

**STREET-LEVEL THEODICY:  
DEVELOPING GUIDELINES FOR A  
PRACTICAL APOLOGETIC SUITABLE FOR  
WORKING WITH VULNERABLE PEOPLE**

A dissertation submitted to the University of Wales  
in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of

**Master of Theology  
in  
Applied Theology**

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# Declaration & Statements

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This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

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# Summary of Work

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## Summary:

The immediate aim of this dissertation is to research the issue of theodicy in order to start developing guidelines for a practical apologetic suitable for working with vulnerable people. It is my hope that the results of this study will, in the longer term, feed not only into future academic work along these lines, but also into the training of future ministers in pastoral care, and into the training in apologetics offered to evangelists and ordinary church members.

I aim to produce a set of guidelines consistent with orthodox Christian theology, approaching the subject from two directions. First, there is a pragmatic exercise to develop guidelines for determining the most helpful approach from a pastoral perspective, given the beliefs, background and context of the parties involved. Second, we examine and evaluate the various beliefs which shape this discussion.

I identify some of the territory such guidelines must cover, both Biblical (such as examples of suffering and words used to describe suffering) and theological (such as the sovereignty and impassibility of God, and the relationship between theology and pastoral care). In some of these areas, such as the question of impassibility, I go into a little more detail, to indicate the kind of content which will need to be supplied in due course.

A number of interviews were conducted, and some of the common themes and issues which arose in the interviews are described and discussed: in particular, the unexpected result that few people reported that they struggled with the problem of suffering.

The results confirmed the underlying methodology: instead of aiming to produce one definitive response to the problem of suffering, I attempt to identify a range of responses and find ways to determine which is likely to be the most helpful for any given individual.



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# Chapter 1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will outline what I intend to cover in this dissertation; describe something of the context in which it is being written, from both a personal and a ministry perspective; and explain my choice to add to the multitude of words already spoken and written about this familiar subject.

## 1.1 Aim

### 1.1.1 Overview

The title of this dissertation, ‘Street-level theodicy’, was chosen in part because I am concerned with seeking to develop a theodicy which will be helpful to people in the context of ordinary life, as opposed to people who are concerned with academic or theological approaches to the subject; and in part because I work with people who are homeless and who live, sometimes literally, on the street: my intention is that the result of this work will be relevant and helpful to them, and to those who care for them.

One reason for choosing this subject is that I have ready access to people with both a wide experience of suffering and a willingness to talk openly about it. The combination makes this an interesting and potentially useful area to explore.

By considering the problem of suffering from both a theological and a pastoral perspective, I hope to enable the church to offer a more coherent and effective theodicy to each individual. The suggested approach should not only enable the church to help individuals as they cope with suffering, but also provide a framework to assist in choosing an appropriate apologetic when challenged with the problem of suffering.

The immediate aim of this dissertation is to research the issue of theodicy in order to start developing guidelines for a practical apologetic suitable for working with vulnerable people. It is my hope that the results of this study will, in the longer term, feed not only into future academic work along these lines, but also into the training of future ministers in pastoral care, and into the training in apologetics offered to evangelists and ordinary church members.

**Start developing guidelines.** A full set of guidelines is possibly unachievable. A usefully complete set of guidelines would take far too much work to be completed within this time available. But I intend to set out the general framework for a possible set of guidelines, and provide enough detail for others to be able to build on this initial work. These guidelines should include, but not be limited to, the area of ‘practical theodicy’ as described by Swinton: “the process wherein the church community, in and through its practices, offers subversive modes of resistance to the evil and suffering experienced by the world.”<sup>1</sup>

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1 Swinton, *Raging With Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil*, 2007, p. 85.

**A practical apologetic.** The main focus is on developing practical responses: ones which respond in a helpful way to the concerns and questions people actually ask, as opposed to the questions they are told they should be asking. This follows the fundamental principle of working with marginalised people: that “the perspective of the research subject must be held in constructive tension with that of the researcher and the research process”.<sup>2</sup>

**Working with vulnerable people.** While the initial context of the research for this dissertation is a Christian ministry working with homeless and other marginalised people, it is a well established principle within our area of work that once you reach beneath the surface, everyone is vulnerable. Guidelines developed for use with vulnerable people should be helpful and relevant to the majority of people within our society; and resources developed for this context should form a useful subset of the resources which are applicable to the wider society.

My initial aim in undertaking this work was to arrive at a pragmatic set of guidelines that would indicate which response, out of a range of possible responses to the problem of suffering, is likely to be most helpful. In an ideal world, each of these possible responses would be described in a cheap and readable book or booklet that is readily available to my staff and volunteers.

While I would have liked these guidelines to form part of the dissertation content, the limitations of words and time made this impractical. The dissertation will concentrate on describing the process of working towards developing such guidelines and justifying the decisions made along the way in theological and pastoral terms.

While the aim of this work is to produce a set of guidelines, these guidelines must be consistent with orthodox Christian theology. This suggests a two-pronged approach may be helpful.

From one direction, the development of guidelines is essentially a pragmatic exercise: what is the most helpful approach from a pastoral perspective, given the beliefs, opinions, values and circumstances of the questioner, and the theological position of the person seeking to help? This approach accepts the beliefs of each party as given, and seeks to find the best way to work with them.

From the other direction, we need to examine and evaluate the various beliefs which shape this discussion. I do not want to attack or criticise any particular theological belief or position; on the other hand, I do wish to recognise that different beliefs lead to different outcomes, and not all beliefs are equally helpful when you are seeking to help someone who is struggling with the issue of theodicy. This is a massive piece of work, and all I can hope to do here is to sketch out something of the territory which needs to be covered, to provide a few examples of the kind of detail which will need to be filled in, and demonstrate something of the relevance of each part to the wider subject. Where I go into some details, I offer the specific content as a ‘place-markers’ for the fuller discussion, and not as an attempt to provide a final word or definitive contribution to a debate which has lasted for centuries.

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2 Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 2006, p. 227.

## 1.1.2 Pastoral and apologetic issues

It was clear from the outset that the pastoral and apologetic aspects of this study would be both distinct and inter-related. While the concerns raised by these two aspects can often seem quite distinct, the response to these concerns must be consistent: in part, because they are both based on the same core theological truths, and in part because you cannot, with any moral consistency, give one message in a pastoral context and a contradictory message in an apologetic context.

My primary concern in developing the guidelines is to establish which approach will be most helpful for any given individual. Of course, the approach must also be theologically sound. It is my conviction that any approach which is genuinely helpful will also be theologically sound: no lie has the power to help as much as the truth can. But I also have to recognise that sincere Christians hold to a variety of theological positions, and what is 'sound' for one can be blatant heresy for another.

In seeking to establish a practical apologetic, I need to be clear about the boundaries of the work. In practical terms, it seems that the issues revolve around the subject of suffering, and include more than just the traditional question of theodicy. Possibly the most common question about suffering is the familiar: why me? Or: why my spouse, child or parent? This, and related questions, must also be addressed if the guidelines are to be of practical help.

Thus, while the aim of this dissertation is to "research the issue of theodicy in order to start developing guidelines for a practical apologetic suitable for working with vulnerable people," the aim of the wider project of which this dissertation is only one piece is to develop guidelines which can help to inform and hence improve both the pastoral care we provide to suffering people and the answers we give to people with questions about suffering.

## 1.2 Context

In this section, I will describe something of the context, both personal and ministry, of this dissertation.

### 1.2.1 Personal Context

I have been engaged for many years in a personal study of suffering and theodicy. I have discussed, debated, taught, written about and spoken on various aspects of it for over thirty years; some of this unpublished work is available on the Internet.<sup>3</sup> While this earlier work was not written for academic purposes, I have permitted myself the occasional reference in this study to a conclusion which I have argued for elsewhere, or to conversations which pre-dated this research.

I have experienced a degree of suffering in my life which forms a backdrop to this

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3 The documents and web pages are mainly accessible from my family web site. I am in the middle of creating a comprehensive set of links to these documents and pages from Hazelden, *The Problem of Suffering: Index*, but one relevant example can be found at Hazelden, *God is Good and Loving*.

study. The details are not relevant here, but are available in outline on my web site.<sup>4</sup> In my experience, many people want to talk about this subject. From my earliest days as a Christian, I have listened to and talked with people about suffering, both their own and that of people close to them – not because my own suffering gave me the right to speak, or any great insight into the subject, but (I assume) simply because I was willing to listen and talk when so many others were reluctant.

I have been employed for the past nine years by a Christian charity.<sup>5</sup> We say in the literature that we work to help homeless people, but the term ‘homeless people’ is a slightly misleading one: it refers to a population group which includes not only those who are currently homeless but also those who have been homeless and those who face problems which make them vulnerable to becoming homeless in the future.

Another description of our work is that we help people with ‘life-disrupting problems’. These problems typically include things like addiction, unemployment, physical and mental health problems, debt, homelessness, a history of family breakdown and abuse, and a criminal lifestyle.

Most of our clients operate, or have operated in the past, outside mainstream society. Sometimes they have ‘fallen off the radar’ of the statutory services or refuse to engage with them, but most of them are in receipt of various benefits.

A significant number have never officially worked; but most of them have been doing unofficial jobs all their lives, being paid in cash and never paying tax or National Insurance. They are frequently buying and selling goods and services, and for the women, prostitution is common. This ‘grey economy’ activity often goes alongside explicitly illegal activity, which ranges from shoplifting through burglary and robbery to mugging; many are also dealing in illegal drugs, which can be anything from a small amount of Class C for a few friends to serious quantities of Class A for other dealers.<sup>6</sup>

There is inevitably a great deal of suffering which accompanies this lifestyle. People often find themselves in this situation because they have faced problems they were unable to deal with, and in the process have alienated their friends and family; often, too, they have suffered from neglect and abuse from an early age. They have experienced a great deal of suffering, and they have also usually inflicted a great deal of suffering on others. We seek to provide a distinctively and explicitly Christian response to their needs, as representatives of the church in Bristol.<sup>7</sup>

Because suffering is one of the common issues our clients face, it is not surprising that the traditional problem of suffering comes up in one form or another on a regular basis. Many of our staff and volunteers struggle to know how to respond when people blame God for their problems.

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4 See, for example, Hazelden, *Paul's Health*, and Hazelden, *Eczema*.

5 The origins of the charity, Crisis Centre Ministries, and the nature of the work we do, are described in some detail in Hitchings with Aitken, *An Ordinary Man With An Extra Ordinary God: A short history of the start of Crisis Centre Ministries*, 2009.

6 To be clear: many of our clients are involved in drug dealing, but we make every effort to ensure that this does not take place on our premises. I could be sent to prison if we get this wrong.

7 Please see Hazelden, *Discipleship: Life and Ministry*, for more details of what we mean by this.

I do not suggest that the suffering of homeless and vulnerable people is in any way different to the suffering of others, but there are two distinctive factors which make it an interesting and potentially fruitful area of study. Firstly, much of the suffering is obvious, and there is a cultural willingness to talk about it. There is, no doubt, other suffering which is hidden and not spoken about; but this provides a context in which suffering can be talked about without much difficulty. Secondly, homeless people tend not to be polite and reticent: if they think you are talking nonsense, they will generally say so. This makes our work an ideal environment in which to gain helpful feedback concerning the usefulness of different approaches to the subject.

Of course, finding people who are willing to talk is not the same thing as finding people who are willing to be honest, and honesty is not one of the primary strengths of our client group; on the other hand, we do have a good deal of experience in discerning when it is likely that we are hearing the truth, and I am confident that the results of the fieldwork are reliable enough to be valid input to a study of this kind.

It is noted that the distinctive aspects of suffering in this context are a two-edged sword: they make the subject easier to study, but they also mean that we cannot simply extrapolate from the results of this study to the general population. While undertaking pastoral care in a traditional church setting, I frequently sought to help people who were experiencing psychological suffering: problems such as fear, doubt, guilt, uncertainty and regret. While these factors are not absent from the present study, they are probably present to a lesser degree than in other contexts; and there may well be other significant differences, too.

### 1.2.2 Ministry Context

The charity I run has been operating since 1984 in St Pauls, a notorious part of Bristol. The area is well known for its ready supply of illegal drugs and sex. Most of our clients are drug addicts, alcoholics and street-based sex workers.

