

TIM MIDDLETON**Objecting to theodicy and the legitimacy of protesting against evil**

The Lisbon earthquake of 1755 and the concomitant debates among eighteenth-century intellectuals set the stage for the modern project of theodicy – the task of reconciling the existence and goodness of God with the reality of evil. Yet the validity of the enterprise was questioned by writers such as Voltaire and Kant right from the beginning. With this in mind, this article seeks to explore four interlinked concerns of the anti-theodicist. Firstly, why do people write theodicies at all? Some are crafting works of Christian apologetics; others have a deep-rooted desire for understanding; but why do we assume that evil must be intelligible in the first place? Secondly, many theodicians defend their writing by inserting the caveat that they do not intend to offer a pastoral response. However, there are good reasons to think that this distinction between intellectual and pastoral questions is a false one. Thirdly, many grand, cosmic, theodical schemes marginalise the plight of the victims. Evil must be engaged with from a first person, not a third person, perspective. Lastly, many Christian theologians neglect the incarnation and crucifixion in their theodicies. Yet it is the narrative of Christ's life that should form the basis of a Christian outlook. Instead of theodicy, it is argued, a better response to evil is to follow the path of moral outrage. Crucially, though, this need not lead to protest atheism – indeed jettisoning God might even undermine the grounds for protest. A combination of silence and lament, shared by Christ on the cross, is a viable and properly Christian reply.

Keywords: Lisbon earthquake, theodicy, natural evil, suffering, protest atheism, anti-theodicy, lament, solidarity

Introduction

A large number of theological thinkers over the last few centuries have applied themselves to the problem of theodicy, and yet it is widely regarded as 'one of the least satisfactory areas of the theological enterprise'.¹ In the words of the French philosopher Paul Ricœur, theodicy is a 'mad project'. As a result, a number of writers – including Kenneth Surin, Terrence Tilley, Donald MacKinnon, D. Z. Phillips, John Swinton and Rowan Williams – have developed anti-theodicy positions. They argue, for a variety of reasons which will be explored below, that theodicy is not a project that should be embarked upon at all. This article, therefore, does not give ac-

1 Surin, K. 'Theodicy?', *Harvard Theological Review* (1983) 76(2), 225-247,(225).

counts of the myriad theodicies on offer, not least because a comprehensive review could span many volumes.² Instead, this study seeks to take a different approach by examining the motivations for theodicy-writing in the first place and questioning the practice of theodicy as a response to evil.

Before beginning, however, a couple of clarifications will be helpful. Discussions about evil tend to divide it into two kinds: moral and natural. Moral evil encompasses all suffering that results from the actions of human agents. Although moral evil can be terrible, many have argued that it is a necessary by-product of true human freedom; the price of autonomy is the risk that some humans will commit grievous atrocities.³ Natural evil, in contrast, is suffering resulting from natural processes such as predation, disease and geological disasters. Both humans and animals can be victims of natural evil.⁴ Secondly, philosopher of religion Marilyn McCord Adams has made another helpful distinction. She identifies what she calls 'horrendous evils', evils that are so terrible that those who suffer them have good reason to doubt whether their life as a whole is, or was, worth living.⁵

This article is principally concerned with natural, horrendous evils that affect humans – a young child, for example, who sees their whole family perish as a building collapses on them in an earthquake, before dying themselves in the ensuing tsunami. Such cases are the clearest examples of unmerited, innocent suffering of definitively sentient agents. It is also at this juncture that many theodicies fall short. It is this sort of evil and suffering that should be borne in mind throughout the following discussions.

The Lisbon earthquake and the origins of theodicy

The Lisbon earthquake of 1755 struck at half past nine in the morning. With an estimated magnitude of 8.5, it was the biggest natural disaster

2 For a full survey of Christian responses to the problem of evil, see Hick, J. *Evil and the God of Love*, Macmillan (1966). For a typology of theodicies, see Southgate, C. & Robinson, A. 'Varieties of theodicy: an exploration of responses to the problem of evil based on a typology of good-harm analyses', in Murphy, N., Russell, R.J. & Stoeger, W.R. (eds.) *Physics and Cosmology: Scientific Perspectives on the Problem of Natural Evil (Vol. 1)*, Vatican Observatory and the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences (2007), pp. 67-90. For an overview of the variety of religious responses to natural disasters, including liberationist perspectives, see Chester, D.K. & Duncan, A.M. 'The Bible, theology and religious responses to historic and contemporary earthquakes and volcanic eruptions', *Environmental Hazards* (2009) 8, 304-332 (and the references contained therein).

3 This is known as the free-will defence and is not discussed further in this article. It is assumed that in most cases the free-will defence can provide a reasonable account of moral evil, but is insufficient as an explanation of natural evil.

4 Animal suffering is not discussed further here, but for material on this see Southgate, C. *The Groaning of Creation*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press (2008) and Murray, M.J. *Nature Red in Tooth & Claw*, New York: Oxford University Press (2008).

