

Why God?

A Description and Assessment of Theologies Used to
Justify Human Suffering

Dana Anderson

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I

Introduction

A medieval village is struck by a plague. A child suffers abuse at the hands of his parents. A family slowly dies of hunger. A mother is diagnosed with breast cancer. A soldier is injured in war. Thousands die and leave behind a mourning nation when planes are hijacked and crash into office buildings. A man dies, abandoned by his father, on a cross. Across time and space a cry rises up. It is the voice of the world asking why. Why God, did it have to be me? Why her? Why them? Why does this have to happen?

There is no denying the prevalence of human suffering in the world's history and present. Humans have suffered at the hands of one another, nature, accident, and themselves. While the type and intensity of human suffering has varied through history, its existence has remained a constant fact of human experience. The constancy of the presence of suffering can be seen in the writings of thinkers throughout the ages. In the days of the Hebrew Scriptures Job cried, "Why is light given to one in misery, and life to the bitter in soul, who long for death, but it does not come, and dig for it more than for hidden treasures; who rejoice exceedingly when they find the grace...For my sighing comes like my bread, and my groanings are poured out like water. Truly the thing that I fear comes upon me."¹ Augustine questioned in the fifth century, "But when we come to the penal suffering of infants, I am embarrassed, believe me, by great difficulties, and am

¹ Job 3:20-25, New Revised Standard Version. All further biblical references are from the New Revised Standard Version.

wholly at a loss to find an answer by which they are solved.”² Suffering has continued to plague people up to the present time. In his novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Fyodor Dostoyevsky gives one of the most poignant modern examples of suffering.

This poor child of five was subjected to every possible torture by those cultivated parents... Can you understand why a little creature, who can't even understand what's done to her should beat her little aching heart with her tiny fist in the dark and the cold, and weep her meek unresentful tears to dear, kind God to protect her? Do you understand that, friend and brother, you pious and humble novice? Do you understand why this infamy must be and is permitted?³

What has changed has been the way people view suffering. For Christians, the Church has always been a place where people seek answers to their questions regarding their suffering and the suffering of the world in general. Therefore, the patterns of human thought on suffering can be traced through theological conversations and trends. In recent years, Christian theologians have begun to re-examine the notion that God is responsible for, or is the cause of, human suffering. World events of the twentieth century have made this view irreconcilable with faith for many Christians. The magnitude and visibility of the innocent suffering in the twentieth century made this suffering seem different from the suffering of previous centuries. Christianity, and Judaism, could not retain belief in a God that consciously allows such suffering. Instead, the trend in several modern theologies of the Jewish and Christian tradition is to attribute the existence of human suffering to limits in God's power to prevent or stop it. The question is now, is this shift in emphasis sufficient? Does it adequately explain the source of modern suffering? Does arguing that God somehow participates in human suffering aid or comfort those who are

² Augustine, "Letter 166" (to Jerome, ca. 415), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 1, vol. 1. *Christian Classics Ethereal Library*. <http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/NPNF1-01/npnf1-01-23.htm#P5649_2631196>.

³ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Random House, Inc., 1943), 287.

suffering today? How can believers have faith and trust in a God with limited power?

Simply, is it enough?

The present study will seek to summarize and assess theologies used to justify human suffering. To do that it is first necessary to look at the philosophical and theological problem of suffering historically, summarizing major viewpoints. Included in these viewpoints are those from antiquity, early Christianity, and the philosophical idea of theism. After these points are summarized, the study will examine events in the twentieth century and how they challenged traditional justifications for human suffering. The theologies of major thinkers responding to these events will summarize the effects of these world events. Out of these effects rose a trend in theology embodying the concept of a God who suffers with the world's suffering. After exploring the attributes of this God and theology, the study will seek to assess the sufficiency of "suffering God" theology for current Christian and Jewish faith. To do this, the study will look at the problems inherent in suffering God theology. Then, it will examine the utility of this theology in comforting and counseling those currently suffering. Finally, it will explore other options to suffering God theology, such as traditional theism, protest atheism, and a theodicy of protest, assessing the strengths and weaknesses of each of these options. After critically looking at the problems and utility of suffering God theology, as well as other options besides this theology, the study will make conclusions on the sufficiency of suffering God theology for modern faith and reality. In addition to these judgments, the study will give suggestions for ways to overcome the problems of suffering God theology and make it more useful and supportive for modern believers.

Believers, philosophers, and theologians alike have struggled with the problem of human suffering since the earliest days of history. This study does not expect nor anticipate finding a solution to this age-old problem. Instead, its goal is to partake in the continuing conversation on the topic. If faith is to continue to be a potent force in the lives of believers and in the world in general it must continue to adapt to the changing needs of believers and the world. By examining the use of theology in light of human suffering, this study hopes to contribute to the viability of faith in the lives of modern believers. In light of human suffering, this is particularly necessary if believers are to turn to God in their suffering, rather than away from God.

II

Historical Thought on Human Suffering

Human suffering has been a topic of investigation by philosophers and theologians from antiquity until the present. In every age and generation of thinkers, reflections on human suffering have emerged. This chapter will review some of the perspectives on suffering articulated by major figures in western philosophy and theology. These are the perspectives that contemporary theologians of the “suffering God” school have modified or rejected.

Ancient Philosophical Thought

According to the Greek philosopher Plato (427-347 B.C.E.), the creator of the world intended its goodness. The creator “was good...and being free from jealousy, he desired that all things should be as like himself as they could be.”⁴ The world’s creator desired to help humans to live happily and harmoniously. But, because human beings are not “altogether immortal and indissoluble,” evil has the ability to enter the world and undo its harmony and justice. Therefore, human suffering is the result of humans acting upon evil influences. The gods desire good for the world they created. Evil beings, including humans, opposed to this goodness, are responsible for the suffering that occurs in the world.

⁴ Plato, “Timaeus,” in *The Problem of Evil*, ed. Mark Larrimore (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 5.

The Stoic philosopher, Seneca, writing during the middle of the first century in Rome, gives a contrasting view of the reasons for human suffering. He sees suffering as sent to humans by God. The purpose of this suffering is to test people, and thus make them, as well as humanity in general, stronger. "He [God] does not make a spoiled pet of a good man; he tests him, hardens him, and fits him for his own service."⁵ Seneca asserts that people should be grateful for their suffering. It is a sign of God's favor. God seeks to test and strengthen those whom he chooses and favors. Through this testing, a person becomes stronger and better. Secondly, humans should be grateful for the suffering they have to endure for the betterment of the entire world. "This much I now say- that those things which you call hardships and accursed, are, in the first place, for the good of the persons themselves to whom they come; in the second place, that they are for the good of the whole human family, for which the gods have a greater concern than for single persons."⁶ Therefore, one should gladly welcome suffering as a sacrifice made for the sake of the world. "Good men are willing that these things should happen and, if they are unwilling, that they deserve misfortune."⁷ No suffering will overcome a good person. A good person will rise above and be strengthened by whatever suffering they are made to endure. God will assist humanity in its endurance of suffering by "arming your minds to withstand them all; endure with fortitude."⁸

From these and other philosophers writing in antiquity came the philosophical idea of theism. Theism maintains that God (not necessarily the God of the Hebrew Bible or Christian revelation) is all-good, all-knowing, and all-powerful. Out of the idea of a

⁵ Seneca, "On Providence," in *The Problem of Evil*, ed. Mark Larrimore (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 20.

⁶ Seneca, "On Providence," 20.

⁷ Seneca, "On Providence," 20.

⁸ Seneca, "On Providence," 21.

good God came philosophical speculation on the origins of evil and suffering, and God's role in these things. The philosophical project of explaining how bad things happen in the deity's good creation is known as "theodicy"— meaning to justify the ways of God to humans.⁹ These philosophical ideas had a deep impact on later Christian theological discussions on evil, sin, and suffering.

Early Christian Theology

One Christian theologian strongly influenced by philosophical speculation on the problem of evil and suffering was St. Augustine (354-430 C.E.). In turn, his writings and unique contributions to the problem influenced later generations of Christian thinkers. Augustine's views on the nature of God formed the basis for the traditional Christian view of God. God is all-knowing, all-good, and all-just. God knows what will happen in the future and has known since Creation that humans would fall, sin, and undergo suffering. "Now God foreknew everything, and therefore could not have been unaware that man would sin."¹⁰ God cannot be changed, cannot be harmed, and does not suffer. God is omnipotent and unaffected by the world. "The nature of God is unchangeable... nothing can do it harm."¹¹ Augustine asserted that God did not create evil. Evil is a result of the privation of God's goodness. It is the result of humans willfully falling away from God, as originated by the Fall. Creation is good and God intended human life to be good.

⁹ Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716) coined the term "theodicy" in the 1690s. In doing this he gave a name to a body of philosophical and theological speculation that both preceded and followed him. G.W. Leibniz, "Theodicy," in *The Problem of Evil*, ed. Mark Larrimore (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 191.

¹⁰ Augustine, *City of God*, bk. XIV, ch. 11, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin Classics, 1984), 568.

¹¹ Augustine, "Concerning the City of God, against the Pagans," in *The Problem of Evil*, ed. Mark Larrimore (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 56.

But through the Fall, humans chose to turn from God and evil entered human experience.¹²

Because God is just, God rewards good people and punishes the bad. Suffering occurs in the world according to the law of retribution. It is a result of and punishment for sin. "God almighty, the supreme and supremely good creator of all beings, who assists and rewards good wills, while he abandons and condemns the bad."¹³ Sin is a voluntary result of human will. Therefore, the suffering that occurs because of it is just punishment. "When an evil choice happens in any being, then what happens is dependent on the will of that being; the failure is voluntary, not necessary, and the punishment that follows is just."¹⁴ While retaining his stance on suffering as a result of sin, Augustine also acknowledged the presence of innocent suffering, such as that of babies, as scandalous. He eventually came to rationalize this suffering as included in that due to sin because all humans are inherently sinful due to the Fall. Thus, all are subject to suffering.¹⁵ Evil is a necessary part of the beauty of creation and the free will of humans. God allows it to exist in order to show God's power in turning evil to good. "Evil things are allowed to exist in order to show how the righteous and foreknowledge of the Creator can turn even those very evils to good account."¹⁶ All suffering has a purpose, although this purpose may be hidden from humans.