We run a coffee shop and drop-in centre, which is currently open five days a week: lunchtime and evenings Monday to Friday. We provide food as a way of drawing people in to the building and to enable us to build relationships with the clients. We also provide other services; but the coffee shop is the largest part of the work, and the most relevant for the purpose of this study.

In functional terms, we are primarily a referral agency: we establish contact with people who are not engaging with the statutory services, and build bridges so that these people can get the help they need. We often retain a relationship as they progress through numerous statutory and funded bodies.

While it is true, this summary does not begin to describe the actual activity undertaken, or the experience of people within the ministry. We are first and foremost a group of Christians functioning as a part of the local church, serving some of the most needy people in our local community as an expression of the church in Bristol.

This sets us apart from much of the other work with homeless people: we are not only a group of Christians serving the homeless, but we are explicitly serving as Christians, seeking to integrate our faith and our work. Most Christian projects aim to

keep their faith and their work distinct, providing opportunities such as chapel services in which the clients can engage with questions of faith, and banning faith-related activities – such as praying for people – from taking place in the context of the secular activities they are undertaking.

Our staff and volunteers are free to talk with the clients about matters of faith, and to pray for them, but only if the clients wish it. The aim is to be entirely consistent in applying our person-centred and client-led methodology. We do not force anything upon the clients – not food, not religion, not advice. But we seek to make everything available to the clients which may be of help to them, should they wish it.

Our primary aim is not to do things to or for the clients, or even to change them. Of course, we want them to change, but the fundamental principle is that of incarnation: we aim, first and foremost, simply to be there for the clients. Being present for them leads to building a relationship with them. And through the relationship, we seek to understand what they would like to happen.

We meet people where they are, we accept them as they are, and we do not impose our ideas and desires upon them. We do not pressurise people to change: partly because we believe it to be wrong, and partly because it does not work. Instead, we offer an environment in which change is possible, in which it is encouraged and supported, and in which they can meet other people who have begun to change and hear their testimonies. We offer a place where the clients can find genuine unconditional love.

We teach this approach to ministry both as the most effective way of achieving lasting change in our immediate client group and also as a model for all Christian ministry within the church.

Most of the work is done through our volunteers: ordinary Christians from the local churches. They are trained, supported and equipped by the staff. Our aim is to equip them for Christian ministry so that they can live as effective Christians in their homes, workplaces and churches, as well as making a difference to the homeless people who come to our drop-in.

### *1.3 Considerations in the choice of subject*

When considering the major questions raised in the context of apologetics,<sup>8</sup> the question of suffering stands out in several ways. First, the question of suffering is the only one which imposes itself upon the lives of ordinary people on a regular basis; and second, only the question about suffering does not have a straightforward response.<sup>9</sup>

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8 It is, of course, a matter of judgement just what the ‘major’ questions consist of, but over the years we have found that the common questions tend to group around one of four major themes, each of which has one key question. The themes and key questions are: suffering (Why doesn’t God prevent suffering?), science (Hasn’t science disproved religion?), salvation (Don’t all religions lead to God?) and scripture (Doesn’t the Bible contradict itself?).

9 For a brief discussion of these questions, and some basic responses to them, please see Hazelden, *Apologetics and Suffering*.

Despite all the words which have been written on the subject, my own informal research suggests that most Christians do not feel they have a response to the problem of suffering. This damages their faith and their witness, and even leads some to reject the Christian faith altogether. Charles Darwin is a familiar, if misunderstood, example of this: the evidence is that he lost his faith because of the problem of suffering, and not (as many people assume) as a result of the theory of evolution.<sup>10</sup>

## 1.4 Methodology

In beginning this dissertation, my first step was to read (and re-read) some of the key theological texts dealing with the subject of theodicy, to provide a framework for my own thinking and planning for the remainder of the work.

The next step was to interview Christian staff and volunteers working with homeless people, asking them how they answer when someone asks them about the problem of suffering, what responses they get to these answers, and for their own reflection on the adequacy of the answers they give to meet the needs of the people they are seeking to help. I also asked what literature or other sources of information and help with this subject they have used or are aware of.

I also asked the same question of homeless and vulnerable people who are Christians, or who share a similar religious perspective, to see if their replies differ from those who have had (it is reasonable to assume) more exposure to Christian teaching. By 'similar religious perspective' I mean those who believe in a personal God or gods who are interested in their suffering and able to prevent it. The reality is that most of the people we work with come from a Christian tradition, and while they are not all active Christians, most of them operate from within a Christian world-view.

If there was time, I initially hoped to develop and trial some guidelines within the project I run, and revise them in the light of this experience; but this was not possible after all.

Another limitation caused by the lack of time is the lack of explicit questions about theological traditions. I anticipate that some part of the guidelines will involve choices based on the theological convictions of the person seeking to respond to the problem of suffering, as well as the convictions of the person who is struggling with the suffering. Some possible responses are not available to people with certain theological beliefs: for example, Arminians and Calvinists can each make arguments that the other would not consider to be valid. Similarly, some parts of the discussion are very much affected by the individual's position concerning evolution: the evolutionist and the creationist are each able to argue points which the other cannot. But there was never going to be sufficient time and space to go into this level of detail in the present work.

My original plan was to consider the topic of theodicy from two perspectives: on the one hand, the philosophical and theological approaches to theodicy; and on the other hand, the pastoral approaches to theodicy. However, the material in the two

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<sup>10</sup> Gunton, *The Christian Faith*, 2002, p. 26.

areas had so many overlaps that this proved impractical. You can consider any of the approaches from either of these perspectives.

The approach I am taking in this study has similarities to the approach used by Basinger and Basinger in *The Logic of Theodicy*<sup>11</sup> and seeks to move on from it. They “aim to compare how three theistic perspectives -- theological determinism, freewill theism and process theism -- do (in fact, must) approach the reality of evil in this world and then reflect on whether any of these approaches (theodicies) can be judged superior to the others.”

Basinger and Basinger conclude, not surprisingly, that each approach brings benefits. I am seeking to understand the strengths and weakness of each approach, not in order to evaluate the perspectives theologically, but to understand better how they can be used pastorally.

## 1.5 Preliminary Considerations

### 1.5.1 Ethics

Much of the preparation work undertaken for this project concerned the ethical framework within which the fieldwork would be undertaken. In brief, much of the standard ethical guidelines presuppose a context and a population group significantly different from the reality of the people and place in which I work. The wording implies not only that the people being interviewed are literate but also that they maintain a stable place within mainstream society. Neither assumption holds true for many of the people I interviewed. Since the assumptions behind the guidelines did not apply to the context in which this study was undertaken, applying those guidelines as originally stated would have been counter-productive in this context.

I proposed an alternative set of guidelines, within a wider ethical framework, for this project. They provided adequate protection for all those involved, but slightly reduced the extent to which the accuracy of the original research could be verified. The ethical guidelines applied to this project were agreed to be appropriate and adequate by the panel considering this dissertation proposal.<sup>12</sup>

### 1.5.2 Comment

According to Marx, “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways. The point, however, is to change it.”<sup>13</sup> In a similar way, it may be that the purpose of theodicy is not to understand the problem of suffering, but to equip us in the battle to prevent suffering: not to understand how suffering can exist in a world with a good and powerful God, but to understand how we can play our part alongside that God in overcoming the suffering.<sup>14</sup>

The problem of suffering is a real one to many people. But, according to my

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11 Basinger & Basinger, *The Logic of Theodicy: A Comparative Analysis* (1998).

12 Please see Hazelden, *The Ethics of Working with Vulnerable People*, for more details.

13 This is the quote from Karl Marx’s 11<sup>th</sup> thesis on Feuerbach (1845) inscribed on his tombstone in Highgate Cemetery.

14 NT Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*, 2006, pp. 23-24.



research, the problem for most people is not quite the same as the problem defined and discussed by most theologians. The question most commonly asked is “Why am I (or, why is my child/my partner) suffering?” The general question, if it exists at all for most people, is bound up in the specific; and it tends to focus on the allocation of suffering, rather than the existence of suffering.

The theologian, on the other hand, is interested in the reason for suffering in general, even if specific examples are given. It seems to me that the problem sometimes exists as a creation of the words we use: if God can do *anything*, why cannot He create a world in which people have free will and suffering does not exist?

This seems to reduce the problem to the level of a schoolboy taunt: if God can do anything, can He create a knot He cannot untie? Once you start to go down the ‘God can do anything’ path, I do not see how you can avoid getting tied up in futile speculation.

We have a similar difficulty with a simplistic understanding of ‘God is good,’ where this is taken to mean that God is perfectly good, so that if He is capable of creating some good, then He must of necessity create it. Every possible good must therefore be resolved into an impossibility, or an actuality, and God has no more freedom than the laws of physics. I know this is a very brief summary of a much larger argument, but I believe this outline to be a valid summary of an argument which follows inevitably from a simplistic understanding of the starting point.

I would like to suggest that the literature in this area falls fairly neatly into one of two distinct groups: it either treats God as a philosophical concept to be discussed, debated and dissected; or it treats God as a person Who actually exists independently of our thinking about Him. This is not the traditional distinction between a philosophical and a pastoral approach to the subject; while that distinction also divides the two groups, it is possible for a philosophical approach to treat God as a real person, and for a pastoral approach to ignore His personhood.

In the literature from the first group, the author can define a term, prove some result concerning it, and then reason about the implications to their heart’s content. Hume’s challenge<sup>15</sup> falls into this camp, and Plantinga’s response entirely solves the problem as stated by Hume.

In the literature from the second group, the author can still define a term, prove some result concerning it, and then reason about the implications to their heart’s content; but they then have to keep checking back to ensure that their conclusions tie in with reality. They recognise that our reasoning cannot constrain God: “God’s love ... is not encumbered by what we think God can and cannot do.”<sup>16</sup> In this second group, theological terms are not statements of necessary truth (such as ‘one plus one equals two’) but of contingent reality, like the laws of physics.

A simple illustration may help at this point. In physics, you may answer the question “why does the apple fall to the ground?” by the simple answer, “because of gravity.” But this is not a real answer – a word or a concept does not make anything

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15 I describe this below in the next chapter, in the section on ‘Theological Context’.

16 Molnar, *Thomas F. Torrance: Theologian of the Trinity*, 2009, p. 148.

happen. We *describe* the reason why the apple falls to the ground as it does, to a reasonably good level of accuracy, by the term ‘gravity’. But *what* we are describing is still, to a large extent, a mystery.

The standard equation of gravity is only a reasonably good approximation for at least three distinct reasons: because it does not take air resistance into account; because Newtonian mechanics are only an approximation (being modified by Einstein’s theories of relativity); and because even Einstein’s theories are almost certainly only approximations themselves, being further modified by other factors which we have not yet quite worked out.

Moreover, the standard equations can address the question, “what does gravity do?” but they do not begin to tell us how gravity acts. Why does gravity act in the way we observe? One theory suggests the reason is tiny particles called ‘gravitons’ which pass between every mass in the universe and every other mass, pulling them together. Another theory suggests that gravity is a by-product of the reality described by ‘string theory’, which says that everything can be explained as interactions between even smaller vibrating strings of pure energy.

If we are still this unclear about the reason for something as familiar and simple as an apple falling to the ground, it is probably a little premature for us to be too certain or too dogmatic about what God is capable and not capable of doing.

In short, it seems to me that terms like ‘good’ and ‘omnipotent’ are more appropriately used, not as terms which *define* God, but as words which we use to *describe* Him; our understanding of these words needs to be modified as we discover where our understanding and our theoretical predictions fail to match up with Biblical revelation and observed reality.

# Chapter 2 Theological Background

In this chapter, I offer a brief summary of Christian theodicy, explore some relevant theological resources, and note how the issues tie into other theological topics and questions.

## 2.1 Biblical Context

### 2.1.1 Suffering in the Bible

There are two simple observations I would like to make at the outset.

First, the Bible is full of suffering. There are many references to suffering, and accounts of people suffering in many ways and for many reasons. Indeed, the entire book of Job is devoted to an account and exploration of suffering.