5 McCord Adams, M. *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*, New York: Cornell University Press (1999), p. 26.

to hit Western Europe for many hundreds of years. The Reverend Charles Davy recorded his experience:

[I was] stunned with a most horrid crash, as if every edifice in the city had tumbled down at once. The house I was in shook with such violence, that the upper stories immediately fell; and though my apartment (which was on the first floor) did not then share the same fate, yet everything was thrown out of its place in such a manner that it was with no small difficulty that I kept my feet, and expected nothing less than to soon be crushed to death.⁶

In total, three separate shocks hit the city in quick succession. Half an hour later a tsunami engulfed the coast. Thousands of residents, who had fled to the boats by the new quay, were all killed as water came pouring out of the Tagus.⁷ Meanwhile, further inland, numerous fires had broken out, consuming both the royal palace and the newly built opera house. As Davy observed:

The whole city appeared in a blaze, which was so bright that I could easily see to read by it. It may be said without exaggeration, it was on fire at least in a hundred different places at once, and thus continued burning for six days together, without intermission.⁸

The devastation was immense. In total between 35,000 and 45,000 people are believed to have lost their lives,⁹ and around a quarter of the houses in the city were destroyed.¹⁰ To compound matters, the disaster had occurred on All Saints Day, a major festival in the religious calendar, and people had been at Mass when the first earthquake had hit. By the end of the day, many of the city's churches lay in ruins.

In the immediate aftermath of the Lisbon disaster numerous sermons focused on the theme of divine retribution. John Wesley, for example, compared Lisbon with apocalyptic biblical imagery for the purpose of evangelism.¹¹ God wreaked vengeance through the earthquake, he said, 'in order to urge people to look into their hearts and change their ways to avoid damnation'.¹² The earthquake was a punishment for sins – sins that included, perhaps, complacency among the citizens of Lisbon and an idola-

6 Quoted in Hough, S.E. & Bilham, R.G. *After the Earth Quakes*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2005), p. 43.

7 The Tagus is the main river through Lisbon, which drains into the Atlantic Ocean.

8 Quoted in: Hough & Bilham *op. cit.*, (6), p. 46.

9 Pereira, A.S. 'The Opportunity of a Disaster: The Economic Impact of the 1755 Lisbon Earthquake', *The Journal of Economic History* (2009) 69(2), 466-499 (473).

10 Brightman, E.S. 'The Lisbon earthquake: a study in religious valuation', *The American Journal of Theology* (1919) 23, 500-518 (504).

11 Bassnett, S. 'Faith, doubt, aid and prayer: the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 revisited', *European Review* (2006) 14(3), 321-328 (325).

12 *ibid.*, 321.

trous interest in their growing wealth. 'God in his anger had destroyed Lisbon' was a theme that spread to academic treatises and moralising poetry across the continent.¹³

Soon, however, more nuanced debates about God's role in the disaster came to the fore. This was the Enlightenment, the so-called 'Age of Reason', and a number of the intellectuals of the time had recently espoused a philosophy of optimism.¹⁴ In 1710 the German polymath and philosopher Gottfried Leibniz had coined the very term theodicy. In his seminal work on the subject Leibniz had proposed and defended the idea that the apparent imperfections of the world could be explained because this was, nonetheless, the 'best of all possible worlds'. For if God was both supremely wise and infinitely good, God 'could not fail to choose the best'.¹⁵

The 1755 earthquake, therefore, shook many eighteenth-century intellectuals from their comfort zones. It felt very hard, on looking around Lisbon, to continue to blithely defend Leibniz's optimism. Most famously, the French philosopher and historian Voltaire composed his 'Poem on the Lisbon Disaster' in which he sought to ridicule the pervading 'all is well' mentality of the era. In the preface to his poem he wrote:

If... the philosophers had said to the wretched survivors, 'Whatever happens is for the best; the heirs of the dead will benefit financially; the building trade will enjoy a boom; animals will grow fat on meals provided by the corpses trapped in the debris; an earthquake is a necessary effect of a necessary cause; private misfortune must not be overrated; an individual who is unlucky is contributing to the general good.'— would not such a speech be as cruel as the earthquake was destructive?¹⁶

In 1791 the German philosopher Immanuel Kant also expressed concern with the theodicies of his day in an article entitled 'On the miscarriage of all philosophical trials in theodicy'. Kant's first response to the Lisbon earthquake had been to view it through a scientific lens and he had initially published three short papers on the origin of earthquakes.¹⁷ Some thirty-six years later, though, he wrote that, 'every previous theodicy has not performed what it promised'.¹⁸ The thrust of his argument was that

13 Kendrick, T.D. *The Lisbon Earthquake*, Methuen & Company (1956), p. 93.

14 The word optimism is believed to derive from this period, the earliest known usage being in 1737; see Brightman *op. cit.*, (10), 503.