Augustine's views shaped the thoughts and writings of Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, and Jean Calvin, and the subsequent religious traditions they influenced. Like Augustine, Aquinas (ca. 1225-1274) asserts that evil is not an entity in itself, but instead

¹² Augustine, *City of God*, 569.

¹³ Augustine, *City of God*, 591.

¹⁴ Augustine, "City of God," 60.

¹⁵ Augustine, "Letter 166."

¹⁶ Augustine, *City of God*, 569.

is an absence of good. "Evil imports the absence of good."¹⁷ God uses evil to make good, and this ability is evidence of God's power and goodness. "Since God is the highest good, He would not allow any evil to exist in His works, unless His omnipotence and goodness were such as to bring good even out of evil. This is part of the infinite goodness of God, that He should allow evil to exist, and out of it produce good."¹⁸ Some degree of evil, and its consequence, suffering, are necessary in order for God to make the good that exists in the world. "God is so powerful that He can make good out of evil. Hence many good things would be taken away if God permitted no evil to exist."¹⁹ Suffering and evil on the individual level exist for the good of the world on the global level. Therefore, God allows individual suffering for the benefit of the world. "God and nature and any other agent make what is best in the whole, but not what is best in every single part, except in order to the whole... And the whole itself, which is the universe of creatures, is all the better and more perfect if some things in it can fail in goodness, and do sometimes fail, God not preventing this."²⁰

Aquinas realized that the presence of evil in the world often led people to doubt God's existence. "But the word 'God' means that He is infinite goodness. If, therefore, God existed, there would be no evil discoverable; but there is evil in the world. Therefore God does not exist."²¹ Aquinas countered these disbeliefs by citing Augustine's arguments that since God is the ultimate good, God only allows evil to exist so that God

¹⁷ Thomas Aquinas, "Summa Theologica," in *The Problem of Evil*, ed. Mark Larrimore (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 98.

¹⁸ Aquinas, "Summa Theologica," 96.

¹⁹ Aquinas, "Summa Theologica," 98.

²⁰ Aquinas, "Summa Theologica," 97.

²¹ Aquinas, "Summa Theologica," 96.

can bring good out of such evil. Through belief in God's work through evil, Aquinas argued that one could retain belief in God despite the existence of evil in the world.

Martin Luther, writing in the early sixteenth century, was deeply influenced by Augustine. Luther saw the world as a dualistic battlefield in which daily battles were fought between Christ and Satan in the lives of humanity. Therefore, Christians should be "prayerful and vigilant," never questioning God's justice.²² Christians should be passive and let God do everything above the world's knowledge and counsel. God's knowledge and righteousness in dealing with human suffering is above human understanding. God's will is perfect and unquestionable. Luther attempts to comfort those suffering by saying that only in the Bible can one find the language to make sense of trials without falling into despair and sin. He uses the story of Job to show that even the saints stumble and fall. Thus, one can take comfort in the fact that all are sinners and thus all suffer.²³

Writing around the same time as Luther, John Calvin had similar ideas on human suffering. He too was undeniably influenced by Augustine and refers his readers to his works, including "On Genesis, Against the Manichees," "Unfinished Treatise against Julian," and "Sermons." Calvin believed that the misuse of freedom on the part of humans created the sin and suffering present in the world. His theology of "double predestination" asserts that the justice of God includes mercy for some and reprobation for others.²⁴ Like Aquinas, Calvin recognized that suffering leads people to question God. "The many accidents to which we are liable make people curse their life, detest the day of their birth, execrate the light of heaven, even censure God and (as they are eloquent with

²² Martin Luther, "Prefaces to Job, Ecclesiastes, and the Psalter," in *Works of Martin Luther*, vol. VI, trans. C.M. Jacobs (Philadelphia: A.J. Holman & The Castle Press, 1932), 384.

²³ Luther, "Prefaces," 385.

²⁴ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, XXIII.2-5, ed. John T. Mitchell and trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 949.

blasphemy) charge him with cruelty and injustice.”²⁵ Like Luther, Calvin condemned all speculation on God’s justice and righteousness. Because God is righteous, whatever God wills is righteous. While humans cannot understand God’s reasoning and judgments, the will of God is perfect. When believers ask why something occurs, the only answer is because God wills it.²⁶ God loves righteousness and does not allow iniquity. Calvin asserts that when people question God, they provide God’s enemies, which are always fighting God’s reign on earth, with weapons. Finally, Calvin believed that because everyone sins, all deserve to suffer and die. Therefore, one cannot accuse God of injustice when this occurs.²⁷

The mainstream, pre-twentieth century idea of the relationship between God and human suffering can be summarized in the notion that God is good, just, and powerful. God is thus accountable for human suffering because God is powerful enough to control its existence. God allows the affliction of suffering on God’s people for a number of reasons. Suffering may be a result of the law of retribution. Humans sin, and thus must suffer the consequences of their sins, which is suffering. This consequence may be a direct result of one’s own sin, or it may be a result of the collective sinning of humankind. Thus, innocent suffering is allowed because it is a part of the collective result of human sin. Suffering may also occur as “pedagogy,” for reasons of education or guidance. God may bring suffering on people in order to teach them lessons about their relationship with God. This education may also take on a more global aspect. God may allow the suffering of one person for the sake of the whole world. If the world benefits through learning, God may allow one innocent person to suffer for this instruction.

²⁵ Calvin, “Institutes,” 949.

²⁶ Calvin, “Institutes,” 950.

²⁷ Calvin, “Institutes,” 951.

Finally, innocent human suffering may occur under the traditional Christian God because of the free will of humanity. In order for the world to be free from direct manipulation from God, God must allow humans to act on their own accord. Therefore, human suffering may result and God may choose not to prevent it. Thus, the generally accepted historical view of God's reaction to suffering, philosophically and theologically, was that of theism: an all-powerful God responsible for, or acquiescing in, all human suffering.

III

Twentieth Century Thought on Human Suffering

Impact of World Events on Theology

The events that pounded the world in the twentieth century made the theistic picture of God unrealistic for many Jews and Christians. The century saw two world wars, the invention and use of the atomic bomb, the continued threat of nuclear annihilation, numerous apartheid and genocides, and increased visibility of suffering from poverty and hunger, violence, and civil war due to mass media and communications. For many believers, an event that fully shook their faith in the God of theism to its core was the Holocaust. This event, taking place in Europe during World War II, revealed to the world innocent human suffering on a scale the modern world had not seen nor ever imagined. The event, because of the identity of its victims, hit the Jewish faith first. But the Christian faith, as well as all other world faiths and philosophies, also had to take into account this massive and unbelievable instance of human suffering. For many theologians and believers, the idea that God would allow such suffering, and even will it for whatever reasons, was blasphemous. The German Protestant theologian, Jurgen Moltmann's summary of his Catholic contemporary, Johann Baptist Metz's reaction to the Holocaust illustrates this point. "For Metz, Auschwitz shattered every theology of history, because in the face of the murdered

victims of Auschwitz there can be no Christian 'theodicy,' no justification of God... To want to justify God in the face of 'the pit' [the mass grave of murdered victims] and to seek a meaning in that appalling event would be blasphemy."²⁸ Christians and Jews alike could no longer adhere to the idea of God willing human suffering on the scale of the Holocaust. The idea was irreconcilable with the identity of God as loving and just. A different view of God was needed if believers were to avoid abandoning their faith completely.

"Radical" Theology

For some theologians, the presence of the visible and collective innocent human suffering in the Holocaust pushed their ideas on theology to the extreme. The term "radical theology" describes these theologians, who responded to the horror of the Holocaust by rejecting the traditional, theistic image of God. Frederick Sontag explains the emergence of radical theology.

The problem of evil, particularly when it is massive, tends to lead us toward a radical theology. When evil is domesticated and treated as a form of lesser good, as with Augustine, one can be fairly controlled in his or her approach to a conventional, ecclesiastically moderate God... Massive destruction leads naturally to *The Trial of God* [a reference to Elie Wiesel's book which puts God on trial for the responsibility of human suffering].²⁹

There was no way to reconcile the facts of modern history with an all-powerful, all-loving, and all-just God. Radical theologians responded to the massive displays of evil by questioning and searching for God.

²⁸ Juergen Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 182.

²⁹ Frederick Sontag, "Radical Theology: God and Evil," in *What Kind of God? Essays in Honor Of Richard L. Rubenstein*, ed. Betty Rogers Rubenstein and Michael Berenbaum (New York: University Press of America, Inc., 1995), 389.

Although God disappeared only to reemerge in the shadows, it is significant that the experience of evil's destructive hand does not always lead to God's total and final absence. Just as often, it moves us to a radical change in the direction and in the tenor of our questioning/search for God.³⁰

Richard Rubenstein has been most prominent among these theologians. His changing position in radical theology reflects the changing nature of his personal thoughts on God. Rubenstein initially reacted to the Holocaust by abandoning the God of Judaism and entering a type of contemplative atheism. As he delved further and further in theology, he continued to reform his position and eventually came to practice Judaism again. Despite this increased moderation, the influence of Rubenstein's radical theology on future Jewish and Christian theologians has been powerful.

Rubenstein asserted "the problem of God and the death camps is the central problem for Jewish theology in the twentieth century."³¹ His theology is a reaction to and a reflection on the effects of this history on theology and the relationship between God and humanity. For Rubenstein, the death camps ended all optimism: "The revelation of the death camps caused me to reject the whole optimistic theology of liberal religion... The death camps spelled the end of my optimism concerning the human condition."³² Rubenstein believed that God does not change. "He is eternal. He remains ever the same."³³ Therefore, God cannot be affected by the events of the world. Rubenstein felt a deep-seated hatred for God because God allowed massive human suffering in the world Rubenstein experienced. "He began to experience a hatred of God so deep that it cried

³⁰ Sontag, "Radical Theology," 389.

³¹ Richard Rubenstein, *A Holocaust Reader: Responses to Nazi Extermination*, ed. Michael L. Morgan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 92.

³² Rubenstein, *A Holocaust Reader*, 90.

³³ Richard Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1966), 239.

out for deicide."³⁴ Because of this, Rubenstein was left with no hope for God's saving presence. He had no hope in God's deliverance or protection:

Only death perfects life and ends its problems. God can redeem only by slaying. We have nothing to hope for beyond what we are capable of creating in the time we have allotted to us... in the final analysis all things crumble away into the nothingness which is at the beginning and end of creation.³⁵

Due to the reality of the death camps, Rubenstein concluded that the present era was a time of the death of history's God. "The death camps helped me to understand the religious meaning of our era. Ours is the time of the death of God... I understood the meaning of the death of God when I understood the meaning of Auschwitz and Madjdanek."³⁶ For him, this was a cultural fact. "The death of God as a cultural fact is real and all embracing."³⁷ He proposed that if one really considers the facts, one could come to no other conclusion. God really died in that era.