Second, despite this, the Biblical writers rarely address the issue of theodicy, and when in the book of Job some justification for suffering is put forward<sup>17</sup> God explicitly denounces it.<sup>18</sup> Other passages seem, from a modern perspective, to cry out for some response to the problem, but fail even to acknowledge it.<sup>19</sup>

This lack of a response to the problem would be expected and appropriate in many contexts, but seems odd in a context in which God's goodness and activity in the world are celebrated alongside the Biblical writers' pleas for help and complaints about suffering and injustice.<sup>20</sup> Even Habakkuk, who starts off complaining about the evil he sees around him, is assured that God will act, and rapidly moves to his famous plea: "in wrath remember mercy."<sup>21</sup> The fact that God will act against the evil doers is more than sufficient response for Habakkuk: the fact that he is currently permitting evil to flourish is sad and unfortunate from a personal point of view, but not a theological problem for him.

We see a similar lack of concern about suffering in the response of the early church to persecution.<sup>22</sup> In the words of a popular Bible reading commentary on that passage, "They don't pray directly for the defeat of their enemies, or even their own safety. They pray for boldness and kingdom expansion... In other words, they pray for what would invite more trouble ... they aren't even confused and upset when bad things happen to them because they see this as the pattern of Jesus' life and God's perfect

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17 Much of the book of Job is taken up with this material. One early example is Job 4:7, "Consider now: Who, being innocent, has ever perished? Where were the upright ever destroyed?"

18 Job 42:7b, "...you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has."

19 See, for example, all of Psalm 91. Verse 14 is a good example: "Because he loves me," says the Lord, "I will rescue him; I will protect Him, for he acknowledges my name." The modern reader cannot help but ask: but what of all those who trust in the Lord, who acknowledge His name, and are not protected or rescued?

20 As in Psalms 88, 89:38-51, 109, 130 and 140, to identify a few.

21 Habakkuk 3:2.

22 Acts 4:1-31.

plan!”<sup>23</sup>

A similar attitude is demonstrated a short while later when, after they had been flogged, “the apostles left the Sanhedrin ... rejoicing that they had been considered worthy ...”<sup>24</sup>

There are a great many references to suffering and perseverance throughout the book of Revelation; leading to the New Heaven and the New Earth where, probably, there will be no more suffering.

The start of 2 Corinthians is all about suffering: the God of all comfort “comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves have been comforted by God. For as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so too our comfort is abundant ... For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction ...”<sup>25</sup>

Jesus, of course, is the ultimate example of suffering, and His prayer in the garden of Gethsemane is instructive: “if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as Thou wilt.”<sup>26</sup> There is no need to give a reason for suffering here: if it is God’s will that I suffer, then I accept it.

This lack of engagement with the problem of suffering is significant for our understanding of the world inhabited by the Biblical writers, their concerns and assumptions. But it does not necessarily mean that we should follow their example: we see God in the Bible revealing Himself in an increasingly detailed manner through the ages (the doctrine of progressive revelation), and the other side of this developing self-revelation on the part of God is a developing set of relevant questions and concerns on our part.

While, for the most part, the Bible does not explicitly address the issue of theodicy, many passages (such as the 2 Corinthians passage partly quoted above) can be understood to contain an implicit response to the issue, and it remains a rich source of material when considering various aspects of theodicy.

There is a third point worth noting at this stage: many writers seem to assume that suffering is a consequence of the fall, but it is at least arguable that suffering was a part of God’s initial ‘good’ creation. Indeed, suffering can be seen as inevitable: “I think [the question of why we suffer] is worth asking since it has such an obvious answer: we suffer because we are incomplete beings who depend on one another for our existence.”<sup>27</sup>

## 2.1.2 Forms of suffering

The Biblical writers use a variety of words to describe different types of suffering. If we restrict ourselves to the New Testament, we find amongst others the following

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23 Davydaitis, Luke, 2009, p. 83.

24 Acts 5:41.

25 Selected portions taken from 2 Corinthians 1:3-11.

26 Matthew 26:39.

27 Hauerwas, *Eliminating People who Suffer?* 1983.

words:<sup>28</sup>

- *Kakopatheia* (κακοπάθεια) ('evil suffering') is translated 'suffering' in James 5:10;
- *Kakosis* (κάκωσις) is translated 'affliction' or 'ill treatment' in Acts 7:34;
- *Pathēma* (πάθημα) is translated 'sufferings' in 2 Timothy 3:11 and other passages;
- *Thlipsis* (θλίψις) refers to suffering due to the pressure of circumstances or the antagonism of persons, and is used in many passages, often coupled with other words such as 'distress' or 'persecution'; and
- *Talai poreo* (ταλαιπωρέω), to be afflicted, from ('to bear a hardness') is used in the middle voice in James 4:9 and translated 'afflict yourselves'.

These five words are taken from the nine listed in the entry for 'affliction' in Vine's dictionary; in addition there are six other entries in the New Testament part of the dictionary referring to suffering. There are other terms used in the Bible, such as 'discipline' and 'persecution', which also imply a degree of suffering.

When considering the subject of suffering, it is clear that the Biblical writers recognise many different aspects and nuances. If suffering is not a simple concept, the problem of suffering is likely to have many different aspects, with different issues and considerations relating to each one. I have done some initial work on identifying distinct aspects of the wider problem.<sup>29</sup> For example, when someone talks about the problem of suffering, it is helpful to know whether they are concerned about the existence of suffering, the extent of suffering, the experience of suffering, or the allocation of suffering – or some combination of the above. Clearly, each of these aspects requires a different response.

### 2.1.3 Good suffering

In the Bible, suffering is not always an evil to be opposed. Jesus chose to suffer for us and for our sins. We too can share in the suffering of Jesus, and make up what is lacking in His suffering.<sup>30</sup> We can be counted worthy to suffer dishonour "for the name".<sup>31</sup>

Suffering, in this context, is not so much a problem as an honour. As Brother Yun recounts, the word of the Lord came to him clearly: "The reason you suffer is so you can partake in the fellowship of my suffering."<sup>32</sup>

Even in our worship, we occasionally refer to good suffering. One popular modern

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28 Vine, *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words*, 1981, pp. 38-39.

29 For a description and examination of this distinction, please see Hazelden, *Suffering Overview*. While this distinction is unlikely to be original, I have not yet managed to locate another source for it.

30 Colossians 1:24.

31 Acts 5:41, as previously noted.

32 Yun and Hattaway, *The Heavenly Man*, 2002, p. 92.

song has the lines: “To know the lasting joy / Even sharing in your pain.”<sup>33</sup>

## 2.2 Theological Context

All theology is interconnected, and this is particularly evident when considering theodicy: every part of theology has some bearing on it. It is a trivial task to take a work of systematic theology and demonstrate how theodicy is relevant to each of the main divisions, and only slightly less trivial to demonstrate the relevance to the subject of each chapter.

In this section, I simply aim to identify some of the main components of the theological context. Any attempt at a complete theological approach to theodicy must include some reference to these components, but I do not propose to delve into any of these areas in the present study.

### 2.2.1 The origin of the problem

Theodicy only becomes an issue when people believe in an all-powerful and good deity. In practice, this usually means people who live within the Judeo-Christian tradition. It is possible that the problem extends to the various Islamic faith traditions, but my research on that subject is too limited to be of general use at present, and it is not of immediate concern for the development of a more robust Christian theology.

Outside the Judeo-Christian tradition, different ideas of God do not generally give rise to this problem. Hick describes one typical example of this:

Reacting against the sub-ethical Homeric conception of the gods, Plato repudiated the common assumption that the supreme power (Zeus, in the popular pantheon) is the source of evil as well as good. ‘He is responsible for a few things that happen to men, but for many he is not, for the good things we enjoy are much fewer than the evil. The former we must attribute to none else but God; but for the evil we must find some other causes, not God.’<sup>34</sup>

Since none of the Greek or Roman gods were all-powerful, none could be held responsible for the suffering we experience.

While philosophers and theologians have been wrestling with this subject for as long as we have records, many authors suggest<sup>35</sup> that the modern agenda was shaped by Hume in his robust challenge:

Epicurus’ old questions are yet unanswered. Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?<sup>36</sup>

A cautionary note is sounded by Surin, who (to my mind, correctly) questions whether the problem of evil was the same for all the major thinkers on the subject

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33 ‘SURRENDER’ Marc James, 2000, Vineyard Songs.

34 Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 1977, p. 26.

35 For example, Swinton, *Raging With Compassion*, 2007, p.30.

36 Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, 1948, p. 66.

over the centuries.<sup>37</sup> We cannot assume that the issues which troubled Augustine and Aquinas are the same ones which keep us awake, even if their (translated) words appear to touch on modern concerns. However, while the point is correct, it does not have a major impact on this present work. If an author's words appear to be relevant and helpful, they will be taken at face value unless there is obvious reason to doubt the validity of this reading: the aim here is to consider the issue of theodicy, not to consider whether ancient writers are being misrepresented in the use which modern writers make of them.

My personal view is that Hume's prominence is hard to understand: his challenge, as stated, is both imprecise and inaccurate. It is an effective piece of rhetoric, but not a careful argument.

The first point to note is an obvious one: the "old questions" are *not* unanswered, as Hume must have known: they have been answered by many people and in many ways. Hume may not like the answers, he may not be persuaded by them, but to pretend they do not exist is misleading. (We can also note in passing that it is now considered unlikely that the "old questions" actually came from Epicurus, but Hume would not have known this.)

More seriously, Hume (in common with many others) ignores the substantial distinction between suffering and evil: they are obviously related, but they are equally obviously not the same. (Swinton describes "the tension between suffering that is evil and suffering that is not."<sup>38</sup>) It seems from the context that Hume cannot be talking about evil; but if he is really talking about suffering, it is hard (I suspect that it is impossible) to determine exactly what type of suffering he is referring to; and, without clarity on this point, we cannot tell what an appropriate response to his challenge might be.<sup>39</sup>

The challenge has been repeated in very similar terms on many occasions. One recent and reasonably popular work succinctly presents it in this way: "If God exists, either He can do nothing to stop the most egregious calamities, or He does not care to. God, therefore, is either impotent or evil."<sup>40</sup> The basic idea is repeated in many different ways; for example, "An atheist is a person who believes that the murder of a single little girl – even once in a million years – casts doubt upon the idea of a benevolent God."<sup>41</sup>

## 2.2.2 The location of the problem

The context in which a question is posed often shapes the response, so we need to consider the place of theodicy within the wider context of theology.

While, at first sight, the function of theodicy in helping people respond to suffering

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37 Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil*, 1986, p. 2.

38 Swinton, *Raging With Compassion*, 2007, p. 61.

39 There is a longer version of this response to Hume's challenge available at Hazelden, *The Problem of Suffering: Responding to the Challenge*.

40 Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, 2007, p. 55. With his usual confidence, Harris describes this summary in the following terms: "This is the age-old problem of theodicy, of course, and we should consider it solved."

41 Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, 2007, p. 52.

may seem to place it within the realm of Pastoral Studies (or ‘Pastoralia’)<sup>42</sup>, others locate it differently. In his ‘survey of sub-disciplines’ of the content of academic theology, Green places the problem of evil within the area of ‘philosophy of religion’.<sup>43</sup> By way of a contrast, Gunton<sup>44</sup> sees the problem as an aspect of the doctrine of Providence; while Davey is able to completely ignore the problem while claiming to provide an “introduction to the main themes in Christian theology”.<sup>45</sup>

NT Wright, on the other hand, sees this problem as central to our understanding of the whole Bible: “what the Bible gives us is both much less and much more than a set of dogmas and ethics, much less and much more than a ‘progressive revelation’ ... It’s written *to tell the story of what God has done, is doing and will do about evil*”.<sup>46</sup>

If this were a more comprehensive summary of Christian theodicy, I would examine the content of an author’s theodicy to see whether there is any link between the content and the context in which the author understands that theodicy belongs.

### 2.2.3 The nature of God

We believe that God is personal, good and powerful. Without these characteristics, there is no problem, but each of them is understood in significantly different ways by many of the major theologians.

For example, Weinandy describes a God Who is good, but not good in the same way that a human being can be good: God is only good in the sense that a being who is ‘totally other’ can be good, which means that you can equally validly affirm that God is not good without contradicting yourself. Such a theological position removes any need for a theodicy.

Similarly, it is entirely possible to describe a God Who is powerful, but not ‘all powerful’ in a way that creates the need for a theodicy. This can be done without relegating God to being simply one member of a pantheon, as with the Greek and Roman gods.