15 Quoted in: Brightman *op. cit.*, (10), 501.

16 Voltaire, preface to his 'Poem on the Lisbon Disaster', quoted in Kendrick *op. cit.*, (13), p. 119.

17 In these papers Kant proposed (incorrectly) that earthquakes were the result of subterranean caverns filled with hot gases.

18 Kant, I. 'On the miscarriage of all philosophical trials in theodicy' in Wood, A.W. & Di Giovanni, G. (trans.) *Religion and Rational Theology*, Cambridge University Press (2001), p. 30.

there is a 'necessary limitation' on the powers of human reason.¹⁹ 'Less depends,' wrote Kant, 'on subtle reasoning than on sincerity in taking notice of the impotence of our reason, and on honesty in not distorting our thoughts in what we say, however pious our intention.'²⁰

It was during this series of debates, initiated by the intelligentsia of the mid-eighteenth century, and in response to the Lisbon earthquake, that theodicy really took shape. Concerns about evil and suffering were nothing new – many trace the question back to the Greek philosopher Epicurus – but justifying God within a culture of Enlightenment rationalism was.²¹ As theologian Terrence Tilley puts it, 'theodicies are part of the Enlightenment obsession with reducing the muddy and mixed to the clear and distinct'.²² And the practice of theodicy today inherits this Enlightenment mindset:

People assumed that the universe was rational, orderly, and essentially comprehensible and that it could be controlled through reason by means of science and technology... Understood in terms of the Enlightenment, the problem of evil appears to be just one more of the problems that humans frequently encounter and strive to solve through reason and intellect.²³

In this sense, a 'scientific approach' to the problem of evil is positively unhelpful. For example, advances in medicine are to be hugely welcomed, but they bring with them an expectation that no suffering is inevitable. We go on to make the assumption that natural, horrendous evils are problems that can be solved; 'we need the psychological assurance that science will eventually cure all of our ills'.²⁴ Given this context, Kant's response to the Lisbon disaster is all the more interesting, since it hints at what science, and human reason more generally, should expect to achieve. Like Kant, we can, and have, studied earthquakes scientifically, and this enables us to lessen the impact of such disasters. Yet there is a limit to our human reason: we cannot remove earthquakes entirely. We have to accept that evil poses an existential threat to the modern notion that we are in control.

In some ways, the Lisbon earthquake marks both the beginning and the end of theodicy. The reality of the devastation meant that right from the outset writers such as Voltaire and Kant were highlighting concerns with the project. Their concerns now form the basis of the modern anti-theodicist's critique.

19 *ibid.*

20 *ibid.*, p. 34.

21 Tilley, T. *The Evils of Theodicy*, Eugene: Wipf & Stock (2000), p. 221.

22 *ibid.*, p. 231.

23 Swinton, J. *Raging with Compassion*, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. (2007), p. 33.

24 *ibid.*, p. 3.

Four objections

1. Motivations for writing theodicy

Why do people write theodicies? What motivates them? And what are they hoping to achieve? It can sometimes seem like the ‘problem of evil’ is so clearly a problem that no justification needs to be offered. This is exemplified by the theologian David Bentley Hart. Hart wrote an article in *The Wall Street Journal* the week after the Boxing Day tsunami of 2004, which was later expanded into the book *The Doors of the Sea*. He says:

Considering the scope of the catastrophe, and of the agonies and sorrows it had visited on so many, we should probably have all remained silent for a while... Pious platitudes and words of comfort seem not only futile and banal, but almost blasphemous; metaphysical disputes come perilously close to mocking the dead. There are moments, simply said, when we probably ought not to speak. But, of course, we must speak.²⁵

Hart makes a compelling emotional case for remaining silent on the question of suffering, but then fails to heed his own advice. It is not at all clear why ‘we must speak’. Such passages are not uncommon: many a tome of densely argued prose is preceded by a prologue, a caveat, or an anecdote which casts severe doubt over the intended purpose of the rest of the book. These snapshots, though, are illuminating – if they are more than just a tactful humility then it is here that the author’s real feelings can be seen.

Consider, for example, *The Problem of Pain* by C. S. Lewis. In the first paragraph of the preface Lewis quotes the Augustinian mystic Walter Hilton, saying, ‘I feel myself so far from true feeling of that I speak, that I can naught else but cry mercy and desire after it as I may’.²⁶ In fact, Lewis even asked his editor if the book could be published anonymously on the basis that, ‘if I were to say what I really thought about pain, I should be forced to make statements of such apparent fortitude that they would become ridiculous if anyone knew who made them’.²⁷ Later in the book he acknowledges that, ‘all arguments in justification of suffering provoke bitter resentment against the author. You would like to know how I behave when I am experiencing pain, not writing books about it.’²⁸ Even Lewis’s brother said that he found *The Problem of Pain* ‘a curiously superficial and unpersuasive response to the issue of suffering’. Perhaps, though, Lewis should be forgiven: it was his first work of apologetics, and maybe he was still learning his trade.

