



NEWBIGIN
HOUSE OF STUDIES

Integrating Faith and Technology Module 4: God's Agency

"I have been asked hundreds of times in my life why God allows tragedy and suffering. I have to confess that I really do not know the answer totally, even to my own satisfaction. I have to accept, by faith, that God is sovereign, and he is a God of love and mercy and compassion in the midst of suffering."

- Rev. Billy Graham

The Question of Theodicy

If Christians are to have any divine responsibilities in the created world, however large or small, we must first answer the question of what kind of work we should be doing, and how our faith and understanding of the role of technology fit into that mission. In what ways do we believe God remains active in this world, and how and to what extent are we called to participate in God's redemptive cause? Can we make a distinction between where God's work ends and ours begins, and does that distinction change?

As Christians we must consider what we believe progress is for and how we should be involved in the ongoing story of creation before we can truly commit to our own path of creation. If we reject the idea that humans have any obligations, then it suggests that there is little utility in practical worldly affairs at all. Why must we bother to improve ourselves, our world, or our faith? Aren't the problems of this world primarily God's responsibility? Or at least, doesn't the power to fix or redeem a broken world rest only within the abilities of an all-powerful God? If we assume the mantle of co-creators, or servants in redemption, then our role and actions become more complex.

The explanation for why the world is broken is one of the most universal theological issues and is addressed by all major belief systems. Christians and non-Christians alike have wrestled with this timeless puzzle, coming up with numerous *theodicies*, or frameworks for why evil and suffering exist. In his book *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question - Why We Suffer*, Bart Ehrman, exevangelical and professor of religious studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, argues that the Bible's answers to this question are contradictory and unsatisfying. Ehrman and others pose the logical challenge that a God that allows suffering is either:

- 1) Not omnipotent (all-powerful) and is therefore unable to prevent suffering;
- 2) Not all-loving because God does have the ability to prevent suffering but chooses not to; and/or
- 3) Not omniscient (all-knowing) because God is unaware of the suffering at the time it is happening.

Traditional Christian theodicies have attempted to resolve the above conflict in various ways, including assigning meaning to suffering by viewing it as: 1) a divine punishment; 2) a divine sign; 3) a means for God to teach us or to develop us spiritually; or 4) a part of a logical aesthetic order.

The presence of various Biblical theodicies should be neither surprising nor unsettling. Nor should we feel limited to only one perspective. It is worth noting that the Bible is a set of diverse books of multiple genres (histories, poems, wisdom literature, prophecies, etc.), written by numerous authors and addressed to various audiences at different times. This is not the course to discuss Biblical authority per se, but it is useful to recognize that there are many perspectives on the nature of evil and suffering within the Christian tradition, and that each can have merit and be useful. Let us look at a brief summary of a few of the most commonly referenced theodicy models:

1. *Divine Punishment*

The theodicy of divine punishment claims that human beings suffer as punishment for their sins. The Fall was a rebellion against God, and there must be justice. Christ's death was a costly price to pay for our debts, and Christ will ultimately return and invoke a final justice. This theodicy was often promoted in the writings

of Augustine and John Calvin.

2. *Divine Pedagogy*

The theodicy of divine teaching holds that God allows suffering as a “soul making” exercise. Suffering is meant to help Christians grow and mature in their faith. As fallen creatures we are easily tempted and forget God, become attached to the world, and remain full of pride. Suffering is a tonic and serves as a reminder of God and of our place in creation. This theodicy was often promoted in the writings of C.S. Lewis, such as in his work *The Problem of Pain*.

3. *Benefitting a Third Party*

Related to divine pedagogy, this theodicy suggests that one person’s suffering often creates the opportunity for someone else to be saved or healed. Saints and martyrs have often acted from this belief, and there are biblical examples of individuals experiencing suffering as a means for revealing or affirming God’s glory.

4. *A Secret Plan*

If God does not ordain all events, then they happen without cause and for no reason. Therefore, another popular theodicy - that is often present in the explanations of other theodicies - is that suffering is part of God’s secret plan. This secret plan was in place before creation but which we will not be privy to or fully understand until after we die. This is thought to provide solace to those who struggle with the possibility that suffering is pointless; if everything is chaos and there is no reason, then we have no one to petition or to negotiate with.

5. *Protest Theodicy*

Protest theodicy holds God accountable for the pain and suffering of the world, and demands that God intervene on our behalf. The book of Job and the Psalms of David present examples of man demanding an answer from God, even questioning God’s morality and justice. A more modern example can be seen in the writings of Elie Wiesel on faith in light of the holocaust.