It is important to recognise that much of the debate relies on an assumption that whatever happens in this world is God’s doing – or, at least, would be God’s doing if there were a God. In a classic passage in *The Plague*, Camus describes the suffering of a child and contrasts the complacent response of the priest with the more admirable response of the atheist, who until his dying day will “refuse to love a scheme of things in which children are put to torture.”<sup>47</sup> Neither the priest nor the atheist contemplate the possibility that God may exist but not be the cause of the child’s suffering.

This brings us directly into the scope of the ‘Open Theism’ debate, which we do not have space to explore in detail here, especially as there has been a great deal of controversy concerning this debate in recent years.

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42 Green, *Let’s Do Theology*, 1990, p. 154.

43 Green, *Let’s Do Theology*, 1990, p. 152.

44 Gunton, *The Christian Faith*, 2002, p. 26

45 Davey, *Mastering Theology*, 2002, p. xi.

46 NT Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*, 2006, pp. 23-24.

47 Camus, *The Plague*, 1982, p. 176.



A short response to parts of Weinandy's contribution to this debate is considered below,<sup>48</sup> but I must first comment on the wider topic.

Many theologians agree with Camus' priest and atheist, and consider that the suffering of a child is evidence that God is putting the child to torture, even if they would not choose to phrase their belief in quite these terms. This is especially the case for those in the Calvinist tradition, who would regard it as an essential aspect of the doctrine of the 'Sovereignty of God'.

It should be noted that the theological concept of 'sovereignty' is far removed from the real world concept, and this is not simply a modern issue raised by the emergence of a 'constitutional monarch' with prestige but no real power: it was an issue in earlier times when the sovereign had absolute authority, almost no accountability, but only limited power. I would argue that the real world concept of sovereignty makes a far better fit with the Biblical teaching about the nature of God than does the Calvinist re-working of the concept.<sup>49</sup>

It seems to me that Romans 9 contains one of the pivotal passages for our understanding of this topic.<sup>50</sup> According to the theology of Camus' priest and atheist, if I choose to hurt a child I can blame God, for, in Paul's words, "who resists [God's] will?" It makes no difference whether the child is being hurt by my deliberate action or by some seemingly random sickness: either way, it is happening, so it must be God's will. Many Christians affirm this view. Blocher is a typical example: according to him, "Scripture never doubts God's command over every event, or that he determines everything that happens, in its entirety and in minutest detail: God is sovereign, totally, radically, absolutely."<sup>51</sup>

But Paul's response is quite clear: he rejects this theology. People may argue about the details of this rejection, the basis for this rejection, and the implications of it. But the fact of it is clear, and entirely consistent with the rest of his argument in Romans. Who can resist God's will? Everyone! You, me, and the rest of the human race – we all resist God's will. This is what we call 'sin', and we are all guilty of it. The Bible is packed full of people resisting and rejecting God's will, from Genesis 3 onwards.

David is often seen as the archetypal King, and Paul's teaching on this subject is entirely consistent the biblical account of David's life as Israel's King. We see David's wife, his children and his general all acting against his will.<sup>52</sup> The sovereign can command, but the people will not always obey. God is sovereign, totally, radically and absolutely, and His people consistently fail to obey Him.

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48 See the next chapter.

49 In using the term 'Calvinist', I am not assuming anything about the teaching and beliefs of John Calvin, but am referring instead to the theological movement mainly shaped by his followers. The extent to which Calvin was a Calvinist is not a question we can explore here.

50 The full argument Paul is making is a fairly lengthy one, but the most immediately relevant section is just two verses, Romans 9:19-20.

51 Blocher, *Evil and the Cross: an analytical look at the problem of pain*, 2004, p. 90.

52 This pattern starts immediately after his coronation by Judah, when Israel chooses a different king (2 Samuel 2:9). It is possible that one of the key reasons for including so much material about Joab in the story of David is to emphasise how very limited is the real power of a king.

## 2.2.4 The nature of reality and the role of experience

Our understanding of the nature of reality will shape our understanding of this problem, even if it is not immediately obvious how this works out in practice. Two brief examples from non-Christian sources may help.

Firstly, the fact of suffering causes no problem in the Buddhist world view: if you are suffering, then you deserve to be suffering. The problem of suffering, for a Buddhist, is the problem of how to avoid suffering, and this is the core of Buddhist teaching. Death does not allow you to avoid the consequences of your actions, and if you cause suffering to others, you will experience suffering yourself, either in this life or in another.<sup>53</sup>

Secondly, according to much ‘new age’ teaching, people only suffer because they choose to suffer: everyone creates the life they want, and chooses the type and extent of the suffering they want in that life. People choose to suffer in the same way that they choose to watch horror films. “Within each of us lies the power of our consent to health and to sickness, to riches and to poverty, to freedom and to slavery. It is we who control these, and not another.”<sup>54</sup> This is also implicit in the teaching of the multi-million pound self-help industry based around *The Secret*.<sup>55</sup>

A helpful discussion of the nature of reality from a Christian perspective is provided by Gunton in his introduction to the Trinity, with primary reference to the works of Berkeley, Kant, Schleiermacher and Barth.<sup>56</sup> A more carefully argued Christian perspective, advocating ‘critical realism’ is provided by NT Wright.<sup>57</sup>

## 2.2.5 The nature and origin of evil.

The first question is the obvious one: how did evil arise in a perfectly good creation? But, in order to answer it, we need to understand a prior question: what is evil? The theological task here is made slightly more difficult by the fact that the Bible does not directly address these questions.

Typical of the definitions provided is this one

Evil, in its most general sense, will be defined as any inherently undesirable state of affairs. More specifically, it is a state of affairs that not only lacks inherent value, it has “negative value.” That is, when considered in isolation, it actually detracts from or diminishes the value of our world. Some obvious examples of evil would be physical and psychological pain and suffering, disrupted social relations, unfulfilled potential, and natural catastrophes.<sup>58</sup>

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53 This is the essence of the Buddhist doctrine of ‘karma’ as taught in mainstream Buddhist groups. There are, inevitably, many versions of Buddhism, and the doctrine of karma has many variations in the different sub-groupings. A selection of helpful texts on the subject can be found in the bibliography at the end of Hazelden, 2010.

54 Bach, *Illusions: the adventures of a reluctant Messiah*, 1992, preface.

55 Byrne, *The Secret*, 2006.

56 Gunton, *The Christian Faith*, 2002, pp. 175-178.

57 NT Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 1992, pp. 31-46.

58 Basinger & Basinger *The Logic of Theodicy*.

My personal definition, for what it is worth, says that evil is that which causes the innocent to suffer.

NG Wright describes the nature of evil in four ways: as discreativity, as nothingness, as outer manifestation and inner spirituality, and as Godforsaken space.<sup>59</sup> He also provides the most helpful discussion I have found of the origin of evil.<sup>60</sup> I fully agree with his strategy of examining the options and identifying “important insights” which can be utilised<sup>61</sup> rather than simply accepting or rejecting each writer’s work as a whole. However, this strategy is not without problems. For example, the author recognises that it is “hard to see how biblical exegesis gives rise to this [Moltmann’s] theory”, but goes on to affirm what the theory “has to commend it”.<sup>62</sup> I feel that more work needs to be done to establish the validity of taking the insights without implicitly relying on the aspects of the writer’s work which have to be rejected. After all, the theory that I have a million pounds in my bank account has a great deal to commend it; but the fact that it is not true effectively counteracts all these benefits.

While it may be helpful to give an account of the origin and nature of evil, this is not actually necessary: the Bible does not address either issue directly. My personal suspicion is that many of the explanations proposed by authors function mainly as a way to avoid criticism and argument. The reader wants an answer, and one is provided; the reader is unable to argue with this answer, so it can stand, and the author is free to move onto more profitable areas.

I suggest, for example, that identifying the origin of evil as “an angelic fall or catastrophe”<sup>63</sup> provides an answer which may be satisfactory for some people; but does not actually explain anything because we do not understand what is being said, and we are being told about an event the Bible does not address directly.

Even when we consider the Biblical account, it is clear that we do not understand the nature of reality before the fall or what happened in the fall. We do not even understand the nature of human life before Adam and Eve fell. We are not told if Adam and Eve were vegetarians, had sex or suffered pain. We do not understand what the Genesis 3 fall consisted of: a serpent capable of walking and talking is presumably different to a significant degree from the serpents we are familiar with today. The language used in the Biblical account tells us something, but we are not sure exactly what, and it certainly does not tell us many things we feel we need to know.

## 2.2.6 Monism and Dualism

Hick, with his usual uncomfortable clarity, identifies monism and dualism as representing “the only two wholly consistent solutions [to the problem of theodicy] that are possible; and unfortunately neither of them is compatible with the basic

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59 NG Wright, *A Theology of the Dark Side*, 2003, pp. 44-61.

60 NG Wright, *A Theology of the Dark Side*, 2003, pp. 62-82.

61 NG Wright, *A Theology of the Dark Side*, 2003, p. 60.

62 NG Wright, *A Theology of the Dark Side*, 2003, p. 60.

63 NG Wright, *A Theology of the Dark Side*, 2003, p. 62.

claims of Christian theology.”<sup>64</sup>

In responding to this aspect of theodicy, I suspect that he is on the right lines in his attempt “to present the Christian response to the problem of evil in eschatological terms, affirming a present interim dualism within the ultimate setting of an unqualifiedly monotheistic faith.”<sup>65</sup> Even if I cannot wholeheartedly support all the details of his approach, any Christian framework must surely include both monotheism as the ultimate reality, and some form of apparent dualism as a significant aspect of our current experience.

If I were to try to formulate a response to Hick on this point, it would start from my conviction that our concepts of monism and dualism may be helpful to an extent, but they do not describe the God Who revealed Himself through Jesus. Monism is not monotheism, and this “present interim” state cannot be properly described as dualism. Granted, the Bible talks about both God and Satan, but while God is not the only spiritual reality, at no point does the Bible present us with Satan as an evil power on the same level as God. The many Biblical texts touching on this subject may seem confusing and unclear on many points, but they are very clear and consistent on this one detail: evil spiritual powers are real, but are subordinate to God.

Moreover, many Biblical passages are very nuanced in this matter. They present a God Who is good and entirely opposed to evil, but Who is also sometimes complicit in events which we perceive to be evil. Of course, this raises the question of whether God is actually complicit in evil, whether the events are not actually evil as they appear, or whether there is some other explanation. The interpretation of these passages is open to much debate; but the story, as it is presented to us over and over again, seems deliberately ambiguous.

I offer two well-known examples of this apparent complicity.

First, in the book of Job, it is clear that Satan is the immediate cause of Job’s suffering;<sup>66</sup> but God is the indirect cause of his suffering, through the repeated provocation, “Have you considered my servant Job?”<sup>67</sup> As the story is presented to us, Satan causes Job’s suffering, but God is the initiator.

Second, in the book of Revelation, the sequence in chapter 6 is very clear. The first four seals are broken and the ‘four horsemen of the Apocalypse’ ride out “to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by the wild beasts of the earth.”<sup>68</sup> Immediately afterwards, the fifth seal is broken and the martyrs under the altar cry out, asking God how long He will refrain from judging and avenging their blood.<sup>69</sup> God does not respond, as we might expect, with an assurance that He has just started to do it; instead, they are told to wait a little while longer so that more of their brethren can be killed “even as they had been”.<sup>70</sup> The four horsemen, released by the

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64 Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 1977, p. 15.

65 Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 1977, p. 16.

66 Job 2:7.

67 Job 1:8; 2:3.

68 Revelation 6:8.

69 Revelation 6:10.

70 Revelation 6:11.

deliberate action of the Lamb, are not punishing sinners and avenging the blood of the martyrs; they may even be killing more of the faithful, possibly deliberately, and possibly along with the others who perish by the sword, famine, pestilence and beasts.

I am aware that we cannot take any passage from Revelation simply at face value, and there are many theories about the meaning of the various scenes, the relationship between them, and the timing. But, as it is presented to us, this passage is an explicit rejection of the simplistic monism-dualism choice, and also a contradiction of the strand of theodicy which says that war (for example) may appear to be a bad thing but it is actually God's way of judging the sinful and therefore it is morally justified. I would argue that there is no good reason to reject this interpretation, even if there are other and deeper levels of meaning in the passage: whatever else this passage is telling us, it must be saying that things are not that simple.