25 Hart, D.B. *The Doors of the Sea*, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. (2011), p. 6.

26 Lewis, C.S. *The Problem of Pain*, London: Harper Collins (2002), p. XI.

27 *ibid.*

28 *ibid.*, p. 104.

So given all their reservations, what did motivate Hart and Lewis to write their theodicies? It is of note that both works are popular books. Maybe Christians feel under pressure to defend their God in the public square. The problem of evil is a common topic for Christian apologists because it is so often cited as a reason for unbelief. But perhaps, as philosopher and theologian Donald MacKinnon warns, ‘theologians have allowed apologetic eagerness to lead them to suppose they had reached solutions, when in fact they had hardly begun effectively to articulate their problems’.²⁹

Yet the pressure to write theodicy may be even more deep-rooted. Human beings desire explanations as to why things are the way they are – the very existence of the book of Job in the canon testifies to this.³⁰ Theodicy is a meaning-making activity. What is more, the Enlightenment drive to rationalise heightens our cravings for an intelligible account of evil and suffering. Unfortunately, though, the desire for an answer does not guarantee that one exists. In fact, says Tilley, theodicy persists because ‘it displays a world which we wish existed, a world in which evil was manageable’.³¹ Literary critic Terry Eagleton explodes our craving for meaning at the start of his book *On Evil*. ‘Evil is unintelligible,’ says Eagleton, ‘it is just a thing in itself, like boarding a crowded commuter train wearing only a giant boa constrictor. There is no context which would make it explicable.’³² The philosopher D. Z. Phillips also elaborates on the bemusement of the theodicist:

When I say that ours is a world in which disasters of natural or moral kinds strike without rhyme or reason; where, if much can be done to influence character, there is far more over which we have no control; where character lies as much, if not more, in reacting to the unavoidable, than with choosing between rational alternatives; some theodacists look at me with amazement, and I look back amazed that they should do so.³³

For those who continue to write theodicies, the laudable desire for meaning trumps any suggestion that evil might in the end be meaningless.

2. Intellectual or pastoral: a false dichotomy

A second concern of the anti-theodicist is a confusion that arises from a false dichotomy between ‘intellectual’ and ‘pastoral’ responses to evil. As

29 MacKinnon, D.M. *The Problem of Metaphysics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1974), p. 124.

30 I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this point.

31 Tilley *op. cit.*, (21), p. 248.

32 Eagleton, T. *On Evil*, New Haven: Yale University Press (2010), p. 2.

33 Phillips, D.Z. *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God*, London: SCM Press (2004), p. 82.

Phillips argues, 'the distinction between the logical problem of evil and the existential problem of evil is a spurious one,' since, 'anything said about evil, in the name of logic, must be answerable to the searching and challenging reality of the evils people suffer'.³⁴

Many authors want to approach the problem on an intellectual level, but they are also painfully aware that such an approach lacks compassion and so they insert a caveat to allay their fear. Yet in acknowledging their bind, they subvert any justification they had for writing anything in the first place. What they implicitly recognise is that an intellectual theodicy is going to be of no use whatsoever in a pastoral situation. But if a theodicy does not bring something of the presence of God into the midst of the life of one who suffers, then it is no theodicy at all: God has not been justified. If a theodicy is not pastorally oriented then the most it can hope to do is to placate the restless mind of the armchair intellectual right up until the point they themselves start to suffer. It papers over our perceptions of evil, only to be ripped away in our moment of greatest need. The theologian John Swinton describes his own experience in stark terms. '[I] was forced to recognise,' he says, 'that the theodical framework that I had built around me to protect me from the reality of pain, suffering, and evil was in fact the emperor's new clothes.'³⁵

The philosopher Mary Midgley also argues, in broader terms, that intellectual and passional (or pastoral) approaches to problems cannot easily be severed:

The idea... is that questions come in two distinct kinds, intellectual and passional, needing quite separate processes to resolve them. This is quite unconvincing. It is a fact of first importance about questions that – if they are difficult at all – they are nearly always complex. They have a number of distinct aspects needing different kinds of thought and attention. They have to be solved by co-operation. They need an integrated personality.³⁶

Thinking and feeling are not independent activities, and we delude ourselves if we deny one in order to promote the other. This said, perhaps that delusion serves a purpose. As Swinton explains:

We might liken theodicy to the defense mechanism of intellectualization, which uses reasoning to block out emotional stress and conflict. Freud describes intellectualization as a 'flight into reason' wherein a person seeks to avoid uncomfortable and anxiety-provoking experiences by focusing on facts and logic to the exclusion of emotion and experience. One interesting feature of intellectualization is the use

34 *ibid.*, pp. XI-XII.

35 Swinton *op. cit.*, (23), p. 10.

36 Midgley, M. *Science as Salvation*, London & New York: Routledge (1992), p. 114.

of jargon to avoid emotional engagement. Using complex terminology draws our focus to words and arguments rather than how human beings are affected within a particular situation. This is precisely how theodicy works.³⁷

So maybe we should not be so hard on theodicists: perhaps theodicy-writing provides an intellectual detachment that allows the writer to survive emotionally? But if this is the case then the key caveat is that theodicy should never be for public consumption; instead, theodicy-writing should be a therapeutic process for the author themselves.

