convincing. In fact, philosophy does so fail. It does not banish differences; it founds schools and sects just as feeling does.¹³

This does not mean we should abandon attempts at theodicy. Rather, it means that reason serves faith and does not establish or replace faith.

We recognize the inherent limitations of rational solutions for another reason. To pose the problem as an intellectual one misplaces the proper focus of our efforts. In other words, the problem of theodicy is more pastoral than academic. Human sufferers need compassion, not simply clichés or correct answers. Job reminds us of this important lesson. C. S. Lewis makes the point with typical poignancy. Having suggested that the purpose of his *Problem of Pain* is to tackle only the intellectual aspect of the problem, he continues:

For the far higher task of teaching fortitude and patience I was never fool enough to suppose myself qualified, nor have I anything to offer my readers except my conviction that when pain is to be borne, a little courage helps more than much knowledge, a little human sympathy more than much courage, and the last tincture of the love of God more than all.¹⁴

Theologians variously formulate distinctions between faith and reason, nature and grace, revelation and experience, theology and theodicy. Our second affirmation maintains the priority of faith in God's self-revelation for the content of theodicy, or what some refer to as a theology "from above" (Barth) as against a theology "from below" (Schleiermacher, Tillich).

Many theodicians assume the latter position and insist, like Hume's Philo, that we must at all costs follow "the dictates of plain reason."¹⁵ Such thinkers insist that we must begin with human experience and from it formulate ideas about God's nature. Sontag maintains that we should "not begin with God and then discover the problem of evil. Rather, evil blocks our consideration of God in the first place."¹⁶ Griffin, likewise, suggests that experience must rule all our judgments and that faith can never oppose reason.¹⁷ William Jones represents the disastrous consequences of this when he argues that "the

¹²J. L. Mackie and H. J. McCloskey in *God and Evil* (ed. N. Pike; Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1964).

¹³W. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Macmillan, 1961) 341. Not all philosophers, and certainly not James, make claims of eliciting universal assent.

¹⁴C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962) 10.

¹⁵D. Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, in Pike's *God and Evil* (ed. Pike) 26.

¹⁶Sontag in *Encountering* (ed. Davis) 138.

¹⁷Griffin in *ibid.*, p. 115.

theodicy question must control the entire theological enterprise and be its ultimate foundation.”¹⁸

We insist, however, that Biblical revelation provides us with a means to interpret experience. We begin with God’s self-revelation and we then try “to reconcile the facts of the world to the doctrine with which we have begun.”¹⁹ No one has stated this methodological perspective better than Anselm, who declared: “For I do not seek to understand in order to believe, but I believe in order to understand. For this too I believe, that ‘unless I believe, I shall not understand.’”²⁰ Thus faith seeks understanding, that it might gain a modicum of understanding and at least not be overwhelmed in its belief.²¹ Even Hume hints at this position when, through Philo, he observes the irony that there is a legitimate sphere of faith that reason cannot overrule. “The eyes of faith alone”²² might arrive at truths regarding God’s nature, in which case experiences of overwhelming evil need not be an obstacle to theism.

Our third affirmation follows the first two, for here we accept the positive value of mystery and paradox. In his apostolic letter “*Salvifici Doloris*” John Paul uses the term “mystery” some twenty-two times, meaning that which “the individual is unable to penetrate completely by his own intelligence.”²³ He applies the term to people, their calling to suffering, the Church, suffering itself, and most importantly and most often the person and work of Jesus Christ. Eleven times he refers to the divine mystery of the redemption of the world. Indeed, using the words of the Second Vatican Council we affirm with him that “only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light.”²⁴

On the idea of mystery several comments are in order. First, some theodists criticize the appeal to mystery as a grave weakness. Both Sontag and Griffin, for example, accuse Davis of a pious agnosticism that claims ignorance as an ally. If empirical evidence alone is one’s sole criterion for truth the charge is a substantial one, but at that point strict empiricism must counter charges that it displays a reductionistic positivism—a difficult and perhaps impossible task. Second, the appeal to mystery need not be an irrational defense-based-on-ignorance.²⁵ It can be “a frank appeal to the positive value

¹⁸W. Jones, *Is God A White Racist?* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1973) xx.

¹⁹J. Cobb in *Encountering* (ed. Davis) 175. Cobb of course rejects this position and rightly notes that those who do subscribe to it cannot pretend that it is “plausible to anyone who is not convinced on quite other grounds that theism is true.”

²⁰Anselm, *Proslogion*, chap. 1. The last sentence here refers to Isa 7:9.

²¹J. Hick, *Evil and The God of Love* (New York: Harper, 1978) 244.

²²Hume, *Dialogues*. See N. Pike’s observation on this in “Hume on Evil,” in *God and Evil* (ed. Pike) 97–98.

²³John Paul, “*Salvifici*” 613; cf. Sontag in *Encountering* (ed. Davis) 149.

²⁴John Paul, “*Salvifici*” 623.