### 2.2.7 The scope of theology

What is the scope of theology? Is it to answer the questions people ask of us, or to clarify the meaning of the things God has chosen to reveal? In the first case, any question can be asked and become theological: what is the Christian position on regulating the sub-prime market? In the second case, if we are only clarifying the doctrines we are confident of, most of the interesting questions cannot be examined.

These are the two extremes. In reality, most theologians fall somewhere between these two extremes: a common attitude is that the church should have something meaningful to say when we are asked questions about good and evil, even if the Bible does not directly address such questions; but the church should not have a fixed position on questions of politics and economics.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with individual Christians applying Christian truth to these practical areas, but the result is probably outside the scope of mainstream theology and becomes a distinct (or comparatively distinct) subject, such as 'Liberation Theology'. However, the place where you draw the line between these two extremes needs some careful judgement, and no simple affirmation that a particular question lies inside or outside the scope of Christian theology should be accepted without question.

### 2.2.8 The relationship between theology and pastoral care

In my experience of church work, a considerable amount of pastoral harm is done as a result of individuals not having an adequate understanding of the relationship between theology and pastoral care.<sup>71</sup> As well as individuals being harmed, the church suffers when it is unnecessarily seen as narrow-minded, bigoted and intolerant, in situations when holding on to Biblical truth and caring for individuals can be reconciled. The obvious battlefield here is the question of homosexuality, but it is not the only one.<sup>72</sup>

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71 The familiar quote that God "hates the sin, but loves the sinner" does not always guide our activity, and sometimes the sinner is made to feel that God hates them, rather than their sin.

72 People dying in Africa because the Catholic Church opposes the use of condoms is another obvious example.

In a large part of the church, through much of church history, the most common approach can be described as academic: you study the Bible to determine what it teaches, and then put into practice what you have learned. This works out very simply for the average church member, you are told what to do, and are expected to go out and do it; but the same process often holds true at other levels within the church hierarchies.

The wide variety of theological options makes it difficult even to attempt to simply unpack and apply theological truth to a specific pastoral situation: at the very least, some selection must be made, in order to decide which aspect of the truth to take up first. It is also the case that some of the theological responses can, at times, be actively unhelpful in pastoral terms: it is true that God sometimes sends suffering as a punishment for sin, or to draw us back to Himself, but this is neither relevant nor helpful when a baby is suffering.

Moreover, I have argued elsewhere that, in the Bible, God tends to work the other way round.<sup>73</sup> First He gives us the experience, then He gives us the understanding of the experience. For example, the early disciples described how Jesus was made known to them “when he broke the bread.”<sup>74</sup> Jesus explicitly links experience with teaching on many occasions. “Now that I ... have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet.”<sup>75</sup> The signs in John’s gospel are experiences which are intended to help the disciples discover and understand theological truth. Doctrine is discovered in experience; the Word is made flesh so that we can believe.

This suggests that the relationship between doctrine and practice is not as simple as the ‘understand it – do it’ model implies; and a more robust understanding of this relationship should shape the way we study and seek to apply the insights gathered through a study of theodicy.

I am not suggesting that our theology must be shaped by what is pastorally convenient or helpful: our theology must aim to find the truth, whether the truth is comfortable and convenient or not. However, I believe that there can be no ultimate contradiction between the two. Jesus is presented to us as being “full of grace and truth”<sup>76</sup> so we can expect to find in Him both the truth we need to understand and the grace we need for psychological health. In His teaching, we find a deep link between theological truth and pastoral well-being. Even if specific truths may not be relevant and helpful at specific times; what is true will, in the long term, be emotionally and psychologically good for us: we were created to be in relationship with God, to be healthy and to know the truth.

### 2.2.9 The two testaments

Given the evident differences between the Old and New Testaments, we have to address, either implicitly or explicitly, the old question of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments.

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73 Hazelden, *Share Your Faith*, 2010, p. 54.

74 Luke 24:35.

75 John 13:14.

76 John 1:14.

My own position is that Jesus was clear about the relationship between the Old Testament and His own word: the Old Testament is the word of God, but He has the greater authority. This seems very clear in numerous passages, including the repeated “You have heard ... but I say” motif in Matthew.<sup>77</sup> His claim goes beyond offering an authoritative interpretation of the Old Testament text: in the question of divorce, He implicitly downgrades the authority of the Mosaic command by asserting a higher principle – “from the beginning it has not been this way.”<sup>78</sup>

This position makes it reasonably straightforward to deal with the Old Testament passages where (for example) God appears to command violence which according to modern standards can be regarded as being excessive, either in its ferocity or its scope. However, those who hold more closely to the continued and unchanging status of the Old Testament have to put more work into reconciling some of God’s commandments with their theodicy.

### 2.2.10 The world to come

Many Christians believe that in the world to come, the problem of evil will have been finally answered. However, a closer reading of the relevant Biblical texts shows that the situation is not as clear cut as is generally supposed.

For example, the inhabitants of the new Jerusalem may experience no more suffering, but as NT Wright recognises, it is a place of healing.

It is a place of *healing*, both in the present (Rev 21:4) and, in a move full of mystery and promise, in the future (Rev 22:2, where the leaves on the tree of life, growing by the river which flows out of the city, are ‘for the healing of the nations’).<sup>79</sup>

If the trees are growing, and the leaves on the trees are to be used for healing, then, in the final image we are given of the world to come, the Bible suggests there will be an ongoing need for healing, somewhere. As in the story of the fall in Genesis 3, we are clearly being told something important, but I suggest it is equally clear that we do not fully understand what we are being told.

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77 Matthew 5:21-22, for example.

78 Matthew 19:8.

79 NT Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*, 2006, p. 74.

# Chapter 3 Theodicy Background

In this chapter, I mention a few of the key individuals who have shaped the historic debate, and then consider in a little more detail a part of the contribution made by a contemporary writer. Following this, I consider some of the main approaches to theodicy.

The initial plan was to divide the final part of this chapter into ‘Philosophical and Theological Approaches to Theodicy’ and ‘Pastoral Approaches to Theodicy’. However, the overlap between the two was too great: both approaches cover essentially the same ground, even if they look at it from a different perspective.

## 3.1 Some Key Individuals

### 3.1.1 Irenaeus

Irenaeus was one of the earliest people to formulate the ‘vale of soul making’ defence.

God has set us in a world containing unpredictable contingencies and dangers, in which unexpected and undeserved calamities may occur to anyone; because only in such a world can mutual caring and love be elicited.<sup>80</sup>

### 3.1.2 Augustine

Hick distinguishes (rightly, I believe) between the more theological and the more philosophical strands in Augustine’s theodicy.

The theological themes are: the goodness of the created world, pain and suffering as consequences of the fall, the ‘O felix culpa!’, and the final dichotomy of heaven and hell. The philosophical themes are: evil as non-being, metaphysical evil as fundamental, the principle of plenitude, and the aesthetic conception of the perfection of the universe.<sup>81</sup>

Over the centuries, these two themes have varied in the relative prominence they have been given, but the importance of his contribution has rarely been questioned.

### 3.1.3 Leibniz

Brief mention should be made of Leibniz and his belief that we live in “the best of all possible worlds”, so memorably parodied in *Candide*. Hick correctly defends Leibniz from the charge that this claim is incoherent<sup>82</sup> but goes on to argue that the argument used by Leibniz fails because it denies God’s omnipotence.<sup>83</sup> I am not

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80 Swinton, *Raging With Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil*, 2007, p. 18.

81 Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 1977, p. 169.

82 Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 1977, p. 162.

83 Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 1977, p. 166.



entirely convinced by Hick's argument here.

### 3.1.4 Moltmann

No survey of theodicy could be complete without some reference to Moltmann, and in particular to *The Crucified God*. Moltmann, in contrast to Weinandy (see below), talks about "the way in which God is affected by events and human actions and suffering in history."<sup>84</sup>

Belief in a God Who genuinely feels and is affected by people and by the things that happen to us seems to be a necessary part of Moltmann's objective: the seemingly impossible task of believing in God 'after Auschwitz'.<sup>85</sup> He does this in the context of considering on the one hand the cross, and on the other hand the double crisis of the modern church: the crisis of relevance and the crisis of identity.<sup>86</sup>

Moltmann must surely be right when he says that "The death of Jesus on the cross is the centre of all Christian theology."<sup>87</sup> Creation and the fall may come first both in logic and in time, but there is a strong argument for starting at the centre and working your way out.

## 3.2 The 'Open Theism' Debate: Weinandy's Contribution

In recent years, the question of whether God is impassible has gained prominence, largely (as far as I can tell) as a result of the 'open theism' debate.

Weinandy in *Does God Suffer?*<sup>88</sup> addresses the question posed in the title in a direct and forthright manner. It is one of the few substantial theological works whose content can be fairly reduced to a single word: no. To be fair, he also addresses another theological question: "Did God suffer on the cross?" and also answers clearly in the negative. He devotes two chapters to establish the conclusion that "the Son of God did not suffer as God ... The Son of God suffered as a man."<sup>89</sup>

While the book contains a great deal which is good and helpful, I am not persuaded by his central thesis: that God, as God cannot change or suffer. While I understand and partly share his concerns, it seems to me that this central thesis depends on a series of failed arguments and one basic error.

The main error, as I see it, is that he imposes what he 'knows' to be true about God upon the Biblical text, rather than allowing the text to fully shape his understanding. A fair chunk of the Preface consists of his description of how he set about writing the book: he knew he could interpret the Biblical text and the Church Fathers to make

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84 Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, 1974, p. 279.

85 Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 1974, p. 287.

86 Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 1974, p. 1.

87 Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 1974, p. 210.

88 Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 2000.

89 Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 2000, p. 205.

them support his position.<sup>90</sup>

Weinandy ‘knows’ that God does not in reality change His mind (and has a proof text in Numbers 23:19), and this understanding is then imposed on all the passages which say otherwise. This is clearly stated in numerous places.

Thus the statement that God does not change his mind is an expression of God’s total otherness, and the statement that God does change his mind expresses this unchangeable mind of God under circumstances which, under ordinary human conditions (if God were man), would demand that a change of mind takes place, but in actual fact need not, because God, as the Wholly Other, is constant in his love, forgiveness, righteousness and justice.<sup>91</sup>

The following brief points are selected highlights from a longer examination of the problems identified in this book. In addition to other problems with the arguments supporting the main thesis, there are also problems which do not directly affect the argument, such as the glaring error in footnote 5 within chapter 3, which seems to be a forgotten remnant of an earlier draft of the book, before the chapter was extensively rewritten.<sup>92</sup> Such errors do not affect the logic of the argument, but they do say something about how much attention was paid to the detail when putting the argument together.

To provide some balance, I would like to note that I share many of Weinandy’s concerns, and agree with a number of his aims in writing the book; in addition, many of the passages which do not deal with the central thesis of the book are interesting, insightful and helpful; but, sadly, they do not fall within the scope of this study.

### 3.2.1 Anthropomorphic theological terminology

The argument is confused by Weinandy’s tendency to speak as if theological concepts exist and operate independently of the reality they seek to describe. For example, we read, “For the Bible, transcendence and immanence do not describe two modes of being or two sets of distinguishing qualities ... For God to be transcendent in the biblical understanding means that he is wholly other ...”.<sup>93</sup> Even if we set aside all the questions raised by the initial phrase (‘the Bible’ is, in this passage, somehow the author of the Bible!), we are presumably supposed to understand by this that all the Biblical writers, when they refer to transcendence and immanence, have this interpretation in mind. One wonders how many Biblical passages he thinks he is referring to: a quick search in a standard concordance does not reveal many.<sup>94</sup>

In passing, I note the contrast between the obscure anthropomorphic uses of Biblical texts and theological concepts employed by Weinandy, and the simplicity of

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90 Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 2000, p. vii.

91 Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 2000, p. 61.

92 In this footnote on page 41, Weinandy promises to avoid using certain terms until he defines them, but then goes on to use them repeatedly, until the passage on page 55 where he claims that he has avoided these terms.

93 Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 2000, p. 56.

94 Most translations of the Bible avoid the terms completely; I found only two uses of ‘transcendent’, both in the Amplified Bible.