3. Object or subject: marginalising the victim's plight

A linked concern is the potential marginalisation of the victim's plight. This is a moral objection to theodicy, specifically that theodicy trivialises suffering by reinterpreting horrendous evils in a way that the sufferer cannot accept.³⁸ As Phillips writes, '[theodicy] should be done in fear: fear that in our philosophizings we will betray the evils people have suffered, and, in that way, sin against them'.³⁹

For example, one strand of theodicy posits that evil is necessary for a greater good.⁴⁰ (This was the sort of argument pursued by Leibniz in the eighteenth century.) The existence of evil is acknowledged but, it is proposed, this is the price one must pay for goodness in the end.⁴¹ However, the theologian Rowan Williams has offered a serious critique of this way of thinking. The problem, he says, is that we simply cannot measure what amount of good (in this world or the next) would be adequate recompense for the suffering endured because we are not viewing the situation as a subject. He writes:

My problem is with the calculus of good and bad experiences suggested by the language of proportion, a calculus that appears to be a long way from what happens in the ways people attempt to make sense of their

37 Swinton *op. cit.*, (23), p. 12.

38 Shearn, S. 'Moral critique and defence of theodicy', *Religious Studies* (2013) 49, 439-458 (439).

39 Phillips *op. cit.*, (33), p. XI.

40 For examples of greater good theodicies see Hick *op. cit.*, (2) or McCord Adams, M. 'Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God', in McCord Adams, M. & Adams, R.M. (eds.) *The Problem of Evil*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1990), pp. 209-221. Also, for the distinctions among different types of greater good theodicy, see Southgate & Robinson *op. cit.*, (2).

41 In the case of earthquakes, a greater good theodicy might proceed as follows. Earthquakes are a consequence of plate tectonics and plate tectonics, in turn, is necessary for life on Earth as we know it. Without plate tectonics there would be no volcanoes, and without volcanoes no release of carbon dioxide into the Earth's early atmosphere. Carbon dioxide is a vital greenhouse gas that ensured that the planet was warm enough to allow liquid water. So earthquakes, and their concomitant devastation and suffering, are apparently necessary for life.

lives... I do not see how there can be a calculus of values for discrete experiences that would allow the observer/theorist to assess the worth-whileness of a life as a whole; and I do not believe that the subject whose suffering is under discussion will naturally think in such terms.⁴²

Instead, Williams suggests, individual subjects make sense of their lives as narratives – stories that they build from their thoughts, feelings and memories. Suffering is a problem because someone or something suffers and therefore failing to engage from the perspective of the victim is failing to address the problem. The French philosopher Gabriel Marcel expands on this point:

In reflecting upon evil, I tend, almost inevitably, to regard it as a disorder which I view from the outside and of which I seek to discover the causes or secret aims... But evil which is only stated or observed is no longer evil which is suffered: in fact, it ceases to be evil. In reality, I can only grasp evil in the measure in which it touches me – that is to say, in the measure in which I am involved, as one is involved in a lawsuit. Being ‘involved’ is the fundamental fact; I cannot leave it out of account except by an unjustifiable fiction, for in doing so, I proceed as though I were God, and a God who is an onlooker at that.⁴³

This emphasis on the victims of evil is not new; Voltaire was also attuned to this concern. The Lisbon earthquake, he says, ‘finds no rational justification from the point of view of the victims themselves. To them, the universe is irrelevant. They perish.’⁴⁴ What Voltaire captures here, and in the preface to his poem on the Lisbon disaster, is the difference between a first person and a third person perspective, and how radically unjust it feels to explain an individual’s torment by referring to wider goods.

Similarly, many Jewish theologians proposed comparable ideas in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Faced with the reality of suffering, and often personally involved in it, they could not countenance any response to evil that did not start from this place of pain. A theodicy cannot exist unless it is perpetually mindful of the first person perspectives of those who are suffering. There is therefore a real danger when authors preface their theodicies with an account of their own suffering, as if to legitimise their subsequent approach. The experience of suffering is subjective and another person’s story will only ever be of limited value.⁴⁵

There are also wider, societal implications of the marginalisation of the victim. Philosopher and critic Kenneth Surin makes this point:

42 Williams, R. ‘Redeeming sorrows: Marilyn McCord Adams and the defeat of evil’, in Higton, M. (ed.) *Wrestling with Angels*, London: SCM Press (2007), p. 259.