²⁵J. Roth’s language in *Encountering* (ed. Davis) 91.

of mystery," which recognizes that some things—in this case, dysteleological suffering—are "impenetrable to the rationalizing mind."²⁶ No serious philosopher or theologian claims to understand all things clearly or completely. With Davis we affirm that at some time "honesty dictates a confession of ignorance."²⁷

Closely associated with mystery is the idea of paradox. As John Paul observes, we encounter paradoxes in several ways. Our experiences in this world both obscure and reveal the nature of God. A common position suggests that our many experiences of evil militate against belief in an all-good, all-powerful God. Others, however, have noted that our many experiences of love and goodness in such a fallen world are hard to understand without presupposing the existence of a good, powerful God. Harry Emerson Fosdick observed that "the mystery of evil is very difficult when we believe in a good God, but the problem of goodness seems to us impossible when we do not."²⁸

Another example of paradox concerns Jesus Christ, for it is "precisely by means of"²⁹ his voluntary and innocent sufferings that he accomplished redemption. The event in which the greatest evil occurs turns out to harbor the greatest blessing. A final example of paradox concerns the gospel of suffering whereby those who follow Christ are called to suffer as he did. Paul adds, of course, that believers both rejoice and boast in these sufferings. We have, writes John Paul, "a strange paradox: the springs of divine power gush forth precisely in the midst of human suffering."³⁰

These first three affirmations need not denigrate human reason or curtail its full and proper use. Indeed good, hard thinking is needed in order to help people avoid some of the common reactions to suffering evil: despair, false guilt at seemingly unanswered prayer, false hopes of certain cures, and so on. Rather, they seek to avoid the *hybris* sometimes attached to natural reason and to place its function in proper perspective. We affirm that reason is a normative guide, but not *the* normative guide, for faith. The relationship between reason and faith is obviously reciprocal, for experience informs faith and one's scientific theology must always give full expression to experience. Nevertheless as we saw with Anselm above, reason follows faith. It does not establish faith.

Christology constitutes the locus of our fourth affirmation, for it provides the most important faith-content of the Biblical revelation. With John Paul we affirm that Christology is the key to Christian theodicy, that the "answer has been given by God to man in the cross of Jesus Christ . . . [and that] in the mystery of redemption suffering finds its supreme and surest point of

²⁶Hick, *Evil* 335.

²⁷*Encountering* (ed. Davis) 94.

²⁸Quoted by Hick, *Evil* 11. Cobb makes a similar observation in *Encountering* (ed. Davis) 175-176.

²⁹John Paul, "Salvifici" 616.

³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 622; cf. 2 Cor 12:9.

reference.”³¹ While we cannot fault non-Christian theodicies for bypassing Christology, we note that even Christian theodicians sometimes miss this point.

Hick, for example, overlooks the objective aspect of the atonement. For him redemption is a long process with the goal of overcoming not the tragedy of sin but humanity’s epistemic distance from God.³² It is hard to see why Christ is absolutely necessary, or why Christ in particular is necessary, in his theodicy. Davis claims to present a specifically “evangelical” theodicy, but Christology plays no significant part at all in it. Sontag suggests that the stumbling block to accepting the Christological solution “lies in the crucifixion and the centrality it has in Jesus’ mission,”³³ a position directly opposed to our affirmation contending that it is precisely by means of the person and work of Christ that we come to grips with suffering.

We affirm that Jesus Christ conquers both the temporal and eternal dimensions of evil and suffering. Physical death epitomizes temporal evil and suffering,³⁴ while the tyranny of sin epitomizes its eternal and moral aspects. The good news of Christ is that he reigns victorious over both. Through his work of redemption in substitutionary death and resurrection he conquers the twin evils of sin and death. This Christological dimension in turn impacts other aspects of theodicy, two of which we will mention.

First, there is a direct relationship between Christology and one’s doctrine of the fall. Rather than seeing the fall as an epistemic inconvenience (Hick), a strong Christology proceeds from the conviction of the radical consequences of Adam’s transgression. While we must be careful to reject the position of Job’s friends—that suffering is always a direct consequence of personal sin—we nevertheless realize that all sin and evil result from a world initially plunged into darkness. Although not without its problems (such as the riddle of evil *ex nihilo*), this affirmation of the traditional notion of the Genesis 3 fall accounts for both natural and moral evil.

Christology also impacts eschatology. Here we make two observations. First, Christ’s redemptive work inaugurates the firstfruits of the *eschaton* and issues forth in hope of future redemption, even in the midst of present “groanings” (Rom 8:22–25). Second, in addition to this current invasion of the future into the present, Christians anticipate a final, fuller and complete redemption in the chronological future. Obviously many theodicians reject such appeals to the future. Dostoyevsky’s Ivan, for example, demands justice “here on earth” and insists that justice delayed is not justice.³⁵ Sontag reasons that a future solution cannot be ruled out but that it is only a hope that cannot be appealed to in the present.

³¹Ibid., pp. 614, 623. We would add that it is not only his death but his entire birth, life, death and resurrection.