I believe such a God is inescapable in the time of the death of God. The God who is the ground of being is not the transcendent, theistic God of Jewish patriarchal monotheism. Though many still believe in that God, they do so ignoring the questions of God and human freedom and God and human evil. For those who face these issues, the Father-God is a dead God.³⁸

This means that humanity is alone, no longer in communication with God. "It does mean that nothing in human choice, decision, value, or meaning can any longer have vertical reference to transcendent standards. We are alone in a silent, unfeeling cosmos."³⁹ All that is left to humanity following the death of God is silence. "Perhaps, in the end, all I

³⁴ Klaus Rohmann, "Radical Theology in the Making: Richard Rubenstein Reshaped Jewish Theology from its Beginnings," in *What Kind of God: Essays in Honor of Richard L. Rubenstein*, ed. Betty Rogers Rubenstein and Michael Berenbaum (New York: University Press of America, Inc., 1995), 14.

³⁵ Rubenstein, *A Holocaust Reader*, 91.

³⁶ Rubenstein, *A Holocaust Readers*, 91.

³⁷ Klaus, "Radical Theology," 13.

³⁸ Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 238.

³⁹ Rubenstein, *A Holocaust Reader*, 94.

have is silence."⁴⁰ History's God, the God who could be depended on to intervene in human affairs, was dead.

Because the death of God was a cultural fact for Rubenstein, he asserted that this was not the end of all gods. It was the death of the God of history, the God who was identified and worshiped as all-powerful and all-just in the Jewish and Christian traditions. Despite this death, God was the beginning and will be the end. The death of God may be the start of a voyage to find the true God. "The last paradox is that in the time of the death of God we have begun a voyage of discovery wherein we may, hopefully, find the true God."⁴¹ The death of God was the failure of the God who was the "ultimate actor in history," a culturally constructed God.⁴² The basic conception of God is still meaningful after the death of history's God.⁴³ Rubenstein suggests a return to a mystical God.

There remains the question of whether the religion of God as the source and ground of being, the God after the death of God, is truly a religion. Can there be a religion without a belief in a theistic, creator God? Pagan religions have never celebrated such a God. As I have suggested elsewhere, in the time of the death of God a mystical paganism which utilizes the historic forms of Jewish religion offers the most promising approach to religion in our times.⁴⁴

Other radical theologians responded to the events of the Holocaust with a response that, while less extreme than that of Rubenstein, is similar in its refusal of the God of theism. These theologians asserted that God was hidden, eclipsed, or transcended during the horrendous suffering of the Holocaust.

⁴⁰ Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 264.

⁴¹ Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 241.

⁴² Klaus, "Radical Theology," 95.

⁴³ Klaus, "Radical Theology," 20.

⁴⁴ Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 240.

Eliezer Berkovits recognized that, following the Holocaust, believers in the God of the Jewish and Christian traditions had reason to contend with God. To support this, he refers to the theme of the Book of Job. The facts of human experience do not fit the God of traditional belief. Therefore one can and should question God in an effort to make the two coincide.⁴⁵ Berkovits asserts that it is good to wrestle with God. True faith demands justice from the God one believes to be just. "Faith cannot pass by such horror in silence. Faith, because it is trust in God, demands justice of God. It cannot countenance that God be involved in injustice and cruelty...the man of God questions God because of his faith."⁴⁶ Berkovits acknowledges that for many, questions of faith in the magnitude brought about by the Holocaust lead to the conclusion that God is dead. "The rebellion may reach quite deep, in which case it may appear as the Jewish version of contemporary radical theology. Its final emphasis may lie in the phrases that God is dead, and life, absurd."⁴⁷ For many, the God of history has died. "When a civilization dies, its God dies with it...there is no possibility for any form of God-man relationship. God has departed this earth. We know nothing of His presence. If anything, we experience His absence. It matters little whether He exists or not. In short, God is dead in our time and in our existence."⁴⁸

Berkovits argues that the assertion that God is dead is a superficial answer to what he describes as the hiding of God. He says that faith, rather than God, has died. It is not possible for God to die, because either God exists eternally or God never existed and never will. God is instead hiding during instances of suffering. Humanity is unaware of

⁴⁵ Eliezer Berkovits, *Faith After the Holocaust* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, Inc., 1973), 68.

⁴⁶ Berkovits, *Faith After the Holocaust*, 93.

⁴⁷ Berkovits, *Faith After the Holocaust*, 3.

⁴⁸ Berkovits, *Faith After the Holocaust*, 50-51.

God's presence during these times, but nevertheless God is present even in times of perceived absence and silence. This hiding of God is not a punishment for human actions. Instead, it is an attribute of the divine nature. This attribute does not mean God is indifferent, for believers can seek and find a redeemer even in God's hiddenness. "The one who is silent may be so called only because he is present."⁴⁹ The knowledge of God's presence allows believers to find God even in God's silence and perceived absence. This description of God can be found in the book of the prophet Isaiah and is given the name *El Mistater*.⁵⁰

While God may be hiding during times of suffering, this does not relieve God of the responsibility for suffering. God created a free world in which suffering could exist. Therefore, God can be held accountable for suffering. "Yet all this does not exonerate God for all the suffering of the innocent in history. God is responsible for having created a world in which man is free to make history."⁵¹ Therefore, in terms of responsibility for the suffering caused by the Holocaust, one can assert that the event is "absolute injustice countenanced by God."⁵² It was not divine punishment. Nor is all suffering due to human sin on the parts of those who suffered. "Through the ages, men of faith knew that human suffering was not to be explained by divine punishment alone, as expiation for guilt and divine justice done."⁵³ To believe the Holocaust and the suffering occurring in it were divinely ordained would be a "desecration of the Divine Name."⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Berkovits, *Faith After the Holocaust*, 99.

⁵⁰ Berkovits, *Faith After the Holocaust*, 65.

⁵¹ Berkovits, *Faith After the Holocaust*, 136.

⁵² Berkovits, *Faith After the Holocaust*, 89.

⁵³ Berkovits, *Faith After the Holocaust*, 98.

⁵⁴ Berkovits, *Faith After the Holocaust*, 135.

Berkovits claims that God's power must be limited in some ways to allow for human freedom. God limits God's self so that humans can be free. "Man can only exist because God renounces the use of his power on him. This, of course, means that God cannot be present in history through manifest material power. Such presence would destroy history."⁵⁵ God has the power to give up some of God's omnipotence. "We are introduced to a concept of divine mightiness that consists in self-restraint... God is mighty, for he shackles his omnipotence and becomes "powerless" so that history may be possible."⁵⁶

Berkovits also explores the concept of divine suffering. God suffers, not because of what humans do to God, but because of what humans do to each other. God suffers because of the paradox of divine providence. To tolerate the sinner, God must at least temporarily abandon the victim. Humans must accept suffering if they want God's love and mercy beyond justice. "It is the tragic paradox of faith that God's direct concern for the wrongdoer should be directly responsible for so much pain and sorrow on earth."⁵⁷ In order for people to have the privilege of free will and God's grace, God must necessarily be silent at times. Therefore, there will be instances of the hiding of the face of God and suffering of the innocent. But, because God is present even in God's hiding, evil will not ultimately triumph and humans can thus retain hope.

The God of traditional Jewish and Christian belief was no longer valid for many in light of the human suffering that occurred during the Holocaust. As more and more Jewish and Christian theologians and believers began to take into account the events of the twentieth century, the more obvious it became that a new picture of God was

⁵⁵ Berkovits, *Faith After the Holocaust*, 109.

⁵⁶ Berkovits, *Faith After the Holocaust*, 109.

⁵⁷ Berkovits, *Faith After the Holocaust*, 106.

necessary in order to keep belief in God alive. The radical theologians began this trend by breaking away from the previously tightly held theistic view of God. The trend they began continued to evolve and change as more and more people held God accountable for what happened during the twentieth century. Theologians strove to explain why and how God could exist in a world with so much collective and innocent human suffering. One trend that emerged was the idea that God is a suffering God, affected by human suffering and unable to end it.

IV

The Suffering God

The term “suffering God” appears to be an oxymoron. In recent years, many theologians have written descriptions, justifications, and assessments of what they mean by “the suffering God.” While certainly not without many diverse theories on the implications of this kind of God, many of these theologians have a degree of similarity in their basic description of a suffering God. Citing a well-known passage from Elie Wiesel’s autobiographical novel, *Night*, may best summarize the meaning of this term. Describing a scene from the time he spent in the concentration camp Auschwitz during the Holocaust, Wiesel writes of the hanging of a young Jewish boy.

For more than half an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. And we had to look him full in the face. He was still alive when I passed in front of him. His tongue was still red, his eyes were not yet gazed. Behind me I heard the same man asking: “Where is God now?” And I heard a voice within me answer him: “Where is He? Here He is—He is hanging here on this gallows.”⁵⁸

This passage suggests that in Wiesel’s view, God suffers with those suffering. God does not will suffering. The suffering God condemns suffering.⁵⁹ Wiesel argues in his play, *The Trial of God*, that to say God wills suffering is the work of Satan. In this story, traveling rabbis stop at an inn owned by the only remaining Jewish man left in a medieval village after Christian Crusaders went through the village on a pogrom. The Crusaders had killed all of the town’s other Jewish inhabitants, including the man’s wife and sons,

⁵⁸ Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Stella Rodway (New York: Bantam Books, 1960), 62.

⁵⁹ Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society*, 173.

and raped his daughter before his eyes. The bitter innkeeper is very angry with God for what has happened to his family and claims that God is the enemy, full of cruelty instead of mercy. The rabbis, innkeeper, and a visiting stranger decide to put God on trial for the responsibility of human suffering. The visiting stranger, Sam, plays the role of God's defendant attorney. He defends God by asserting that God does not answer the people's cries because God's reasons are above human knowledge. He claims that, like past disasters in Jewish history, the pogroms must be because of the sins of the Jewish people. He asserts, "God is just and His ways are just." The story concludes with Sam revealing himself to be Satan and all are killed in another pogrom that invades the inn. Thus, one can interpret Wiesel's story as saying that to argue that suffering is God's will and desire, deserved because of people's sins, is the work of Satan.⁶⁰ Finally, not only does the suffering God suffer with those suffering and condemn human suffering, the suffering God cannot stop or prevent human suffering. Theologians writing on the suffering God give diverse reasons on how and why God cannot stop human suffering.