43 Quoted in: Hick *op. cit.*, (2), p. 9.

44 Brightman *op. cit.*, (10), 506.

45 Swinton *op. cit.*, (23), p. 16.

A theodacist who, intentionally or inadvertently, formulates doctrines which occlude the radical and ruthless particularity of human evil is, by implication, mediating a social and political practice which averts its gaze from the cruelties that exist in the world... [The theodacist] must at least not attempt to disengage herself from [the victim's] plight by adhering to a viewpoint of specious generality, which effectively reduces theodicy to mere ideology, and which in the process merely reinforces the powerlessness of those who are powerless.⁴⁶

In other words, theodicy is not only unhelpful on an individual level, but it might also promulgate an additional evil by discouraging others within society from speaking of their suffering. As Surin says elsewhere, 'a theodicy is not worth heeding if it does not allow the screams of our society to be heard.'⁴⁷ Theodicy, it seems, could well make the problem worse.

4. Ignoring the incarnation and neglecting the Christian narrative

During the Enlightenment period it became, for many intellectuals, philosophically embarrassing to refer to any texts or persons that claimed any special authority. Within this context apologists often abandoned the particularities of their Christian faith and instead tried to defend a more general theism.⁴⁸ In part this move stemmed from the understandable, even admirable, desire to appeal to sceptics on their terms. But this tactic both ignores the resources of Christianity and leads almost inevitably to a deistic conception of God. To put it crudely, 'Christianity entered into defense of the existence of the Christian God without appeal to anything Christian'.⁴⁹

When it comes to theodicy, the situation is much the same. Christian theodacists often seek to defend an abstract theism and rarely mention Christ. 'The theodacist's image of God,' says Swinton, 'is focused on a generalised god-figure rather than on the intricate and specific history of the Trinitarian God who is revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.'⁵⁰

One twentieth-century theologian, though, is notable for the use he makes of the incarnation in his response to evil. Jürgen Moltmann not only acknowledges Christ, but views the problem of suffering from a Christological centre.⁵¹ Moltmann's key contribution to the question is to

46 Surin, K. *Theology and the Problem of Evil*, Eugene: Wipf & Stock (2004), pp. 51-52.

47 Surin *op. cit.*, (1), 232.

48 Buckley, M.S.J. *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press (1987), p. 67.

49 Buckley, quoted in Tilley *op. cit.*, (21), p. 223.

50 Swinton *op. cit.*, (23), p. 36.

51 Bauckham, R. 'Theodicy from Ivan Karamazov to Moltmann', *Modern Theology* (1987) 4(1), 83-97 (83).

argue that, contrary to traditional Christian thought, God suffers. Etymologically speaking, to have compassion for someone is to suffer with them. If God truly loves, says Moltmann, then God must have compassion for us and must suffer with us – both as a human being in the person of Christ but also within the Godhead.⁵² Moltmann writes in *The Crucified God*:

Any other answer would be blasphemy. There cannot be any other Christian answer to the question of this torment. To speak here of a God who could not suffer would make God a demon. To speak here of an absolute God would make God an annihilating nothingness. To speak here of an indifferent God would condemn men to indifference.⁵³

God's suffering is epitomised for Moltmann in the crucifixion and this is where the particularity of the Christian faith comes to the fore:

A God who is conceived of in his omnipotence, perfection and infinity at man's expense cannot be the God who is love in the cross of Jesus Christ... Anyone who suffers without cause first thinks that he has been forsaken by God. God seems to him to be the mysterious, incomprehensible God who destroys the good fortune that he gave. But anyone who cries out to God in this suffering echoes the death-cry of the dying Christ, the Son of God.⁵⁴

Christ's cry from the cross – 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Matt. 27:46) – is of the utmost importance to Moltmann. In the crucifixion we see no great cosmic recompense for all suffering past and present; we simply have an indication that God keeps us company. As MacKinnon puts it:

To suggest that Christianity deals with the problem of evil by encouraging the believer to view it from a cosmic perspective is totally to misunderstand both the difficulty and the consolation of its treatment. Rather Christianity takes the history of Jesus and urges the believer to find, in the endurance of the ultimate contradictions of human existence that belong to its very substance, the assurance that in the worst that can befall his creatures, the creative Word keeps company with those he has called his own.⁵⁵

In other words, Christ offers solidarity, not theodicy. It is precisely because the Christian story is centred on the particular, historically contin-

52 It is worth noting that Moltmann's suggestion of divine passibilism is not consistent with the classical theist picture, and there are a number of theologians who would disagree with him at this point.

53 Moltmann, J. *The Crucified God*, London: SCM Press (1974), p. 293.

54 *ibid.*, pp. 250-252.

55 MacKinnon, D.M., 'Order and Evil in the Gospel', in Roberts, G.W. & Smucker, D.E. (eds.) *Borderlands of Theology and Other Essays*, Philadelphia and New York: J.B. Lippincott Company (1968), p. 93.

gent narrative of the incarnation that it is able to say anything at all about particular, historically contingent evils. Christ was the subject of suffering – and a suffering that is only ever resolved in the form of the narrative of the New Testament. Nevertheless, living with ‘the ultimate contradictions of human existence’ is very far from straightforward.

The legitimacy of protest

So how should one respond to evil? If most, or even all, theodicy is objectionable, then what resources, if any, does one have at one’s disposal?