³²Hick, *Evil* 236–240.

³³Sontag in *Encountering* (ed. Davis) 143.

³⁴See Gen 2:17; Rom 3:23; 5:12–21; 1 Cor 15:20–21.

³⁵F. Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (New York: Random House, n.d.) 253.

Three points help clarify the theodicist's appeal to a future solution to present evil. First, such appeals must be rooted in Christology. Hick appeals to a life-after-death scenario, but it seems to be more like a purgatorial appendage to this life that helps to complete the process of soul-making and not a corollary to Christology. Second, appeals to the future must not unwittingly denigrate the doctrine of creation or short-circuit attempts at ameliorating evil today (lifeboat ethics), both of which are mistakes evangelicals have made. Despite criticisms leveled at Augustine's definition of evil as a privation of good—that it is merely parasitic—his position does have the advantage of affirming the goodness of the created, material world.³⁶ Despite all its evil we affirm the goodness of life as a divine privilege and blessing. If this were not so it would be better not to live at all or to die early.³⁷ Third, this gift of life is an end in itself and not only a means to an eschatological end. While Christian theodicies must necessarily incorporate the eschatological dimension, this is so only because of Christology and not because of an anthropological goal of a future blessing.

Our fifth affirmation concerns the doctrine of creation. God created the world out of nothing, so that he is absolutely sovereign over and responsible for it. It is totally dependent on his sustaining grace. Further, while the world operates within a uniformity of cause and effect, creation and history are an open system and not subject to fatalism or utter determinism.³⁸ Thus we affirm both God's sovereign grace over all creation and the freedom of human beings as creatures responsible before him. In Barth's words, this human freedom never encroaches upon divine freedom, for the latter always precedes the former although it never suspends or destroys the former.³⁹ Because of our freedom before him we realize our responsibility for all of our actions. More important, because of his sovereign grace over all of life we entrust ourselves to him, knowing that he not only suffered for us but that he suffers with us today.

Our final affirmation addresses the felt needs of theodicy. We affirm the necessity of constructive protest and concrete actions against evil and suffering in all their many dimensions. With Pope John Paul we remind ourselves that we "can put this question [the problem of evil and suffering] to God with all the emotion of our hearts and with our minds full of dismay and anxiety; and God expects the question and listens to it."⁴⁰ Job reminds us of this, as do other Scriptures such as Psalm 73. We need never deny our human emotions,

³⁶Augustine, *Enchiridion*, chaps. 3 ("God the Creator of All; the Goodness of All Creation") and 4 ("The Problem of Evil").

³⁷Cobb in *Encountering* (ed. Davis) 176.

³⁸Here I am following closely the language of J. Sire's excellent presentation of Christian theism in his book *The Universe Next Door* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1976) 26-29.

³⁹K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 1.2.21.

⁴⁰John Paul, "Salvifici" 613.

for to do so diminishes the human spirit.⁴¹ We distinguish, however, between the rebellion and protest of unbelief of which Alyosha accuses Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov*⁴² and what Roth calls “protesting faith” or “the fear of God which provokes righteous rebellion.”⁴³

This protest of faith issues forth not only in compassion and sympathy for the oppressed but (more important still) vigorous, concrete actions and effective help. As John Paul concludes from the parable of the good Samaritan, “Christ’s revelation of the meaning of suffering is in no way identified with an attitude of passivity. Completely the reverse is true. The Gospel is the negation of passivity in the face of suffering.”⁴⁴ The protest of faith, then, affirms the full expression of human emotions and constructive deeds of love that effect change and restore dignity to our fellow human beings. In doing so, Christian theodicy addresses the aspects of existential felt needs that are too often lost amidst rational argumentation.

In conclusion, we can learn from a distinction that the Reformers made between security and certainty. Certainty requires guarantees, something that God has not given and that Christians too often seek. We can claim no immunities from the groanings of creation. Security, on the other hand, depends not on guarantees but on something far better: the promises of God. We do have the promises of God, and these issue forth in a hope that will not be ashamed or disappointed (as opposed to false certainties, which are always disappointed). Thus while we do not have any certainty or guarantee of being saved from unjust suffering, we have the far better security of God’s promise of grace in Jesus Christ.⁴⁵

⁴¹Sontag in *Encountering* (ed. Davis) 20.

⁴²Dostoyevsky, *Brothers* 254–255.

⁴³Roth in *Encountering* (ed. Davis) 21.

⁴⁴John Paul, “Salvifici” 623.

⁴⁵I am indebted to Sam Rowen for drawing my attention to this distinction between certainty and security, which as yet I have not been able to document. Karl Barth makes a similar point when he refers to the “assurance of faith” that does not seek an “unequivocal experience . . . a guarantee of the guarantee so to speak”—that is, something that would seek to go beyond “the guarantee which is identical with God Himself.” See his *Church Dogmatics* 1.1.12. I also wish to thank Terrence Tice of the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor for reading this paper and offering constructive criticisms.