Why God Suffers

For most theologies on the suffering God, God suffers for three main reasons: because of the rebellion of God's children in the world, out of love and empathy for these children who undergo their own suffering, and because of God's desire to be close to humanity. As Douglas John Hall asserts, God weeps over the rebellion of God's children.⁶¹ God desires obedience from God's created humans. In an effort to obtain this obedience, God moves into the people's suffering to free them from what is causing their

⁶⁰ Elie Wiesel, *The Trial of God*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Schocker Books, 1979).

⁶¹ Douglas John Hall, *God and Human Suffering* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), 75.

rebellion. God assumes their pain in order to heal creation.⁶² God allows God's self to be "forced out" of the world, totally abandoned by the people, crucified in a plan and hope for reacceptance by God's rebellious people.⁶³ God suffers because of the rebellion of the world against God.

In addition, God suffers out of love and empathy for God's children. God feels pain because humanity feels pain. God's spirit dwells in God's children. "What the children of Israel suffer, Israel's God suffers too, the God who dwells among them and wanders with them... God was there-but not as the Lord of history: as the victim along millions of victims."⁶⁴ God possesses a kind of suffering love, termed *agape*, for God's world.⁶⁵ This love is the greater reality that meets the reality of human suffering. God is active in this love for humanity. Without active suffering, God's love for humanity would not truly be love. It would be a false and shallow façade of love.⁶⁶ God ultimately demonstrates this type of suffering love for the world in the event of the cross.⁶⁷

God also suffers in response to humanity's suffering because God desires to be close to humanity. Suffering is a part of the human condition. God suffers because God wants to be with humanity. Suffering brings God closer to the world.⁶⁸ In order for God to identify with the human species, God must partake in the suffering that is an inevitable and critical part of the human experience and identity. God needs to be in solidarity with

⁶² Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 125.

⁶³ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 248.

⁶⁴ Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society*, 180.

⁶⁵ In contrast to the common definition of *agape* as selfless or unconditional love, Hall defines it specifically as "suffering love." Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 94.

⁶⁶ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 230.

⁶⁷ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 244.

⁶⁸ Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 117.

humanity if God wants to work to heal humanity.⁶⁹ If God wants to help, God must first suffer with those God seeks to help. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer, one of the pioneers of the idea of a suffering God, wrote, "Only the suffering God can help."⁷⁰ By suffering, God can truly identify with humanity. Only through truly feeling their experiences can God work to help people through those experiences.

How God Suffers

Suffering implies a change in one's self and being. It is being deeply affected by an outside event. When one suffers, one brings the external happenings of the world into one's internal sense of self and one's emotions. Suffering is not therefore reconcilable with the unchanging God of theism. For God to suffer, God must change and be affected by the events of the world and its people. The suffering God must be able to change.⁷¹

The suffering God engages in the events of the world and is moved by them through participation in the world. God takes the events of the world into God's own being. Hall asserts that God engages in the world through participation, not power, and self-emptying, not might. God takes the burden of the world's suffering into God's own being.⁷² The suffering God enters into the life of the world, "freely, effectively, and without reserve."⁷³ God's transcendence is not God's distancing God's self from the world, but instead is the bridging of this distance. Linking, not distancing, is what makes God powerful in the world.⁷⁴ Historically, the ultimate sign for Christians of God

⁶⁹ Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 33.

⁷⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1953), 361.

⁷¹ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 229.

⁷² Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 113.

⁷³ Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 109.

⁷⁴ Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 112.

entering into the world and being affected by the world is the event of the cross. But this was not the end of God's participation in the suffering of the world. God is still involved in this suffering and is changed by what occurs in the world.⁷⁵

The idea of God being changed by the world, instead of remaining unchanged in spite of and in face of what happens in the world, is summarized by the idea of the *pathos* of God, in opposition to the *apathy* of God. The God of early Christianity and of philosophical theism is qualified by the idea of an *apathetic* God. This God is incapable of suffering because God is not affected by the world. The *apathetic* God is unable to feel, is free from needs and the possibility of damage, does not change, operates in complete freedom from all other beings, and is insensitive to the events that affect others. A *pathetic* God has needs, compulsion, drives, and passions. This God is dependent on what happens outside of God's self to fulfill these needs and passions, and thus suffers because of what occurs outside of God's being.

Abraham Joshua Heschel is often cited as the founder of the idea of a *pathetic* theology.⁷⁶ Heschel maintained that because God enters into the history of the world and its people through a covenant with them, God is thus affected by events and human actions, and suffers in response to human history. *Pathetic* theology is expressed in the relationship of God to God's people. Because this relationship is grounded in God's freedom, God intentionally enters into the events of the world and then is able to be harmed by people's actions.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 141.

⁷⁶ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God is Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1955).

⁷⁷ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 267-271.

Because God is changed and moved by the world, God is able to suffer. Dorothee Soelle summarizes this ability with a term from the Jewish tradition, *shekinah*, the indwelling presence of God in the world. This term implies that God, “shares the suffering of his people in exile, in prison, in martyrdom...God suffers where people suffer.”⁷⁸ Moltmann expands on this concept by discussing God’s “self-humiliation.” Through self-humiliation and by entering into the people’s exiles, imprisonments, and persecutions, God suffers with God’s people and feels their pain through *shekinah*.⁷⁹ God, because of God’s love for the world, is made vulnerable. The more one loves, the more vulnerable one is, and thus the more one can suffer.⁸⁰ Therefore, because of God’s great love for the world, God is vulnerable to suffering at the hands of the world.⁸¹

Finally, evidence of God’s openness to change at the hands of the world is found in humanity’s participation in God’s work in the world. Wiesel illustrates this idea by asserting that God is where people bring God. Humanity has responsibility for God.⁸² Thus, God is vulnerable to change in response to the events of the world. The suffering God is not completely unmovable. God has the ability to change. Thus, there is the possibility that God can and will suffer in this change.

Suffering God’s Relation to Power

Another of God’s attributes that demands attention when speaking of God’s ability to change and suffer is that of power. Traditionally, Western thought on God has

⁷⁸ Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering*, trans. Everett R. Kalin (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 145-146.

⁷⁹ Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society*, 183.

⁸⁰ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 253.

⁸¹ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 361.

⁸² Ekkehard Schuster and Reinhold Boschert-Kimmig, *Hope Against Hope*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 92.

focused almost exclusively on power.⁸³ God is seen as completely omnipotent, able to do whatever God wants, and able to effect change in the world in whatever way God wants. The idea of a God who suffers and is changed by the events of the world poses definite problems for traditional concepts of the power of God. The suffering God trend asserts that God cannot stop human suffering from occurring, thereby posing significant theological problems for a traditional theistic view of the power of God. Theologians writing of a suffering God have not ignored the concept of power. It is an important aspect of suffering God theology. In general, those theologians assert that God limits God's own power and thus cannot stop human suffering from occurring in the world. Additionally, while God self-limits God's power, this does not mean that God is without power. Instead, God's power comes from the effects of God limiting God's power. In this manner and definition of power, God remains powerful.

God limits God's power consciously. It does not occur inevitably or naturally. God must become the suffering God.⁸⁴ God choose this limitation for God's own reasons. It is not a sign of weakness. God could do whatever God wants, but instead chooses to limit God's self.⁸⁵ When God chooses to do some things, it limits God's ability to do other things.⁸⁶

God limits God's power for two general reasons: for the sake of a relationship with the world and in order to allow for human freedom. Because God loves the world, God enters into a relationship with it. This relationship qualifies the power God possesses

⁸³ Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 96.

⁸⁴ Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 35.

⁸⁵ Schuster and Boschert-Kimmig, *Hope Against Hope*, 97.

⁸⁶ Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 159.

and can deploy.⁸⁷ In this relationship, there is not a dualism between God's power and goodness. Instead, God's power is limited by God's goodness.⁸⁸ God's love for the world is not that of a tyrant. "Love is not an otherworldly, intruding, self-asserting power."⁸⁹ God does not just permit human suffering; out of love for the world God also endures it.⁹⁰ By assuming a relationship with the world, God can help the world through God's apparent weakness in being a part of such relationship. Being in a relationship makes one vulnerable to pain in response to the other being in the relationship. But this vulnerability also gives one the possibility of helping the other being. "He [God] is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us, and helps us."⁹¹ This is how God can answer the cry of human suffering. Friendship and empathy is a more comforting and believable answer to human questions about suffering than is God's silence and indifference. God suffers because God wants to be with humanity and suffering is a part of its condition. "To be befriended in one's suffering is a more believable and profound 'answer' to the pain of suffering."⁹²

In addition to love for the world, God also limits God's power to permit freedom for humanity. In order for history to exist, God necessarily needs to limit God's power. "That is the particular nature of God's 'omnipotence' in human history. He imposes shackles on his omnipotence and becomes powerless so that human history may be possible."⁹³ This limiting is necessary if the world's people are to have choices and free will. Hall summarizes this argument by saying that if God eliminated suffering through

⁸⁷ Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 97.

⁸⁸ Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 154.

⁸⁹ Soelle, *Suffering*, 148.

⁹⁰ Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society*, 184.

⁹¹ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 360.

⁹² Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 118.

⁹³ Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society*, 178.

power, God would also eliminate freedom. But if freedom is the very essence of being human, eliminating it would be to eliminate humanity. Therefore, the concept of God's unlimited power simply does not work in this situation.⁹⁴ Because of God's love, creation is free. Thus, God must limit God's power in order for creation to live freely. "Divine self-restriction [is] implicit in the creation of free human beings."⁹⁵ Because of this freedom, God's power is limited and suffering befalls both God and humans.