Ivan Karamazov, in Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, provides an initial lead. The passage is a famous one. Ivan, a sceptic, is in conversation with his more religious brother Alyosha. Ivan has just recounted a series of stories about the torture and mistreatment of children – true stories that Dostoyevsky had collected from newspapers – and he now lays the following challenge:

Tell me yourself, I challenge you – answer. Imagine that you are creating a fabric of human destiny with the object of making men happy in the end, giving them peace and rest at last, but that it was essential and inevitable to torture to death only one tiny creature – that baby beating its breast with its fist, for instance⁵⁶ – and to found that edifice on its unavenged tears, would you consent to be the architect on those conditions?⁵⁷

Alyosha’s answer is a muted no. What Dostoyevsky realised is that a morally intelligible account of the history of suffering and death would actually be terrifying; trying to reconcile ourselves to evil is the last thing we should be doing.⁵⁸ What is particularly interesting, though, is that it is not so much that Ivan does not believe in God but that Ivan cannot believe that God is good:

Too high a price is asked for harmony; it’s beyond our means to pay so much to enter on it. And I hasten to give back my entrance ticket, and if I am an honest man I am bound to give it back as soon as possible. And that I am doing. It’s not God that I don’t accept, Alyosha, only I most respectfully return him the ticket.⁵⁹

56 Here, Ivan is referring to one of the true stories about a couple who tortured their five-year-old daughter and punished her for fouling her bed by filling her mouth with excrement and locking her in an outhouse. Ivan’s vignettes are all examples of comparatively small-scale, though horrendous, suffering. Again, Dostoyevsky is pointing us to the idea that it is an individual’s subjective experience of suffering that matters.

57 Dostoyevsky, F. *The Brothers Karamazov*, London: Penguin (1993), p. 321.

58 It should be noted that this is the exact opposite of what greater good theodocists, such as John Hick, would say. For Dostoyevsky, the problem is not dysteleological suffering, but the horrifying idea that suffering *is* being used for a purpose. See Hick *op. cit.*, (2).

59 Dostoyevsky *op. cit.*, (57), p. 320.

It is an approach that has become known as protest atheism. Philosopher of religion Stuart Sutherland identifies three separate strands to Ivan's position: an initial moral outrage, a rebellion in the form of atheism, and a final shutting of the door behind him.⁶⁰ In this third stage the idea is that even if some sort of final recompense were possible, it should still be refused. As Ivan says to Alyosha, 'I would rather remain with my unavenged suffering and unsatisfied indignation even if I were wrong.'⁶¹

But what are Christians to make of this? This is where Ivan's chain of reasoning needs to be broken. Moral outrage can be a legitimate Christian response to evil without necessarily leading to protest atheism. Often, Christians have been overly wary of heeding Ivan's concerns because they are worried that doing so will ultimately lead to atheism. However, by severing the link between the two, the initial moral outrage can be reclaimed as validly Christian. The theologian Richard Bauckham proposes that Ivan's revolt contains, 'a positive affirmation of value, a sense of human dignity and human solidarity from which the desire for justice in the face of the world's injustice arises.'⁶² Bauckham also identifies in Moltmann the idea that this protest is not only permissible, but positively encouraged by the example of Christ. He writes that, 'moral outrage against suffering, is not quelled but sustained by the cross, and becomes an essential element in that loving solidarity which the crucified Christ both practises and encourages in his followers.'⁶³ Protest is 'not a mark of faithlessness but an act of faithfulness in situations where faith and hope are challenged'.⁶⁴ Furthermore, the theologian George Pattison proposes that failing to voice our protest would be to deny our humanity:

Beings who are self-conscious in their suffering... may, indeed must, question their maker and cry out against a fate that condemns them to a life of so much suffering. We are not dumb artifacts but sentient beings, and it would be a denial of humanity itself to forbid us to protest or answer back.⁶⁵

The cry of protest which Pattison identifies as part of the nature of humanity is, as Moltmann pointed out, precisely the cry which Christ issued from the cross. There could be no better affirmation of our distress.

However, it is important to distinguish between two important aspects of the response to evil that Christ models on the cross. In the case of moral evil, Christ's impassioned outburst is deeply motivating in the fight

60 Sutherland, S. *Atheism and the Rejection of God*, Oxford: Blackwell (1977), pp. 28- 34.

61 Dostoyevsky *op. cit.*, (57), p. 320.

62 Bauckham *op. cit.*, (51), 84.

63 *ibid.*, 93.

64 Swinton *op. cit.*, (23), p. 109.

65 Pattison, G. *A Short Course in the Philosophy of Religion*, London: SCM Press (2001), p. 164.

against it.⁶⁶ Christ's, and our, protest is a rallying cry indicating that the world could and should be other than the way it currently is. It is often only when we are really distraught, angry or upset that we start to do something. The philosopher Amia Srinivasan has recently written a paper on 'The Aptness of Anger', in which she defends precisely this notion.⁶⁷ Particularly in the political sphere, argues Srinivasan, anger cannot just be dismissed as irrational or counterproductive – it is instead both part of what it is to be human and a powerful, motivating force for action and justice.