NT Wright's insistence that our theology must be shaped by the person of Jesus: "Dare we take all the meanings of the word 'God' and allow them to be recentred upon, redefined by, this man, this moment, this death?"<sup>95</sup>

In making his argument, Weinandy never explains why he is so certain that the "biblical understanding" of transcendent is what he claims it to be. This passage illustrates a common feature in this work: the habit of stating a conclusion he later relies upon as if it has been established through an argument, but without actually providing the argument.

The anthropomorphic construction is used in many places. For example, "The communication of idioms ... ensures that it is truly human suffering that the Son of God experiences and endures".<sup>96</sup> Even if we re-write this to avoid the strange idea of a theological concept doing something, my understanding of the communication of idioms suggests either that he is missing the point or that he is using the term in an unusual manner. In any case, Weinandy does not even attempt to demonstrate that this doctrine he relies upon so much (and, he seems to imply, this doctrine alone) has the effect he claims.

### 3.2.2 Weinandy's approach to philosophy

It seems mildly ironic that the following three passages all appear on the same page.

Moreover, since the Bible is not a work of philosophy, I will not, as far as possible, take up the philosophical issues that arise from the scriptural revelation.

One of the goals of this chapter, having ascertained the biblical understanding of God and his relationships, is to discern what philosophical notion of God best upholds, clarifies, and enhances our understanding of the biblical truth of who God is and the manner in which he relates to the created historical order.

... the Bible tends to speak in terms of how God and persons function and inter-relate rather than what they are ontologically in themselves.<sup>97</sup>

The implied methodology being followed by Weinandy is to articulate a biblical understanding of God without any philosophical framework or assumptions, and then look around to see which philosophical framework best fits this understanding. But any understanding of God will rest upon a philosophical framework: there is no unbiased philosophy-free starting point from which you can compare the alternatives.

The task of comparing philosophical systems is a good and important one, but you have to recognise that you have a philosophical system as your starting point from which you can undertake the activity of comparing systems. It is inevitable that your starting point will have an effect on the comparison you make: the only real choice you have is whether you recognise that your starting point will bias the comparison,

95 NT Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*, 2006, p. 63

96 Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 2000, p. 203.

97 Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 2000, p. 41.

or whether you pretend to be completely unbiased.

### 3.2.3 Weinandy's unexamined Catholic basis

Weinandy is working from within the Catholic Church, so he already knows the 'right' answers to a great many questions. Similarly, this provides him with a philosophical framework within which any discussion must take place, and through which any conclusions he reaches will be judged. As far as the reader can tell, his starting point is the traditional Catholic view of God and the philosophy of the early Roman Catholic Church. Not surprisingly, these are the 'options' which come out on top when he compares them with the other views he considers.

One demonstration of the Catholic basis of his work can be seen in the way he quotes from the Second Vatican Council<sup>98</sup> to establish points, in the same way that he quotes from the Bible.

I have no objection to a Catholic theologian arguing for traditional Catholic doctrine. But if he wishes to convince me, a Protestant, he needs to demonstrate that the catholic basis from which he is working, and on which he frequently draws, does not play a significant role in establishing the conclusions he reaches. This is something he completely fails to do.

Of course, in describing the Catholic basis as 'unexamined' I do not speak with any knowledge of Weinandy as a person: I simply observe that, in the context of this book, the Catholic basis is not acknowledged.

### 3.2.4 Assuming the conclusion

Another problem in the book is Weinandy's frequent use, in a seemingly deliberate way, of the logical fallacy *petitio principii*. This is seen, for example, in chapter 3, "Yahweh: the Presence of the Wholly Other", where he chooses some key terms, creates his own definition of these key terms as references to Yahweh as 'other' and then concludes that we have established that Yahweh is 'other'.

In this chapter, he then goes on to play a second trick: having 'established' that Yahweh is other, he then slips in, without any attempt at justification, the conclusion that Yahweh is 'wholly other'.

### 3.2.5 The Passion of Yahweh

Two key sections are quite short: "The Passion of Yahweh"<sup>99</sup> and "Does Yahweh Change His Mind?"<sup>100</sup> and the arguments in each case are simple.

In the first, he refers to various Biblical passages which demonstrate the passion of Yahweh. In a move which for most authors would be surprising, he dismisses the traditional defence for God's impassibility: "the Bible in such passages is using anthropomorphic language, and so cannot be taken literally."<sup>101</sup> He validly notes that

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98 Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 2000, p. 250 (several times).

99 Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 2000, p. 58.

100 Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 2000, p. 59.

101 Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 2000, p. 59.

it is indeed anthropomorphic language, but it must also mean something. But, according to Weinandy, the key point that both sides of the debate (those who argue that God experiences passion, and those, other than Weinandy, who deny it) miss is that “the one who is so filled with passion is the Wholly Other.”<sup>102</sup>

This is much more than an “It’s life, Jim, but not as we know it” twist. It is vital to understand the point being made here. “There is a legitimate literalness to what is being said, but it is a literalness that must be interpreted from within the complete otherness of God...”<sup>103</sup> Because the one who suffers passion is Wholly Other, we can affirm that the Bible is true in describing the passion experienced by God, but also deny that God experiences passion.

A normal response to the discovery that an entity differs significantly from anything we have known before would be to question whether things we had assumed or believed to be true about this entity are actually the case: a lack of familiarity suggests a consequential lack of knowledge and certainty. But Weinandy responds instead by concluding that we can be absolutely certain (somehow!) that this completely different entity simultaneously possesses and does not possess a number of vital characteristics. Again, there is no argument: he seems to think that his conclusion follows automatically from his affirmation that God is ‘wholly other’.

### 3.2.6 Does Yahweh Change His Mind?

In the second passage, the argument is even more stunning: God does not change His mind because, on every occasion when this happens, something else has changed first. This change is “predicated upon or conditioned by a change in the people involved.”<sup>104</sup> He does react to sin and respond to repentance, but these reactions and responses only point to a deeper underlying consistency in His unchanging “compassion, mercy and forgiveness”.<sup>105</sup> In other words, God does change His mind, but only when He is justified in doing so.

At a stroke, Weinandy has not only cut away the ground from under his own feet; he has also opened up an even bigger can of worms than the one he was trying to contain in the first place.

The first point, I think, is straightforward. If God can change His mind, then God can change. The why, the when and the how makes no difference: the conclusion is that God can change. And, if God can change, there is no obvious reason (and no reason presented by Weinandy) why suffering cannot be one of the ways in which He changes.

The second point is even more significant. If God changes His mind because something else has changed, then it must be the case that God changes His mind because something else has changed *in God’s perception*.

I can understand someone claiming that God did not change His mind when He

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102 Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 2000, p. 59.

103 Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 2000, p. 59.

104 Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 2000, p. 60.

105 Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 2000, p. 61.

told Moses He would destroy the children of Israel and start again with him,<sup>106</sup> because He already knew that Moses would argue against this plan. But if, as Weinandy seems to be suggesting, God did change His mind because of what Moses said, then He did not know that Moses would reject His offer. In other words, God does not know the future, and the ‘open theism’ supporters are right.

### 3.3 Some Common Approaches to Theodicy

There is a long and eminent tradition of providing philosophical and theological responses to the challenge of theodicy. Even a brief summary of the major approaches would take far too much space, so this is inevitably an inadequate and sketchy overview.

The most successful (that is, comprehensive, clear-thinking and sensitive) approach to the problem I have found is *Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil*.<sup>107</sup> Despite the sub-title, it seeks to address the theological issues, integrating the doctrine with aspects of the pastoral care of people who are suffering and struggling with suffering.

In order to structure this section, I have adopted the framework provided in a public lecture on the subject which was organised by the Bristol School of Christian Studies in 2009.<sup>108</sup>

The only comment I need to make at this point is that these different approaches are not alternatives, despite this being the way they are often presented. It is quite possible to argue, for example, that God is not to blame for some suffering, that much of the remaining suffering is actually for the best, and the cross justifies our decision to apply sceptical theism to the remainder.

#### 3.3.1 Free Will

The central philosophical approach encountered today is the ‘free will defence’. God has given man free will, and this means we have the power to make the wrong choice.<sup>109</sup> This is sometimes presented as a subdivision of one of the other approaches.

God has made the world in such a way that it is possible to question the divine wisdom. God leaves enough space for trust to develop, but this also allows space for doubt.<sup>110</sup>

Discussions of this approach frequently raise deep issues, both philosophical and theological, which we do not have the space to explore here. However, the basic idea is very straightforward: when a drunken driver hurts an innocent victim, it is natural to blame the driver for the harm done.

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106 Numbers 14:12.

107 Swinton, *Raging With Compassion*, 2007.

108 For a summary of the talk, see Vitale, *Suffering and a God of Love*.

109 Chapter 4 of Phillips, *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God*, 2004, is devoted to this topic.

110 Sanders, *The God Who Risks: a Theology of Divine Providence*, 2007, p. 45.

### 3.3.2 God is not to blame

There are several distinct approaches that can be grouped under this heading.

*We know that God is not to blame because He loves us.* We may not understand why we suffer, but we know that God is on our side. The simple approach simply affirms what we ‘know’ – what we believe to be true about God. This can be as straightforward as an affirmation: we can explain to people that “it is not God who brings suffering into this world, God loves them.”<sup>111</sup>

*Someone else is to blame for suffering.* “This response attempts to shift responsibility for suffering off of God and onto someone else, usually by means of a cosmically catastrophic Fall of the first human persons.”<sup>112</sup> It sometimes shifts the blame onto the angelic conflict which, we assume, pre-dates the fall.

*Evil is unavoidable.* If it is absolutely unavoidable, then God is not to blame; if it is unavoidable given certain constraints which God has chosen or permitted, then this turns into the ‘It’s for the best – evil is necessary’ response described below.

*We do not know everything.* It is sometimes suggested that there may be some other reason, which we do not know about, why God is not to blame for suffering.

### 3.3.3 It’s for the best

This response accepts that the buck stops with God, but claims that God is justified: He only permits the amount of suffering that is necessary in order to justify a greater good.<sup>113</sup>

There are several distinct approaches within this response.

*Evil is necessary.* This can be argued from both a philosophical and a theological perspective. Philosophically, good can only be known as such when it is contrasted with evil. “Any good gets its sense from a contrast with an evil. To call for the absence of evil is, unwittingly, to call for the absence of good at the same time.”<sup>114</sup> Writers such as Mackie and Swinburne have raised objections to this, but they seem to be adequately refuted by Phillips, who concludes: “If we now look back at Mackie’s and Swinburne’s claim that God could have created a world in which human beings are naturally good, we can see that whoever these beings would be, they would not be human.”<sup>115</sup> Theologically, if the lamb was ‘slain from the creation of the world’<sup>116</sup> then the cross was a necessary part of the creation plan, and is not in fact a rescue made necessary by the fall.

*Good outweighs evil.* One option is to simply affirm that evil is justified by the greater good it makes possible. This is a very popular position, often adopted by those who have experienced significant suffering. For example, we read that “the spiritual dimensions in my life have been deepened rather than weakened through

111 Response 17, question 5.

112 Vitale, *Suffering and a God of Love*, 2009, p. 1.

113 Vitale, *Suffering and a God of Love*, 2009, p. 1.

114 Phillips, *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God*, 2004, p. 51.

115 Phillips, *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God*, 2004, p. 54.

116 Revelation 13:8.

suffering.”<sup>117</sup> We also have evil as an opportunity for character development, and the development of moral responsibility; for example, we are told in the context of the persecution and imprisonment of Christians in China:

There is always a purpose behind why God allows his children to go to prison. Perhaps it's so they can witness to the other prisoners, or perhaps God wants to develop more character in their lives.<sup>118</sup>

A specific example of the ‘good outweighs evil’ approach can be seen in the Old Testament, when God sends suffering in order to draw His people back to Himself. This is a pattern which repeats on many occasions.<sup>119</sup>

*Free will outweighs evil.* “Freedom of the will ... entails the ability to choose between good and evil. Freedom of the will is an undeniable good. It is better for us to have it than not have it. Therefore a world containing freedom of the will must be a world that contains some evil.”<sup>120</sup>

*We are chosen.* God did not create a world in which good is maximised or evil is minimised; He created the world in which we exist. God could have created another world with other people, but He chose to create this world, with us. Existence brings suffering, but can we really claim that we were wronged by being allowed to exist?