By limiting God's power, God is powerful. While this statement may appear contradictory, theologians of the suffering God explain it in terms of completeness of God's being, involvement in the world, and work in redemption. Only by limiting God's power can God have completeness as a being. Moltmann asserts that a being only omnipotent is not a complete being because it cannot experience helplessness and powerlessness.⁹⁶ The God of theism is "poor" in being. This God cannot love because God cannot suffer. In loving, it is necessary to open one's self up to possible suffering due to one's vulnerability because of love. If God is not vulnerable, God cannot love, and is thus, poor in spirit.⁹⁷ God must have the choice to suffer in order to be complete as a being. In order to be truly powerful, God must have the ability to choose to suffer. Thus, by limiting God's power, God gains power in completeness of being.⁹⁸

Without this limitation of power, God cannot be truly involved in the world. God cannot help without limiting God's power and thus entering into the human situation. Again, Bonhoeffer's sentiments that, "Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering...Only the suffering God can help," illustrate

⁹⁴ Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 98.

⁹⁵ Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society*, 178.

⁹⁶ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 223.

⁹⁷ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 253.

⁹⁸ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 222.

the concept.⁹⁹ Bonhoeffer argues that the world “come of age” has the tendency to limit God to only the periphery of human experience. “The weakness of liberal theology was that it conceded to the world the right to determine Christ’s place in the world.”¹⁰⁰ God is seen as the solution to only the things that humans cannot do on their own. Humans cannot be all-loving; therefore God is all-loving. Humans cannot be all-powerful; therefore God is all-powerful. “God is being increasingly pushed out of a world that has come of age, out of the spheres of our knowledge and life, and...relegated to a realm beyond the world of experience...restricting God to the so-called ultimate questions.”¹⁰¹ But, Bonhoeffer asserts, this God cannot be truly involved in the world. Therefore, God sent Christ to intersect the world in its middle, in the center of all of its pain and suffering. “Jesus claims for himself and the Kingdom of God the whole of human life in all its manifestations.”¹⁰² In this way, God suffers to truly be a part of the world. “God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us.”¹⁰³ The God who can only speak to humans can never listen.¹⁰⁴ Only through limiting God’s power can God become involved with humanity and love. Hall argues that the only power that can address the human situation is the power of love. This power is made perfect only in weakness. Hall cites 2 Corinthians 12:9, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness,” as evidence for this.¹⁰⁵ Thus, God must limit God’s power in order to be involved in the world and help and love humanity.

⁹⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 360-361.

¹⁰⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 327.

¹⁰¹ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 341.

¹⁰² Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 342.

¹⁰³ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 360.

¹⁰⁴ Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society*, 183.

¹⁰⁵ New Revised Standard Version.

Finally, by limiting God's power, God gains power through acts of redemption. Bonhoeffer writes "the God of the Bible...wins power and space in the world by his weakness."¹⁰⁶ For Christians, the most significant display of this power is found in God's action in the event of the cross. For Christianity, God was never so powerful as God was in that seemingly powerless moment. While God's humanity and humility is portrayed in the moment of the cross, God is never more glorious.¹⁰⁷ It was here that God is most recognized on earth, not in might or power, but by limiting God's self to redeem humanity.¹⁰⁸ Redemption cannot be accomplished through a sheer show of power. It must be accomplished by sacrificing a part of God's power, assuming a position of powerlessness, and working from within the human condition to redeem it. Redemption occurs from within the inner parts of the human spirit. It is not a totally external act. Therefore, to accomplish it, God must enter into the weakness of humanity and conquer this weakness from within.¹⁰⁹ God is still the determining party in redemption.¹¹⁰ By this, God retains God's power in spite of self-limitation.

Use of the Cross in Suffering God Theology

Theologians arguing for the identity of a suffering God have used the event of the cross to support their ideas. Moltmann, in *The Crucified God*, is one of the main proponents and pioneers of this idea. To use the event of the cross in support of a suffering God, one must assert that in the suffering of the cross, not merely Jesus' humanity suffers but also his divinity, God's own self. Moltmann uses four main

¹⁰⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 361.

¹⁰⁷ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 205.

¹⁰⁸ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 195.

¹⁰⁹ Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 100-102.

¹¹⁰ Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society*, 184.

arguments to support this idea: the doctrine of the Trinity, the identity of God in Jesus, the necessity of God's presence in the cross in order for redemption or salvation to occur there, and God's loss of a son in the cross. In using the doctrine of the Trinity, one must assert that the unity of God is found in the Trinity. This is necessary for Christianity to be a monotheistic religion.¹¹¹ Terence E. Fretheim supports Moltmann in this by asserting that the message of the New Testament is that God and Jesus are one.¹¹² One needs to see the event of the cross as a trinitarian event, not a separation of the two natures of Jesus, human and divine.¹¹³ This trinitarian theology is necessary for a relationship of *pathos* between God and humanity. Through this, God chooses to enter the world's situation and is near to God's people.¹¹⁴ Thus God cries out in Jesus, and therefore in people's cries of suffering.

But anyone who cries out to God in this suffering echoes the death-cry of the dying Christ, the Son of God. In that case God is not just a hidden someone set over against him, to whom he cries, but in a profound sense the human God, who cries with him and intercedes for him with his cross where man in his torment is dumb.¹¹⁵

Therefore, because the cross is a trinitarian event, God's identity is in Jesus in his life and death. People cannot just "say" who God is. One can only know who God is in history. Therefore, for Christians, God is Jesus. God's own self suffered in the event of the cross.¹¹⁶ God reveals and identifies God's self in Jesus, defining and representing God's self in Christ.¹¹⁷ God and suffering are not contradictory terms. Without this ability, God cannot be truly involved in the world. God's being suffers the death of

¹¹¹ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 240.

¹¹² Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 3.

¹¹³ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 244.

¹¹⁴ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 275.

¹¹⁵ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 252.

¹¹⁶ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 238.

¹¹⁷ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 192.

Christ. God's being is in suffering and suffering is in God's being itself because God is love.¹¹⁸ "God himself loves and suffers the death of Christ in his love."¹¹⁹ Christ's death "expresses" God and is part of the inner mysteries of God's self. Thus the self-surrender, grief, and death of Christ are a part of God's own self.¹²⁰ To see God in the cross is to see the cross in the identity of God. "To recognize God in the cross of Christ, conversely, means to recognize the cross, inextricable suffering, death, and hopeless rejection of God."¹²¹ Thus, God suffers in the event of the cross because God's identity and self is in that of Christ.

God must be present in the suffering Christ if redemption and salvation through the cross is to be possible. Soelle asserts, in concert with Moltmann, that God is on the cross, not just up in heaven.¹²² Moltmann goes on to argue that if the cross is "evacuated of deity," religion loses its humanity and fails to make sense to the world.¹²³ For God to be present and acting in the resurrection, God must be in the crucifixion. Paul in II Corinthians 5:19, "that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself," gives support to the idea that God was in Christ.¹²⁴ In this work of redemption, God is never greater nor more glorious and powerful than on the cross.¹²⁵ Thus, for the basis of Christianity's ideas of redemption through the event of the cross, God's self must be present and suffering in Jesus.

Finally, in addition to suffering in Jesus, Moltmann argues that God also suffered because of the death of God's Son on the cross. While a different type of suffering than

¹¹⁸ 1 John 4:8.

¹¹⁹ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 227.

¹²⁰ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 202.

¹²¹ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 277.

¹²² Soelle, *Suffering*, 148.

¹²³ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 214.

¹²⁴ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 190.

¹²⁵ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 205.

that of God's being in Jesus, this suffering was just as important. This death rendered God with grief out of love for God's Son, and left God Sonless. It was in effect the death of God's Fatherhood.¹²⁶

In summary, Moltmann and others argue that evidence of God's ability and participation in suffering is portrayed in the event of the cross. God and Jesus are one in this event, due to the unity of the Trinity. Thus, God's identity is in Christ. This is necessarily true because of the act of redemption and salvation that occurs for Christians in the cross. Without the reality of God's presence there, this event would not be significant and Christianity would be without its foundation. Also, besides the suffering God endures in the person of Jesus, God also suffers under the loss of God's Son on the cross.

Issues of Justice

In addition to power and the event of the cross, the issue of justice often comes up in conversation on the suffering of God. Theologians discussing the suffering God tend to assert that if God is to have mercy, God must allow suffering. Therefore, God's justice is a kind of grace rather than a judgment. Moltmann summarizes this argument by relating Eliezer Berkovits' argument that "he who asks for God's love and mercy beyond justice must accept suffering." Thus, "while God tolerates the sinner he must [temporarily] abandon the victim."¹²⁷ While this answer does not justify human suffering, it can justify God by pointing to God's sharing in the suffering of the world. Soelle argues that human suffering can never be justified, but God can be justified through God's participation in

¹²⁶ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 243.

¹²⁷ Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society*, 178.

the suffering of the world. "The God who causes suffering is not to be justified even by lifting the suffering later. No heaven can rectify Auschwitz. But the God who is not a greater Pharaoh has justified himself; in sharing the suffering, in sharing the death on the cross."¹²⁸ By assuming the guilt of those causing suffering, God suffers doubly, for both the victims and the perpetrators.¹²⁹ Therefore, the justice of the suffering God is found in mercy and in God's assumption and sharing of suffering with the world.

Biblical Support for Suffering God Theology

Other theologians have used biblical mandates outside the event of the cross to support the idea of a suffering God. The God of the Bible is often seen as *apathetic*. Many suffering God theologians argue that the God portrayed in the Bible is a *pathetic* God, being moved by the world and suffering with its people. Bonhoeffer states the Bible directs people to God's powerlessness and suffering. The world's "coming of age," in terms of the magnitude and visibility of twentieth century suffering, has done away with false conceptions of God as unmoving and unable to suffer. The events of the recent world have opened up a way of seeing the God of the Bible as winning power and space in the world by God's weakness.¹³⁰

When theologians seek support for the idea of a suffering God from the writings of the New Testament, many tend to focus on Jesus' life. Hall asserts that Christ invites us to life by experiencing the painful condition of everyday humanity himself.¹³¹ Soelle claims that the Gospels offer the "strongest opposition" to an *apathetic* God. Christ's

¹²⁸ Soelle, *Suffering*, 149.

¹²⁹ Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society*, 188.

¹³⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 361.

¹³¹ Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 131.

daily needs demonstrate a biblical God that is emotional and suffering.¹³² Theologians in support for the idea of a suffering God often cite these and other New Testament reasons.