However, the second aspect of Christ's response to evil concerns natural evils, events that humanity can do nothing about. In this case, we start not with protest but with silence. What is most notable about Christ's words on the cross are how few he utters; the majority of his three hours of agony were suffered in silence. Perhaps this is also a helpful model for us? Dorothee Sölle, for example, argues that there are occasions when we should resist language altogether: 'There are forms of suffering that reduce one to a silence in which no discourse is possible any longer, in which a person ceases reacting as a human agent... This initial phase of pain, which we experience again and again, leaves us numb and mute.'⁶⁸

Then, after silence comes lament; lament enables us to move from silence into speech.⁶⁹ It acts as a container for our grief that forms the very beginning of a coping strategy. As Swinton puts it in his book *Raging with Compassion*: 'Lament allows us honestly to express rage to God for the injustices that constantly befall us but helps us at the same time to hold onto the compassion of God in the midst of human suffering.'⁷⁰ What is more, Christ's cry of dereliction from the cross is not alone; the Christian scriptures are replete with a vocabulary for articulating our pain and sadness. Indeed, Christ himself was quoting from Psalm 22:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from saving me,
so far from my cries of anguish?
My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,
by night, but I find no rest.
Many bulls surround me;
strong bulls of Bashan encircle me.
Roaring lions that tear their prey

66 This is in stark contrast to the greater good theodicies of people like John Hick. For Hick, evil is necessary for good and so there is no motivation to fight against it.

67 See e.g. Srinivasan, A. 'In defence of anger', *BBC Radio 4's Four Thought*, 27th August 2014, available at: http://users.ox.ac.uk/~corp1468/Research_&_Writing_files/Srinivasan_In%20Defence%20of%20Anger.pdf

68 Sölle, D. *Suffering*, Kalin, E.R., (trans.), Philadelphia: Fortress Press (1975), pp. 68- 69.

69 Swinton *op. cit.*, (23), p. 103.

70 *ibid.*, p. 105.

open their mouths wide against me.
I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint.
My heart has turned to wax;
it has melted within me.
My mouth is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth;
you lay me in the dust of death. (Ps. 22:1-2, 12-15)

Many other Psalms are also valuable Christian resources for lament. Psalm 13, for example, is brutally honest about the apparent Godlessness of the world – only in the final section does the psalmist sound a note of hope:

How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and day after day have sorrow in my heart?
How long will my enemy triumph over me?
Look on me and answer, Lord my God.
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death,
and my enemy will say, 'I have overcome him,'
and my foes will rejoice when I fall.
But I trust in your unfailing love;
my heart rejoices in your salvation.
I will sing the Lord's praise,
for he has been good to me. (Ps. 13)

There is also a final strand to this overall argument. Not only is moral outrage a properly Christian response, but Ivan Karamazov's subsequent turn to atheism may even undermine his own protest. If Ivan does not believe in God, who is he protesting to about the deep unfairness of innocent suffering? As Moltmann writes:

These blasphemies [of protest] are fundamentally provocations of God, for there is something that the atheist fears over and above all torments. That is the indifference of God and his final retreat from the world of men... But if metaphysical theism disappears, can protest atheism still remain alive? For its protest against injustice and death, does not it need an authority to accuse, because it makes this authority responsible for the state of affairs? And can it make this authority responsible if it has not previously declared it to be behind the way in which the world is and exists?⁷¹

Psalm 13 ends with a declaration of trust because the Christian hope is simply that our cries of protest do not fall on deaf ears.

71 Moltmann *op. cit.*, (53), p. 220.

Conclusion

The anti-theodicist has no ‘answer’ to the problem of evil. There is plenty we can and should be doing to alleviate suffering, but at rock bottom we have nothing satisfactory we can say. For the Christian, many apparent questions are left unanswered. What does provide a modicum of solace, however, is the example of Christ. MacKinnon expresses this well:

If I am honest, I think that I must say that I should cease to believe altogether unless I believed that Jesus had indeed prayed that the hour might pass from him, had indeed been left alone to face the reality of absolute failure. It is fashionable nowadays to speak of Christ as victor, as if the agony and disillusion, the sheer monstrous reality of physical and spiritual suffering which he bore were a mere charade. The idiom of a superficial cosmic optimism, often expressing itself ritually in patterns of liturgical symbolism, is currently fashionable, as if a world that knows, as ours does, extremities of terror as well as hope, could be consoled by a remote metaphysical chatter.⁷²

We must not allow our intellectual eagerness get carried away at the expense of real people in real situations who are really suffering. We must not indulge in ‘metaphysical chatter’. ‘Theodicy, in the final analysis, has to be silence qualified by the stammering utterance of broken words.’⁷³

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⁷² MacKinnon *op. cit.*, (55), p. 91.

⁷³ Surin *op. cit.*, (1), p. 247.