While varied, these views of sin and suffering often feel too narrow to account for the intense pain felt by those experiencing tragedy, particularly when tragedy is perpetrated by other people and is accompanied by a strong sense of injustice. Modern day theologians have responded to such objections by developing new approaches to the theodicy question. We will look at two of these alternative models: the “persuasive God” and the “suffering with God”.

An Alternative Model: A Persuasive God

In his essay “*Creation Out of Chaos and the Problem of Evil*”, retired professor of philosophy of religion and theology David Griffin departs from traditional Christian theodicies to instead suggest an alternative view that God is not omnipotent but persuasive.¹ Griffin argues that God’s perfect power does not necessarily require the traditional doctrine of omnipotence. God is perfect in power and goodness, but by the inherent “nature of things” is constrained in ability to coercively control the actualities of this world.

To further his argument, Griffin rejects the notion that God created the world out of a void. Instead, he subscribes to an alternate interpretation of the language in the Genesis narrative in which God’s work in creation was to establish order out of a pre-existing chaos.² If God did not create the pre-existing elements of creation ex nihilo, it follows that some conditions would persist and retain an influence or entropy upon the created world and might continue to influence outcomes in this world, or at least influence when and how God engages it.³ God’s work in the world is thus reimagined as an effort to create the best world possible within this framework and accounting for the limits of human beings and of nature as a whole.

1 Griffin, David. “Creation Out of Chaos and the Problem of Evil”, in *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy*, ed. Stephen Davis (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 117.

2 Ibid., 101.

3 Ibid., 104.

Griffin argues that there are four aspects of creation that correlate positively to one another: the capacity to experience goodness, the capacity to experience evil, the power of self-determination, and the power to influence others. As the world has evolved, humans have realized an increased capacity to experience goodness, as well as an increased capacity to suffer: “this correlation between the capacity to enjoy and the capacity to suffer is a necessary, metaphysical correlation, inherent in the nature of things.”⁴ Griffin contends that this metaphysical correlation means that God had no alternative to creating beings that suffer. To do otherwise, he would have had to create beings without the ability to experience goodness.

Griffin extends this argument by saying that the powers of self-determination and influence are proportionate to the capacity to experience good and evil; therefore, God could not unilaterally produce human beings free from suffering if those same human beings were powerful through self-determination and influence. And, the more power and free will that humans have, the more able they are to deviate from divine will:

“It is precisely we creatures who have by far the greatest capacity for suffering who likewise have by far the greatest power to deviate from God’s will for our lives... Those beings with the greatest power of self-determination, and hence the greatest power to deviate from the divine will for the good of the whole, necessarily have the greatest power to influence others – for good or ill. The capacity to create and the capacity to destroy go hand in hand.”⁵

In Griffin’s paradigm, when we deviate from God’s will, we have not actualized the best of all possible worlds, and this is what allows for moral evil and suffering.

Griffin argues that both nature and human beings are contingent on God, having been “brought about and sustained through the creative providential activity of God.” But this is a shared power, and we possess a power that cannot be overcome by God.⁶

This is the core of Griffin’s argument: humans have their own self-determining activity and the ability to influence others, and therefore cannot be fully controlled by God. God must therefore “create” through persuasion, leaving us to act in accordance with or against the divine will: “although God is ultimately responsible for the world’s having reached a state in which significant evils can occur, God is never totally responsible for the evils that do occur. Each situation contains seeds for good and evil.”⁷ God seeks to influence the world to the greatest good possible, and when the world actualizes a lesser possibility, the failure is their responsibility.

The meaning of this theodicy is that both God and the world share the responsibility for evil: God fails in persuading the world to develop in such a way as to exclude suffering, and the world has not cooperated with God’s persuasive powers toward perfect good. While God is a creative force, God cannot unilaterally change the structure of our existence. Gravity has to hold, even if we decide we want to try to fly. We are not puppets on a string and can self-actualize as we choose. We can listen for God’s creative persuasion and can choose God’s goodness. We collaborate with God in creation, as God works through our activity in the world. God is here now, empowering us and giving meaning to our choices. God is with and for us, but we must cooperate for God’s good will to be realized.

With regards to issues of faith and technology, Griffin’s paradigm leaves a significant burden upon humanity for both the choices and priorities we set for the future, and for the obligation to correct and heal the brokenness of the past. Griffin implies that the path of faith lies in aligning with God not simply in values and beliefs, but also in effort to bring healing and order into the world, and to remove the suffering of an ever-encroaching chaos.