*The cross is the ultimate good.* Plantinga talks about the central Christian good of the atonement of Jesus Christ. “You can't have the good of the atonement without the reality of evil and suffering. It would be overkill in a world of small evil.”<sup>121</sup>

*In Christ is the greatest good.* If we gain in Christ more than was lost in Adam, then the eternal gain must outweigh the cost of the fall, along with all the suffering which resulted from it.

### 3.3.4 Reconciled in the Cross

There are three fundamental biblical affirmations that we must hold together in wrestling with the problem of evil ... the utter ‘evilness’ of evil; the utter goodness of God; and the utter sovereignty of God.<sup>122</sup>

CJH Wright, along with many other writers, affirms that these three truths ‘converge’ at the cross.<sup>123</sup> This approach can also take various forms.

*The cross is God's victory over evil.* Evil is incompatible with a God of love, and the cross is the decisive victory in the battle to overcome evil.

*God fully participates in the suffering.* The cross contradicts the common account of the problem: God creates a world in which evil and suffering is inevitable, and then

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117 Went, *A Theological Reflection on the relationship between Personal Suffering and Spirituality*, 1999, p. 1.

118 Yun and Hattaway, *The Heavenly Man*, 2002, p. 313.

119 For example, Joshua 2:11-19; 4:1-2.

120 Phillips, *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God*, 2004, p. 54.

121 Plantinga, quoted in Vitale, *Suffering and a God of Love*, 2009, p. 2.

122 CJH Wright, *The God I Don't Understand*, 2008, p. 57, quoting Henri Blocher from *Evil and the Cross*.

123 CJH Wright, *The God I Don't Understand*, 2008, p. 62.



sits back and watches us poor creatures suffer all our lives. The cross demonstrates that, far from sitting back and watching us suffer, God participates in the suffering. On the cross, He suffered far more than we can imagine.

*God will go to any length to help us.* If God spared not His son, how will He not graciously give us all things?<sup>124</sup>

*Through the cross, the future kingdom is made present.* We can begin to experience the reality of God's victory over evil in this present age. "The cross of Christ is not the preliminary of the Kingdom; it is the Kingdom breaking in. It is not the clearing of the site for the heavenly city; it is the city itself descending out of heaven from God."<sup>125</sup>

### 3.3.5 Sceptical Theism

Plantinga's response to Rowe contains a nicely argued presentation of the sceptical theism response.<sup>126</sup> God may have reasons for permitting suffering, and it is likely that we are incapable of understanding many or all of them. After describing certain representative evil events, he continues:

... given that God *does* have a reason for permitting these evils, why think we would be the first to know? Given that he is omniscient and given our very substantial epistemic limitations, it isn't at all surprising that his reasons for some of what he does or permits completely escape us.<sup>127</sup>

Vitale applies the argument in a concrete manner.

When I take my dog to the vet, he does not understand why he is suffering the injection. God is much further beyond us than we are beyond the dog... We are not that smart. God may have His reasons, and we may not be capable of understanding them.<sup>128</sup>

NT Wright offers another helpful simile:

One day I think we shall find out [why there is evil], but I believe we are incapable of understanding it at the moment, in the same way that a baby in the womb would lack the categories to think about the outside world.<sup>129</sup>

It is worth noting that these quotes summarise the conclusion of an argument, not the argument itself. It is not sufficient (certainly, not sufficient for many purposes) merely to affirm that God *may* have reasons we do not know about; we must also establish that it is reasonable to believe that God does, or is likely to have such reasons. It seems to me that Plantinga and others do this entirely adequately.

This argument does not seem to have a prominent role in much of the literature, but the responses to my questions indicate that for many people this is a much stronger

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124 Romans 8:32.

125 Forsyth, *The Justification of God: Lectures For Wartime On A Christian Theodicy*, 1917, p. 75.

126 Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 2000, pp. 465-469.

127 Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 2000, p. 467.

128 Vitale (1), *Suffering and a God of Love*.

129 NT Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*, 2006, p. 108.

argument than the literature suggests.

The central focus here is not on understanding a problem, but in relating to a person. We face this issue in real life whenever someone we know appears to behave in a way which is not consistent with their character as we know it. We face this issue when someone we trust and believe to be essentially good does something which appears to be cruel, insensitive or malicious.

In such circumstances, how do we respond? One possibility is to go with the evidence, and reject the person: “You have shown yourself to be cruel and mean spirited, so you are not the sort of person I want to have as a friend.” The other possibility is to trust what you know of the person, and respond accordingly: “I know you to be good and kind, so please help me to understand how it appears to be that you acted in this cruel way.”

In other words, for a Christian any experience of suffering must be placed in the context of a relationship in which we also have experience of God as good and kind. We know that sometimes (perhaps often) when we have confronted those we trust with evidence of bad conduct, they have been able to explain or reveal aspects of the situation we did not know about, and have thus reconciled the events with our knowledge of their character. It is not in the least unreasonable to expect that God will be able to do the same, once all is revealed.

### 3.3.6 Contemporary trends

Modern society seems to have a schizophrenic approach to suffering: on the one hand, any amount of suffering is unacceptable, and any risk of suffering must be totally eliminated, as we see in much of the health and safety legislation and the claims for compensation when people are hurt in some way; on the other hand, we have a pornographic fascination with pain, and relish in graphic depictions of suffering and violence.

The avoidance of suffering and the way this has been turned into a legal necessity can be seen in the apparently pointless warnings printed on common items: a packet of peanuts ‘may contain nuts’ and a cup of coffee ‘may contain a hot liquid’.

The fascination with pain can be seen in modern literature,<sup>130</sup> but in popular culture it is perhaps most clearly seen through the medium of film.<sup>131</sup> Of course, horror in books and films is not a new phenomenon, but there is evidence that depictions of pain and cruelty have to keep on getting more intense and graphic to have the same effect on the audience, just as normal pornography must be continually achieving more extreme forms to have the same effect on an increasingly jaded audience.

An interesting observation on this topic suggests that graphic portrayals of suffering in film function as the only way in which a godless society can deal with deep issues. Thirlwell observes that “maybe the only way now to talk about evil is to

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130 Two well-known examples would be *A Clockwork Orange* by Anthony Burgess and *Crash* by J G Ballard. Both, predictably, have been turned into films.

131 In *Saw* (2004), amongst other horrors, one of the main characters chooses to cut off his own foot with a hacksaw in order to have a chance of survival.

use a horror film ... obviously this vocabulary is kitsch. All these clichés, these Satans and Antichrists! The banality of Good and Evil! ... These ideas are now kitsch, gothic props, and yet they refer to essential categories.”<sup>132</sup> In other words, religion provides horror film with the only tools we have in modern society to address real and important questions about good and evil.

It seems obvious to me that one aspect of the church’s calling is to be counter-cultural: to teach and to live truths which cannot (or cannot easily) be articulated in mainstream society. Amongst these truths needs to be a deep response to the problems of death and evil. I suspect that society is becoming increasingly incapable of looking at these subjects without our help. As NT Wright notes, “when we talk about evil we must recognise, *as neither modernity nor postmodernity seem to me to do*, that there is such a thing as human evil, and that it takes various forms”<sup>133</sup> (my emphasis).

This touches on the wider issue of the role of spirituality and religion within society, and the question of how society can provide meaning in a nominally secular world. We do not have space to explore these strands, but they need to be picked up in any complete examination of the problem of suffering in the modern world.

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132 Thirlwell, ‘Author, Author’, 2009, p. 4.

133 NT Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*, 2006, pp. 17-18.

# Chapter 4 Fieldwork

In this chapter, I describe the research I undertook for this dissertation.

## 4.1 The Research

### 4.1.1 My original plan

The initial plan was to do ten interviews with workers (staff and volunteers), and ten with clients. The interviews would be prefaced with a statement and question.

The interviews with clients would be prefaced with a statement and question: “I assume you have experienced suffering, you have asked questions about it, and some people have tried to help you by answering some of those questions. Which answers have you found to be most helpful?”

The interviews with workers would be prefaced in the same way, followed by an additional question: “When you have tried to help people who are struggling with questions about suffering, what answers have you found to be most helpful to them?”

### 4.1.2 Initial expectations

I began with the assumption that most approaches to the problem of suffering will be more helpful in some contexts rather than others. This seems like a reasonable assumption: there are many different types of suffering, and many different individual circumstances, and I have found no evidence which suggests that any one approach will work equally well in all contexts.

It follows that a potentially fruitful line of investigation would be to examine the result of trying different approaches in different contexts. Instead of trying to find the one ‘correct’ answer to the problem of suffering, we could try to find a way to determine which approach is most likely to be helpful to the individual we are seeking to respond to.

Since the aim is to help individuals who are asking questions about the problem of suffering, we are dealing with an individual, a question about suffering (also, possibly, some suffering which prompts the question), and some connection between the two – a reason for this question being important for this individual.

Early in the exercise, I drew up an initial list of factors which might influence the choice of approach. About the *individual*, we can ask about their sex, age, religious beliefs and their ethnic and cultural background. About the *question* (or the suffering which prompts it), we can ask if it is current, and if it is recent or something which has been lived with for a long time? About the *link* between the two, we can ask what the question is prompted by (for example, is it prompted by speculation, intellectual satisfaction, personal experience, second-hand experience, observation or distant experience, or something else?); and if the question is prompted by personal or second-hand experience of suffering, we can ask if the individual feels that he or she

is responsible in some way.

I did not propose to be able to identify all the relevant factors, but was aiming to be able to start describing the relevance of some of these factors, with the hope that others may be able to build on this work in the future.

The factors which might shape the possible responses are described in the section on theological background above.

### 4.1.3 The revised plan

The starting point for this project was our experience<sup>134</sup> of clients asking questions about suffering and God's part in it, so I wanted to provide a structured opportunity for these questions to be asked.

However, when presented with this opportunity, in the initial interviews our clients did not talk about God. Even when prompted gently, one person explicitly declared: "No, I have not asked why God is making me suffer," and immediately went on to spontaneously list three "good things" which had come out of his suffering. [Interview 3]

Since my plan was to deal with theodicy, rather than suffering in general, I decided to revise the interview format. I introduced a structured set of questions, initially asking nine questions, but the answers to two of them (questions 6 and 7) were frequently similar or overlapping, so these were later combined to produce the following eight questions, prefaced by a brief definition of the 'problem of suffering'.

### 4.1.4 The revised questions

I am particularly interested in the 'problem of suffering' – the problem raised by the question, "If God is good, why does He allow suffering?"

1. What has helped you to cope when you have experienced suffering in the past?
2. When you suffered, did you feel that God was in some way responsible for your suffering?
3. Was the 'problem of suffering' something that you had to struggle with?
4. If so, what answer or answers did you find which helped you?
5. What do you say when someone raises the problem of suffering with you?
6. How satisfied are you with your response? Do you think it is adequate, or are there outstanding problems it does not adequately address for you?
7. Who and what has been most helpful to you in finding answers to these questions? Which books and preachers have been most helpful? What else has been helpful?
8. Is there anything else you would like to say on this subject?

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134 This is both my own experience, and the experience of the staff and volunteers who work for me in the charity I run, as described above in the section about the 'Context' of this work.

## 4.2 *The Results*

In the reported answers to these questions, I have sometimes performed a minor editing role, to correct obvious mistakes of spelling and grammar. I have not changed the meaning of any quote.

In conducting the interviews, it became evident that the proposed distinction between ‘client and ‘worker’ was not helpful: some workers have been clients, and some are part-way along that journey.

It also became clear that the distinction was not necessary: the only difference was that I intended to ask the workers an additional question about their experience of trying to help other people who are struggling with questions about suffering, and it would be wrong to assume that the clients have not attempted to help others in this way. There is no reason why their experience should not be as valid and as important as anyone else’s experience.

### 4.2.1 Broad categories

#### **There are some basic starting points it is helpful to understand.**

Through the conversations, interviews and reading for this present study, combined with my previous work in this area, it appears that people usually approach the problem of suffering from one of four basic starting points; although there is one other, less common, situation.

1. I believe in God, and am struggling with suffering, either my own, or that of someone I care about.
2. I do not believe in God, and find the problem of suffering a useful tool with which I can support my own disbelief and, possibly, poke holes in the faith of others.
3. I believe in God, and want to be able to provide better pastoral care for people who are in the first category.
4. I believe in God, and want to be able to provide a more effective evangelistic and apologetic response to people who are in the second category.
5. I am not sure whether I believe in God, and am not sure if belief in God would make suffering easier to cope with or more difficult. (The less common starting point.)