More challenging in finding biblical mandates for a suffering God are the texts of the Hebrew Scriptures. Theologians usually typify the God found in these texts as all-powerful and reigning from afar. This God produces judgments and imposes punishments for sin without mercy or feeling for people's suffering. Despite this overarching view of the God of the Hebrew Scriptures, many theologians have found sound and justifiable support for viewing the God of the Hebrew Scriptures as a suffering God, involved in the lives of God's people. Hall argues that the "tradition of Jerusalem," which includes the whole Christian tradition including its Jewish beginnings, is "nothing less than the suffering of God."¹³³ Moltmann asserts that through a Jewish exegesis of the Hebrew Scriptures, one inevitably arrives at a *pathetic* theology.¹³⁴ Time and again, God enters into the situation of the guilty and suffering. In these Scriptures, God experiences lamentation and suffering over Israel's exile.¹³⁵

In his book, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective*, Terence E. Fretheim develops a strong argument, citing numerous biblical passages, that the God of the Hebrew Scriptures is a suffering God. He asserts that suffering belongs to the person and purpose of God.¹³⁶ By discussing many Hebrew Scripture passages, Fretheim argues that no other metaphor for God is found as often and pervasively throughout these Scriptures. It is the most common and overarching theme, bridging the books of the

¹³² Soelle, *Suffering*, 42.

¹³³ Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 16.

¹³⁴ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 267.

¹³⁵ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 273.

¹³⁶ Fretheim, *Suffering of God*, xii.

Jewish exile.¹³⁷ There is an “organismic” image of God in these Scriptures that is often overshadowed by the monarchical picture so commonly cited. This image, in actuality dominating the Hebrew Scriptures, is one of continuity and intimacy between God and the world, a relationship of reciprocity. God is dependent on the world, affected by the world, and choosing to be bound in time and history, thereby limited.¹³⁸ There is a divine self-limitation to the order of creation by God. God gives up some freedom and power to be in relationship to the world.¹³⁹ Fretheim cites Genesis 8:21, “the Lord said in his heart, ‘I will never again curse the ground because of humankind...nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done,” as evidence that at times God limits God’s self for the sake of the world.¹⁴⁰ God makes God’s self vulnerable in God’s relationship to the world. Because of what occurs to those God loves, the God of the Hebrew Scriptures suffers.¹⁴¹ This God suffers because the people reject God as Lord, with the people in their suffering, and vicariously for the people.¹⁴² Because God is portrayed as immanent, manifesting through the prophets and messengers, God indicates that God is choosing to identify and enter the human condition, and inevitably suffering.¹⁴³ Jeremiah 8:18, 21 and 9:1 demonstrate the embodiment of God’s mourning and suffering with humanity. “My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick... For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me... O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for

¹³⁷ Fretheim, *Suffering of God*, 25.

¹³⁸ Fretheim, *Suffering of God*, 35.

¹³⁹ Fretheim, *Suffering of God*, 44.

¹⁴⁰ Fretheim, *Suffering of God*, 72.

¹⁴¹ Fretheim, *Suffering of God*, 78.

¹⁴² Fretheim, *Suffering of God*, 108.

¹⁴³ Fretheim, *Suffering of God*, 103-106.

the slain of my poor people.”¹⁴⁴ By using multiple passages from the Hebrew Scriptures to support his points, Fretheim argues that the God of the Hebrew Scriptures is not the *apathetic* God that Christianity historically names as the God of these books. Instead, this God is a *pathetic* and suffering God.

In summary, theologians discussing a suffering God generally describe this God as one who suffers with those suffering. God suffers for reasons of love for humanity, solidarity with God’s people, and because of rejection by the world. The suffering God is affected and changed by events of the world. This God does not will suffering, instead God condemns it. God is unable to stop human suffering because God limits God’s power for reasons of love for the world and the free will of humanity. In limiting God’s power, the suffering God gains power through fullness of being, involvement in the world, and action in redemption. The suffering God is often illustrated in the event of the cross. Suffering God theologians have used biblical passages from the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament to support their concept of God.

¹⁴⁴ Fretheim, *Suffering of God*, 159.

V

Sufficiency of the Concept of a Suffering God for Modern Faith

Modern Christian and Jewish faiths must now address the sufficiency of the view of God as a suffering God for modern faith. They need to assess the kind of God this gives the world and the worth of having this God. Believers must examine the value of this view of God for those currently suffering and assess the possibility and legitimacy of better options. In general, Christianity and Judaism need to look at the relevancy and value of the concept of a suffering God.

Problems of Suffering God Theology

The concept of a suffering God leaves believers with a God that suffers with them, but chooses to be unable to prevent their suffering, thus possessing limited power in their lives. This image brings up questions on the ability of believers to trust and have faith in a God that is unable to end their pain during their darkest hours. When one is in the midst of utter despair and pain, who would one cry out for, a God who will cry with one, or a God who will save one's self from the source of one's travail? How can a believer have everyday faith in a God knowing that, when faced with pain, this God will not be able to stop this pain? In *She Who Is*, Elizabeth Johnson summarizes this question by describing the objection of one woman to the idea of a suffering God in contrast to a powerful God. "If I were at the bottom of a deep pit, aching, cold, and nursing a broken

arm,' she writes, 'what I want and urgently need is a Rescuer with a very bright light and a long ladder, full of strength, joy, and assurance who can get me out of the pit, not a god who sits in the darkness suffering with me.'"¹⁴⁵

A suffering God needs to be reconciled with the need of believers for faith and trust in this God's actions in their lives. While with variations, the basic answer given to this criticism involves pulling in a bit of history's traditional ideas of theism. Augustine asserted that God has the power to work for the ultimate good.¹⁴⁶ The suffering God gives up the power to direct the daily happenings of the world, and thus sacrifices a part of God's power. However, one can argue that this does not sacrifice God's total ability to work for good in the world. The suffering God can retain the power to use what happens on earth for God's ultimate will of good. The suffering God does not will suffering for the purpose of the ultimate good. But, this God can use whatever suffering does happen for the ultimate good of the world.

Various theologians have explained this idea in differing terms. Fretheim asserts that while God does not completely determine every event, God is present at every occasion and has a hand in each event. God works with what happens in the world. God's ultimate aim is for the best of the world. With a suffering God, the best means the least amount of suffering. But because God possesses a type of divine powersharing with the world, creating a divine empowerment that leaves the world with the freedom to determine its own course, God is sometimes limited in part by what humans do. However, this limit does not automatically negate God's presence and work in every situation. God is at work for the good in whatever situation humans create. Therefore,

¹⁴⁵ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 267.

¹⁴⁶ Augustine, *City of God*, 592.

believers can have trust and faith that God's presence will use whatever occurs for the ultimate good.¹⁴⁷

Douglas John Hall addresses the need of believers for trust in a suffering God by pointing to the capacity of history to be changed. History is not fixed. The continuing freedom of humanity leaves things open to the possibility and probability of change. Hall argues that the suffering God uses this possibility of change to work from within the world to create miracles. Hall gives these miracles the term "grace." Faith is thus defined as the belief that God can use the events of the world for good. God can work from within whatever occurs in history to create miracles of grace. Because of these miracles, believers can find hope and trust in the possibility that God has the power to effect miracles of grace and work from within their situation to effect change.¹⁴⁸

Writing in 1944, out of the horror of world events occurring at that time, Leslie Weatherhead developed a terminology to describe the idea that, while not completely deterministic, God has the power to work with what occurs in the world for the ultimate good of the world. Weatherhead directly addresses the needs of believers for faith in a God that is not completely powerful in a series of sermons to his congregation "to help others to clarify their minds on a subject that is specially relevant to these days of loss and sorrow."¹⁴⁹ Weatherhead names three different, but connected, wills of God. God's intentional will is God's ideal purpose in the world. This, because of God's identity with the good, is not tragedy or suffering. "Surely we cannot identify as the will of God something for which a man would be locked up in a jail, or put in a criminal lunatic

¹⁴⁷ Fretheim, *The Suffering God*, 75.

¹⁴⁸ Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 109-111.

¹⁴⁹ Leslie Weatherhead, *The Will of God* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1944), 1.

asylum.”¹⁵⁰ In God’s intentional will, God pours God’s self out in goodness. This will is for good and not evil. Unfortunately, this intentional will can be temporarily defeated by the will of people, due to the inherent freedom of humanity.¹⁵¹

God’s second will is termed the circumstantial will. In this will, evil circumstances create a will that is necessarily different from the intentional will. While humanity’s freedom creates evil circumstances that distract from God’s intentional will, God’s circumstantial will works within these situations to accomplish God’s ultimate goals. The circumstantial will “opens us up to God’s ultimate triumph through evil circumstances.”¹⁵² Weatherhead argues that believers can find comfort in the fact that God loves and cares. Thus, one can have faith that if one does whatever the will of God is in whatever situation one is in, God’s ultimate will will be done.¹⁵³

Finally, God has an ultimate will which is the goal God reaches, “not only in spite of all man may do, but even using man’s evil to further his own plan.”¹⁵⁴ This will is not accomplished by God’s sheer might, but instead from within man’s choice. Furthermore, if God merely asserted sheer might it would be an admission of weakness, not power because it would be a confession of the divine inability to use human actions for God’s ultimate goals. The end will show how God’s ultimate goals can be accomplished through the circumstances of suffering that exist in the world. The last word will be God’s.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁰ Weatherhead, *The Will of God*, 11.

¹⁵¹ Weatherhead, *The Will of God*, 11-15.

¹⁵² Weatherhead, *The Will of God*, 23.

¹⁵³ Weatherhead, *The Will of God*, 21-31.

¹⁵⁴ Weatherhead, *The Will of God*, 32.

¹⁵⁵ Weatherhead, *The Will of God*, 32-39.

Hall summarizes Weatherhead's position by defining the question as not what God can and cannot do, but what God may and must not do. God is finally omnipotent. Suffering is against the divine will, but grace and faith can find divine omnipotence at work in suffering.¹⁵⁶

By drawing from the ideas of Fretheim, Hall, and Weatherhead, one can urge believers to have faith in a suffering God by pointing to God's actions in using what happens in human history for the ultimate good and will of God. While God may not be able to end their current suffering, God will work from within this suffering to bring about good. This does not justify suffering nor imply that God wills suffering. God does not intend nor desire suffering. But because of the nature of the world and humanity, suffering exists in the world. God, having final power and omnipotence, uses the pain and suffering created by the world for the ultimate good and eventual cessation of all suffering. With trust that God is working in the world and in the people's suffering, believers can have faith in the ultimate saving power of the suffering God.

In addition to problems the concept of a suffering God presents for the ability of believers to find faith and trust in this God, another danger inherent in the view of God as suffering is the possibility that such a view will glorify suffering. This is dangerous in that it may lead followers to admire and seek out suffering in a masochistic fashion.