4 Ibid., 107.

5 Ibid., 108-109.

6 Ibid., 105.

7 Ibid., 110.

An Alternative Model: A “Suffering With” God

In *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion: A Contemporary Theodicy*, Wendy Farley suggests yet another theodicy: God is a “suffering with” God. When we are subject to Shakespeare’s “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” God is continuously present in our lives, walking along side us. Farley quotes the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher, a German theologian who attempted to reconcile the criticisms of the Enlightenment with Protestant Christianity in suggesting that it is God’s compassionate accompaniment of creation that mediates God’s love and redemptive power to us:

“One cannot make assertions about God’s own being, but it is possible to describe the effects of God. Friedrich Schleiermacher provides a more recent example of this method. Schleiermacher found the decisive clue to theology in the experience of redemption. For him, redemption refers to the mediation of God-consciousness to people and to history. He reasoned that since God is the cause of redemption, the most proper designation for God is love.”⁸

Farley believes compassion is “a determinate form of love, symboliz[ing] the struggle to transcend and redeem evil,” and is the force of God’s creative activity luring the best outcomes for creation.⁹ This compassion is not an emotional stance, but an effective power. It is not a coercive, dominating force that fights evil, but a redeeming, loving power that works from within the good creation.

The power of evil is that it “conceal[s] the ultimacy of goodness behind the finality of pain.”¹⁰ Intense suffering can be so deep and consuming that the afflicted may no longer be able to sense God’s accompaniment: God’s presence is concealed. So the primary work of compassionate love is “to break the dominion of suffering over the spirit.”¹¹ Farley argues that divine compassion restores our dignity and our capacity to love, hope and resist evil. It does this by restoring “the courage to resist suffering,” enabling us to deny that suffering is absolute and to affirm God’s presence.¹² We then can have faith in the goodness of creation and can draw on an internal power to resist evil and suffering.

Our Response

We find that it is not our experience of suffering that becomes the defining moment of our lives, but our courage in face of that suffering. It is not our anxiety of death and the future of creation that becomes the defining movement of our lives, but our response to our anxiety. To be human is embracing what Paul Tillich defined as the “courage to be.” It is in this way that Tillich sees the New Creation being actualized:

We all live in the old state of things, and the question asked of us by our text is whether we also participate in the new state of things. We belong to the Old Creation, and the demand made upon us by Christianity is that we also participate in the New Creation. We have known ourselves in our old being, and we shall ask ourselves in this hour whether we also have experienced something of a New Being in ourselves.¹³

We can see glimpses of the future New Creation now and God’s lure toward goodness is made real by eternity breaking into the present. We can discern God’s good will, and we can participate in the process of promoting life and creating meaningful responses to evil.

In Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, we find the devil encouraging his followers to toil and struggle, and there is very little hope that they will succeed. Even though the devil has been cast out of heaven, it is “once more into the breach” for him and his cohort. They rally their cry and try to shake the throne of heaven, but are not successful. Biblically, as well as in literature, God is presented as a force for whom every plan bears fruit, a builder who lays a perfect foundation,

⁸ Wendy Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion: A Contemporary Theodicy* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 14.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 97.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 116.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 117.

¹² *Ibid.*, 86.

¹³ Paul Tillich, *The Essential Tillich*, ed. F. Forrester Church (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1999), 91.

an author whose story always moves forward. Milton contrasts these images to that of the devil, whose work is anti-productive and therefore not of God.

God's creative activity is for restoration, and God's compassionate love is mediated through human relationship. Suffering and redemption is then a communal experience for human beings. Seen through this lens, in a Christian community we are called to join in the redeeming work of Christ.

One common Christian anthropological perspective is to present human beings as social creatures who experience divine love through communal spirituality. In *The Call to Holiness: Embracing a Fully Christian Life*, Richard Gula suggests that "the centrality of being in relationship for the spiritual and moral life is rooted in the uniquely Christian understanding of God as Trinity."¹⁴ Gula reasons that, "since we believe the Trinity to be a community of persons in loving relationship, we believe that to be made in the image of God is to be necessarily and inherently communal and relational. In this view, human relationships are a privileged locus for experiencing God, and authentic holiness is a communal affair."¹⁵ If God's nature is to be in relationship, and we believe that we have been made in God's image, then we desire to love and to be loved. 1 John 4:16 reveals, "We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him." Love is the activity of a faithful life, and through love God is present in the world.

Our ability to respond to God's compassionate presence in a hopeful and empowered way rests heavily on the grace and courage mediated by those who accompany us. If we believe that our faithful response is one of being active in the world, working toward its restoration and redemption, then by using technology as our tool and the fruits of our labor, we can work toward a divinely inspired vision of a New Creation.

14 Richard M. Gula, *The Call to Holiness: Embracing a Fully Christian Life* (New York: Paulist Press, 2003), 103.

15 Gula, 103.