Johann Baptist Metz protests this, as what he terms the "aestheticization of all suffering." At its roots, suffering is not powerful. Nor is it a sign or expression of love. Instead, suffering is a "horrifying sign that one is no longer able to love."¹⁵⁷ Johnson focuses on the danger of glorifying suffering as particularly potent for women. "When spoken to

¹⁵⁶ Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 189-192.

¹⁵⁷ Schuster and Boschert-Kimmig, *Hope Against Hope*, 48.

women, stress on the powerless suffering of God is particularly dangerous... Structurally subordinated within patriarchy, women are maintained in the position, not liberated, by the image of a God who suffers in utter powerlessness because of love."¹⁵⁸ Thus, because of their traditional position of powerlessness, women may be negatively affected by the image of a God who seeks and remains in suffering and powerlessness because of love. This picture of God "serves only to strengthen women's dependency and potential for victimization and to subvert initiatives for freedom."¹⁵⁹

Theologians, including Johnson herself, have addressed this danger of a suffering God in various ways. Johnson asserts that because of the "pathological tendency" of the current culture to ignore and deny the presence of suffering, and thus react in apathy to instances of it, the emphasis on a suffering God has the potential to work also for the good of women and others regularly left powerless and/or suffering. By reorientating society to the reality of suffering, Johnson hopes that the idea of a suffering God may increase awareness, and thus action, on behalf of those suffering.¹⁶⁰

Hall also addresses this danger, but with a different focus. He asserts that faith must not be masochistic. It is for life and against death. Suffering is not to be loved.¹⁶¹ By recognizing the virtue of a suffering God, one cannot exaggerate this concept to the point of celebrating or cultivating pain. The line separating emphasis on the suffering God as constructive or negative is drawn at the point where suffering ceases to serve life.¹⁶² Suffering is never an end in itself. The object of a suffering God is not to create more suffering in the world, but instead to identify with the suffering already present in the

¹⁵⁸ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 253.

¹⁵⁹ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 254.

¹⁶⁰ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 254.

¹⁶¹ Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 127.

¹⁶² Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 63-64.

world, being in solidarity with those who suffer. In this way, the suffering God is at work in the world, conquering, not creating, suffering from within.¹⁶³

Utility in Comforting Those Suffering

Another question that demands attention when considering theology's shift in emphasis toward the concept of a suffering God is that of its utility in comforting and speaking to those suffering today. One must consider if this concept is consoling and healing for those stricken by modernity's kinds of suffering. By examining sources of conversation on the use of suffering God theology in pastoral care and counseling, one can come to a conclusion on its practical utility in the present world.

In his article, "The Problem of Evil and the Task of Ministry," John B. Cobb, Jr. addresses the problem of suffering and finds support for the use of the suffering God concept in comforting and counseling those suffering. Cobb sees this assessment as a legitimate measure of the practical worth of the theology because "for thousands of years religion has been associated with the explanation of evil, and consciously or unconsciously, whether encouraged by the express theology of the pastor or not, persons in their suffering turn to those they perceive as representative of religion."¹⁶⁴

Cobb summarizes what he sees as the main arguments given historically to answer the problem of suffering for believers. He rejects such traditional approaches as silent empathy with the sufferer, scientific answers to the cause of their suffering, attributing suffering to the law of retribution, or claiming suffering as a way of teaching

¹⁶³ Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 144-145.

¹⁶⁴ John B. Cobb, "The Problem of Evil and the Task of Ministry," in *Encountering Evil*, ed. Stephen T. Davis (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 167.

and strengthening people.¹⁶⁵ Finally, Cobb introduces the idea of God suffering with the sufferer, not causing the suffering, and assesses this idea by three criteria: familiarity and compatibility with other beliefs, logical consistency, and consistency with facts.¹⁶⁶

Drawing from the reality of suffering in the world, the common beliefs formed from this reality, and the rationality suffering God theology obtains from its congruence with reality, Cobb finds the suffering God theology sufficient in all three of these criteria.

In addition to fulfilling these three criteria, Cobb finds support for the use of suffering God theology in pastoral care by using it as a source of hope and worship for God. Cobb asserts that, instead of seeing the world with expectations of goodness promised by theism, one should see the world with expectations of what history has proven to be reality, suffering. By seeing the world through more realistic expectations, one can find blessings and praise for God through the good things in life. Cobb argues that this will bring greater credibility to a faith in God. "But just as the ancient biblical affirmations of God's power grew out of people's experience with God's gracious acts, so once again we might learn to praise God out of our own real experience and vital historical memories. It would be a refreshing change from defending doubtful dogma."¹⁶⁷ Cobb suggests that instead of accusing God because of suffering, one can find comfort in their suffering by seeing whatever is good in their life as a blessing rather than something deserved. In this, a believer can find peace and faith in the midst of suffering.¹⁶⁸ Thereby, Cobb supports the use of suffering God theology in pastoral care and counseling those suffering.

¹⁶⁵ Cobb, "The Problem of Evil," 167-170.

¹⁶⁶ Cobb, "The Problem of Evil," 171-172.

¹⁶⁷ Cobb, "The Problem of Evil," 175-176.

¹⁶⁸ Cobb, "The Problem of Evil," 176.

Other Options

With the inherent problems of finding trust in a God with limited power, the possibility of glorifying suffering, and the question of its utility in comforting those presently suffering, one is brought back to the question of the sufficiency of the concept of a suffering God for modern believers. Another way to approach this question is to consider the other options outside of suffering God theology presently available to believers to deal with the problem of suffering. The first of these alternatives is the philosophy the suffering God trend rejected, theism. Reason for rejecting this view of reconciling the problem of suffering, as discussed above, is its incongruence with the realities of the suffering in the present world. One cannot morally and faithfully attribute the meaningless and tragic suffering of the twentieth century to the will, intention, and power of a loving and just God. Additionally, as Johann Baptist Metz argues, theism does not allow for questioning of God, and places an exaggerated emphasis on the guilt of the sufferer, an idea that is immoral in consideration of today's suffering. Metz sees the combination of these two effects of theism as possibly the root of modern atheism.¹⁶⁹ On these grounds, one can reject the option of theism as a viable answer to faith's problem of reconciling modern suffering with God.

A second option to the suffering God trend is protest atheism. Atheism is a common response rising out of personal and/or recognition of global suffering. Soelle relates this through a story of a dying woman's sister. The old woman had always been very pious. Now, in her old age, she was dying a slow and tortuous death. Her sister watched her "try without ceasing" to pray the Lord's Prayer. To her great sorrow and frustration, in her illness, she could not remember the words. The sister explains, "This

¹⁶⁹ Johann Baptist Metz, *A Passion for God*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 62.

death shattered whatever faith in God I had left.”¹⁷⁰ This woman’s experience is not an isolated incident, but rather a common example of what people regularly experience in the world. The process of suffering, or watching others suffer, leads many to the conclusion of atheism as an almost logical development. Moltmann gives examples of theologians supporting this conclusion by citing Voltaire’s statement that “The simplest answer is there is no God,” and Stendhal in saying, “The only excuse for God would be for him not to exist.”¹⁷¹ This response of atheism comes because people can no longer find characteristics of God in the world, only characteristics of evil. The world does not give any indications of God, therefore it is doubtful that the world experienced by believers is grounded in or guided by a divine being. “Thus, as the world has been made, belief in the devil is much more plausible than belief in God.”¹⁷²

Protest atheism comes into play when believers no longer find reason to accept the world God has made. One can accept God but only God as a “deceiver,” “executioner,” or “sadist.”¹⁷³ Ultimately, the biggest fear and objection of protest atheism is the indifference of God and God’s final retreat from the world. Thus, protest atheism makes a choice to protest this indifference and neglect by consciously ending worship of God. Without acceptance of God, one cannot worship God.

The main criticism of protest atheism lies in the fact that many people cannot continue to avoid the question of God, nor be content with accepting the world as it is. It is not sufficient to simply withdraw from worship of God and expect others to be content with suffering and ignoring God’s relationship to this suffering. People will ultimately

¹⁷⁰ Soelle, *Suffering*, 143.

¹⁷¹ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 225.

¹⁷² Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 220.

¹⁷³ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 221.

want to end suffering, and will want someone to provide and guide them towards this end. As cited by Moltmann, Max Horkheimer labels this need as “longing for the wholly other.”¹⁷⁴ Simply ignoring God will not pacify this longing.

Finally, a third alternative may be labeled as a theodicy of protest. In this option, one does not excuse God for human suffering by citing God’s limited power. Instead, God is presumed to have the power to end suffering but does not wield this power to do so. So, the goodness of God is sacrificed in the face of allowing innocent and tragic human suffering while withholding the power to prevent such suffering. In reaction, theodicy of protest asserts that it is the responsibility of humans to protest God’s actions. This differs from protest atheism in that people do not simply ignore the question of God, but rather confront and protest God, working to correct the effects of God’s actions in allowing human suffering.

Two theologians can further explicate the theodicy of protest. In “A Theodicy of Protest,” John K. Roth asserts, “No matter what happens, God is going to be much less than perfectly justified.”¹⁷⁵ The God of this theology is completely omnipotent. All possibilities are within God’s reach, bound only by God’s will. God fails to use this power to end human suffering, and is thus responsible for its effects. “Everything hinges on the proposition that God possesses-but fails to use well enough-the power to intervene decisively at any moment to make history’s course less wasteful. Thus, in spite and because of his sovereignty, this God is everlastingly guilty and the degrees run from gross negligence to murder.”¹⁷⁶ The idea that God limits God’s power for the sake of

¹⁷⁴ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 224.

¹⁷⁵ John K. Roth, “A Theodicy of Protest,” in *Encountering Evil*, ed. Stephen T. Davis (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 15.

¹⁷⁶ Roth, “A Theodicy of Protest,” 16.

human freedom is not sufficient for protest theodicy. Roth claims that the freedom God gives is too much and too soon for humans to handle. Thus, God is responsible for the way in which humans misuse this freedom, and the suffering that thereby results. "God's responsibility is located in the fact that he is the one who ultimately sets the boundaries in which we live and move and have our being."¹⁷⁷ Roth concludes that the proper response to God's irresponsibility resulting in mass suffering is to protest to God by working against the results of these actions. "God's promises call for protests."¹⁷⁸ In summary, Roth argues,

Still, the fact remains: the net result of God's choices is that the world is more wild and wasteful than any good reason that we can imagine would require it to be. Thus, to be for such a God requires some sense of being against him as well. To defend the good as we know it best- especially to carry out God's own commandments that we should serve those in need, heal the sick, feed the hungry, forestall violence- we must do battle against forces that are loose in the world because God permits them.¹⁷⁹

Another well-known proponent of protest theodicy, David Blumenthal, proposes a more provocative and controversial summary of this theological stance. Blumenthal asserts that God is sometimes, but not always, good. God is all-powerful and omnipotent. "Common sense and reason do not allow one to deny or limit God's power."¹⁸⁰ Because God is all-powerful and not always good, God is responsible for the existence and extent of human suffering. "I contend that God's ongoing presence and power implies God's ongoing, direct and indirect, moral co-responsibility in human affairs."¹⁸¹ Blumenthal labels this responsibility as "abusive." While God is not always abusive, this trait is a part

¹⁷⁷ Roth, "A Theodicy of Protest," 11.

¹⁷⁸ Roth, "A Theodicy of Protest," 17.

¹⁷⁹ Roth, "A Theodicy of Protest," 19.

¹⁸⁰ David R. Blumenthal, "Theodicy: Dissonance in Theory and Practice," in *The Fascination of Evil*, ed. David Tracy and Hermann Haering (London: SCM Press, 1998), 96.

¹⁸¹ Blumenthal, "Theodicy: Dissonance," 96.

of God's personality.¹⁸² Support for this attribute of God can be found in texts from the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament.¹⁸³ Abuse is inexcusable for humans to accept. "Abusive behavior is abusive; it is inexcusable, in all circumstances. What is true of abusive behavior by humans is true of abusive behavior by God...Furthermore, the reasons for God's actions are irrelevant, God's motives are not the issue. Abuse is unjustified, in God as well as in human beings."¹⁸⁴

Blumenthal argues that one must break the silence over God's abuse of humans through protest. "The first step in reconstructing a post-holocaust, abuse-sensitive faith is to face up to the truth, resistant as we are to admitting it. We must break the conspiracy of silence and tell the truth."¹⁸⁵ This is the proper form of worship believers must have towards God. Having its roots in the Bible and rabbinic tradition, this form of worship preserves the true identity of the abusing God and the moral sense of humanity. Believers must admit, "scripture does indeed portray God as an abusing person."¹⁸⁶ Thus, protest is the proper stance towards God. "Given Jewish history and family violence as our generations have experienced the, distrust is a proper religious affection, and a theology of sustained suspicion is a proper theology to have."¹⁸⁷ Worship of God must not simply be composed of pious and passive acceptance of abuse. Instead, believers must challenge and fight against dissonance through protest as a form of worship.¹⁸⁸

Humans must take a more mature and realistic view of God as abusive, instead of simply denying God and God's true identity. Believers do not need to have a perfect God,

¹⁸² David Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/ John Knox Press, 1993), 246-247.

¹⁸³ Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusive God*, 240.

¹⁸⁴ Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusive God*, 248.

¹⁸⁵ Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusive God*, 249.

¹⁸⁶ Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusive God*, 242.

¹⁸⁷ Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusive God*, 257.

¹⁸⁸ Blumenthal, "Theodicy: Dissonance," 100.

but rather a realistic view and appreciation of God. By seeing all sides of God's personality, humans can begin to have an authentic and true relationship with God. Instead of simply "throwing out God with the purifying waters," one can reject ignoring God and develop a relationship despite God's abusiveness.¹⁸⁹ This view implies taking a stance of protest against the abusive God.

In general, one can find inherent problems in the concepts of protest atheism and protest theodicy for the faith of believers. Most fundamentally, one can question the legitimacy of a God who is not all good, who may be "abusive," as still being God. If God is defined as good, an abusive or neglectful God cannot be God. Secondly, these two options make it difficult for a believer to retain faith in such a God. It is difficult for one to have faith in a God that allows evil. One will struggle to live out one's life in faith without the assurance that God is on their side and working for their good.

¹⁸⁹ While Blumenthal supports developing a relationship with an abusive God despite the abuse, he does not suggest this course of action for human relationships. Blumenthal takes measures to assert that he is not proposing that people maintain an abusive relationship with one another despite the abuse. Blumenthal, "Theodicy: Dissonance," 104.

VI

Conclusion

Strengths of Suffering God Theology

Finally, after examining other options and criticisms on them, one can turn back to the conversation on the sufficiency and adequacy of suffering God theology for modern faith. Keeping these alternatives in mind, one can assess the value and inherent quality of the concept of a suffering God. First, a suffering God accounts for reality. It is impossible in the current age to deny that suffering is a present and strong reality. More so, this suffering cannot be attributed to the personal guilt of its victims, nor the will of a loving God to use it for education or growth. Secondly, a suffering God allows for believers to have faith and worship such a God. Since the suffering God is at least loving, believers can believe and worship such a God. Thirdly, a suffering God can be a source of comfort for those suffering. By experiencing the empathy and presence of God in the midst of one's suffering, one can be counseled and comforted with the idea of a suffering God.

Suggestions to Overcome Weaknesses in the Theology

To overcome inherent problems within the concept of a suffering God, one needs to place additional emphasis on certain aspects of the theology. First, one needs to focus attention on the fact that God does not want or glorify suffering. There is no intrinsic value in suffering. As discussed in the above section on the reasons as to why God

suffers, a suffering God's goal is to eliminate the suffering that is already present in the world, not to create additional suffering. Secondly, one should emphasize that God has the final ability to work for the ultimate good, and acts on this ability. While unable to prevent suffering, God will use what happens on earth for God's ultimate goals of good for the world. Leslie Weatherhead's terminology of the three wills of God, as summarized above, gives an example of how God can accomplish this. Thus, believers can have faith and trust that God will not merely suffer with them, but will also work within this suffering to do what God can to ultimately end their suffering.

Nevertheless, Wendy Farley, like Elizabeth Johnson, brings up another caution against suffering God theology. This theology cannot be used to pacify the existence and recognition of suffering. Believers cannot simply accept suffering because God suffers. Instead, if one cannot stop suffering, one must continually work to resist and end one's own suffering, as well as that of others. "If suffering and destruction cannot be overcome, they can be resisted. It is in the resistance itself, in this refusal to give up the passion for justice, that tragedy is transcended."¹⁹⁰ Farley names compassion as the power to resist. "Tragic suffering cannot be atoned for; it must be defied. Compassion is that power which survives to resist tragic suffering."¹⁹¹ In order to have active compassion and avoid mollifying the problem of suffering, one must first recognize the humanity of those suffering, and the reality of their suffering. Next, one must desire the welfare of those suffering because of their identity as fellow human beings. Finally, one must be active in one's compassion by working to resist and end earthly suffering. "Compassion is the

¹⁹⁰ Wendy Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 27.

¹⁹¹ Farley, *Tragic Vision*, 29.

resilience of the passion for justice that survives tragedy and in fact resists and defies it."¹⁹² Only through such compassion can believers respond to suffering without despair.

While avoiding falling into the dangers of pacifying the question and reality of suffering, nor glorifying suffering, and keeping in mind the importance of God's ability to work for the ultimate good, suffering God theology is sufficient for modern faith. It accounts for the world's reality and can be used to comfort those suffering. It is compatible with other facets of Christian and Jewish beliefs. But, in order to retain this sufficiency, suffering God theology must continue to make efforts to address the above problems inherent in it. With adjustments of emphasis to avoid these dangers, suffering God theology can address the needs of believers in response to modern suffering.

Ultimate Goal of Conversation

Finally, with regards to all that has been discussed above, one must keep in mind the ultimate goal of conversations, including the present one, on God and human suffering. One cannot expect to solve in finality the ancient problem of the existence of evil and pain in the world. Instead, the goal is to continue the conversation on the subject and contribute what one can to this conversation. With this goal in mind, one can continue to explore and debate claims and theologies used to justify the relationship between God and suffering as experienced in the world one lives in.

The importance of continuing this conversation grows from the value one places on one's faith. One must critically look at and explore questions such as these in order to keep one's faith alive and relevant to the present reality. One must continue to question and examine one's beliefs in God if one desires to turn to God rather than away from God

¹⁹² Farley, *Tragic Vision*, 39.

when faced with challenges in one's life and faith. Eliezer Berkovits summarizes this necessity for faith. "After the holocaust Israel's first religious responsibility is to 'reason' with God-if need be-to wrestle with Him... The 'reasoning' with God is a need of faith; it issues from the very heart of faith."¹⁹³ For faith to continue to be an active and credible force in the lives of believers, one must continue conversation on the congruence of one's beliefs with one's life and reality.

¹⁹³ Berkovits, *Faith After Auschwitz*, 68.

Epilogue

On a more personal note, my motivation for starting this research stems from an experience with a friend last summer. My friend, Nate, was newly active in his Christian faith. After months of questioning and searching, he had decided to become an active believer. About two months after this decision, he was still exploring and participating in Christianity. Then, his mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. This news understandably shook his newly found faith to its core. As I listened to him questioning God, some of his cries echoed within my own faith. He, and I, could not understand why this had to happen to his family when he was just coming into his faith. He wondered if God was trying to teach him something and questioned what kind of God would allow and use something as horrible as cancer to teach. He could not find reason to believe in a God who allows such things, and who, for all God's power, could not help and save his mother. As I listened to his and my own doubts, I came to realize that I could not answer him. There was nothing I could come up with that would answer his questions or rectify his faith. This led me to question our place as believers in encouraging people to have faith when in their darkest moments we cannot give them any reasons as to why they ought to or how they can believe in or worship God.

After writing this paper, I still cannot give any final answers to my friend's or my own questions. But, I have come to realize that God does not expect a final and polished faith. As a fellow sufferer, God knows that we hurt, fear, get angry, and doubt. These emotions are a natural result of suffering. When God suffers, God also hurts and thus knows how we too feel. It is in this that we can find comfort and try to give comfort in

suffering. God is present and empathetic in suffering. God is at work, using whatever happens for the ultimate good. In this, God does not want us to suffer and would stop it if God could. In this comfort, we can have faith in and a relationship with God. This relationship will not be perfect or without cracks, but it can be active and alive. In this faith, believers can take action to oppose suffering, to strive to end it for others and ourselves. In this relationship, believers can continue questioning faith, seeking answers, and reconciling our experience of reality with our faith.

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