These starting points implicitly identify the basic motivation a person has for engaging with the problem of suffering. This is not a complete set of options, but it seems to be a useful working set. It is possible, for example, that someone who does not believe in God may nevertheless wish to provide pastoral care for believers, and be asking for that reason; but I have not encountered this situation either in real life or in my research, so there seems little point in exploring it at present.

Clearly, people do not always fit neatly into one of these broad categories; but it seems to be the case that, in any given encounter, most people will function on the

basis of one of these categories to the exclusion of the others. For example, someone who is on one occasion approaching the subject from category 4, as an evangelistic and apologetic exercise, may also have personal suffering they struggle to understand; this suffering may be the main focus of the conversation on another occasion, but rarely becomes a significant feature at that time.

When formulating an appropriate and helpful response to a question about suffering, the most important factor identified in this work so far is the issue of motivation. There are many actual questions: “Why am I suffering?” “Why is someone I care for suffering?” “Why does suffering exist?” and so on. But, whatever the actual question being asked, the motivation for asking it needs to be determined.

“Why?” can be asked for two basic reasons: to challenge faith, or to ask for pastoral care. In each case, it can be asked as a genuine question, or as a form of attack, a way of hurting or causing distress to the person being asked. In this latter situation, it may be that we are being asked about suffering precisely because there is (or seems to be) no answer; and if we were to come up with a simple and adequate answer to the problem of suffering, this would only result in a different ‘impossible’ question being asked in its place.

#### 4.2.2 Personal relationships help

##### **Personal relationships are vital.**

One almost unanimous, if unsurprising, result is that personal relationships and personal contact were the most significant factor which helped people cope with suffering. Typical of the responses are the following.

I go to NA<sup>135</sup> meetings and hear people who have been through it and are clean now. The helpful stories are the ones who regret what they did.  
[Interview 1]

Just talking to others helps. Living, chatting, hearing that others have problems – sometimes worse than mine ... Getting closer to my son helps.  
[Interview 3]

Honest and good friends who have helped me listen to myself and God have been most helpful. [Interview 14]

In looking for answers to the problem of suffering, we must never forget that the most important source of help comes from the willing availability of other people. God works, first and foremost, through incarnation.

People very much appreciated and were helped by others who cared enough to do something for them – either ‘just’ listening, being present and supportive, or in more active and practical ways. People appreciate those who are seen to be fighting on the same side as them.

However, relationships are not always helpful. Supportive friends are invaluable: but those who offer easy, trite answers are very counter-productive.

135 *Narcotics Anonymous*, a meeting for people who are or who have been addicted drug users, based on the model of *Alcoholics Anonymous*.

I didn't find the standard Christian replies very helpful. "It's God's will" is a rubbishy reply, in my opinion. [Interview 5]

It is not only unsympathetic and trite Christians who cause problems to those who are suffering: talking about the loss of her husband through cancer and the many unanswered prayers, one lady said:

My husband suffered and I had to watch, as he slowly lost abilities like his love of playing guitar. Yes, I had to try and work out why God didn't seem to do anything... yet I had to listen in church to people praising God for finding them a parking place – or getting their child a place at an eminent uni – GRRRRRRRRR!!!! [Interview 11]

This is clearly not an argument against praising God in public, or celebrating answered prayer, but perhaps those who are responsible for public worship or leading homegroups may at times need to be more sensitive to the needs of those who are struggling and who may not be able to contribute as freely or easily as the happier members of the congregation.

### 4.2.3 God is not responsible

#### **People do not always blame God for suffering.**

The most consistent feature of the responses was quite unexpected. When answering the second question ("When you suffered, did you feel that God was in some way responsible for your suffering?"), of the seventeen responses I currently have on record, sixteen answered 'no' to this.

Many people replied "Not really." One [Interview 8] replied simply, "No, not at all," and two [Interviews 10 and 17] replied "Never." Even the single affirmative response [Interview 11] was hesitant: she first answered, "At the time yes," and then went on to elaborate, "Now, three years on, I do not blame God – well – I guess I do at times."

I fully expected homeless people, and probably others as well, to be blaming God in many of the interviews; or, at the very least, to be raising the question of His involvement in their suffering.

When seeking to help people in the context of our normal activities as a Christian ministry to homeless people, we still get the question of God's involvement in suffering raised on a regular basis. It often feels that the question is not so much raised as 'thrown in our faces'. So we know this is a concern, even if it is not apparent from the interviews. The question is: why do the interviews not reflect this?

I offer the following possible explanation. It may be that if you sit down with someone and ask them about their suffering, then the suffering becomes less of a theological problem for them. They feel they are being cared for, and this changes not only their feelings but their questions as well.

This interpretation is supported by a common response to the interviews: people were profoundly thankful for the experience of sitting down and talking about these issues. The exercise was a very helpful, and possibly healing, event for them, even



though no answers were offered.

In simple terms, we can see the question about suffering as a cry for help. If I blame God for my suffering, I get a response. It is the response I need, not an answer to the question. If someone is already listening to me, I don't need to provoke them by blaming God.

The situation may be analogous to that of people in a long term relationship who are not communicating well. One may say to the other: you don't care for me any more. This may be a statement of perceived fact, but it can also be a challenge – prove me wrong! It may be that people will say to a Christian that God is responsible for their suffering not as a fact but as a challenge, which they want to be proved wrong.

Being proactive in asking people about suffering is a possible strategy in dealing with people on a one-to-one basis, or in a small group setting. In public worship, it may be that we need to consider offering people more opportunity to articulate their suffering, alongside the praise, celebration and thanksgiving which more usually characterise church services.

From a pastoral perspective, people need to be able to 'come to God' in their suffering, not only to receive prayer and the relief of their suffering, but also because we need to come to God as we are: weak, imperfect and suffering creatures. God does perform miracles, but He also upholds us in our suffering and gives us strength to survive it; if we only concentrate in public on God's role in stopping suffering, then those who continue to suffer are likely to get the message that God has failed them, and, perhaps, is not interested in them.

#### 4.2.4 The problem of miracles

##### **People sometimes struggle more when God does answer prayer.**

A significant pastoral problem, as identified in this study, has only a marginal connection with theodicy: it is the Christian problem of miracles. "... I had to listen in church to people praising God for finding them a parking place ..." [Interview 11] This is not the problem of whether it is possible for God to do miracles (as Christians, we know He does; we see answers to prayer, at least sometimes), but the problem of understanding why He sometimes performs a miracle, and sometimes does not. It is the problem of understanding God's interventions in this world – why, how often, and on what basis? – and the perceived unfairness of these interventions.

The problem we have in the church with miracles and suffering should probably be seen in the wider context of Western society. We live with a nominally secular world-view which has no place for the supernatural; and certainly no place for real evil, so we are surprised and unsettled by it. "First, we ignore evil when it doesn't hit us in the face. Second, we are surprised by evil when it does. Third, we react in immature and dangerous ways as a result."<sup>136</sup>

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136 NT Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*, 2006, p. 8.

#### 4.2.5 Suffering after long service

##### **People sometimes struggle when they face unexpected suffering.**

From my personal experience of pastoral care, I suspect that one of the groups which have the greatest difficulty with the problem of suffering are those who have been Christians for some time, and who suddenly confront significant suffering for the first time, either in their own lives or in the life of someone close to them.

The pastoral problem, in this situation, tends to be mainly unvoiced; but, when it is occasionally expressed, it goes along the lines of: "I have served God faithfully all these years, and see how He repays me!" I see in this a similarity to the complaint of the older brother in the parable of the lost son.<sup>137</sup> It is possible that both complaints have a similar root: a failure to grasp the nature of grace. My good works cannot save me, and neither can they earn me or my loved ones a comfortable and pain-free future.

If this is the case, then it is possible that at least part of the pastoral problem caused by suffering can be addressed through bringing people back to the basics of salvation through grace. This would be consistent with my experience of counselling several Christian leaders who have experienced a significant and unexpected moral failure: they frequently struggle not so much with the sin itself and its consequences as with the fact that they are not the person they thought themselves to be. This is an area I expect to explore further in the future.

#### 4.2.6 Books and preachers

##### **People have access to very little material which helps them cope with suffering.**

One of the few explicit questions being asked was about the books and preachers people found helpful. Despite this, few people made reference to preachers; and most of those who did were negative.

What helped? "No preachers." [Interview 11 and 13]. "People who have experienced the same sort of thing are a thousand times better than any book or preacher." [Interview 10] "I don't find much help from books or preachers to be honest." [Interview 14]

Only two people [Interviews 8 and 17] had a positive experience of a preacher; and for each of them, there was only one preacher who had been helpful.

The original expectation on starting the dissertation was that the interviews would point me to some useful sources of information. In practice, very little useful material was identified. Five out of the seventeen made reference to books: *The Problem of Pain* by CS Lewis, books by Joni Eareckson, *Man's Search for Meaning* by Victor Frankl, the Bible (twice!), *Peace is Every Step* by Thich Nhat Hanh (a Buddhist) and *An Alien at St Wilfred's* by Adrian Plass.

Homeless people often have limited literacy, so it was never likely that they would

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137 Luke 15:29.

refer to helpful written material; however, I had hoped that the volunteers would identify more written material. It is possible that working in a largely non-literate context has inhibited the use or reporting of written material, and it may be that repeating the survey with people working in a more literate context would identify more helpful material. But it may also be the case that, for many people, there is very little helpful literature available, or it may be that most people will not find any written material helpful in this context.

It is possible that Grieg's summary of possible responses to the problem of unanswered prayer may function as an example of the kind of summary which could be useful in responding to the problem of suffering.<sup>138</sup> Further work will be needed to determine if this is the case.

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138 Grieg, *God on Mute*, 2007. In appendix A, pages 316-319, he offers sixteen approaches to unanswered prayer, divided into four areas: God's world, God's will, God's war and Exploring the silence.

# Chapter 5 Conclusions

This chapter will contain my conclusions and practical implications, including any suggested next steps or way forward.

## 5.1 *More work is required*

The consistent feedback from this work is that people need better help to formulate a pastoral response to the problem of suffering, and that the assumptions which have shaped this study may well produce a useful result if I continue to pursue studies in this direction: instead of aiming to produce one definitive response to the problem of suffering, I will attempt to identify a range of responses and find ways to determine which is likely to be the most helpful for given individual. Time, of course, will tell.

It is my opinion that the response to suffering is most helpfully seen as primarily a pastoral issue, and hence our primary aim is to equip the pastor with the best possible tools with which to care for the people in his or her care. Another important aim is to enable the theologian to engage with those who wish to debate the philosophical issues posed by suffering, such as Hume's challenge<sup>139</sup> or the question of how evil can originate in a perfect and good universe; but the pastoral perspective can help to shape this secondary area of dialogue.

## 5.2 *Suffering is a good problem to have*

From a number of responses, it seems, paradoxically, that for many people, it is good that we have this problem and are able to wrestle with it. Some people may use Hume's words to taunt us, but this is a problem that many Christians seem comparatively happy to endure. When I speak with Christians about the problem of suffering, it seems that most prefer to be mocked for not having an answer to the problem of suffering, if their only alternative is that suffering does not cause them a problem.

In discussing the problem, there is a general agreement that the 'new atheists' have nothing to offer in this area. If we follow their lead and take away any belief in God, if the whole universe is simply the result of physical forces, evolution and blind chance, then we no longer have a problem of suffering as suffering is simply an inevitable fact of existence. But it is a pointless fact. Belief in evolution does not help me cope with suffering, and it does not make me a better person in responding to the suffering of others.

While not expressed in precisely these terms, several people seemed to feel that there is something wrong, or perhaps something missing, if we do not have a problem with the suffering in the world. At the very least, we can say:

The faith position is an altogether more positive and optimistic one than

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139 Quoted above in the section on 'Theological Context'.

the assertion of meaninglessness.<sup>140</sup>

Towards the end of my fieldwork, a conversation with a non-Christian produced this interesting observation: “People are drawn to religion because of suffering, not away from it.” This view is supported by recent evidence that church attendance (taken to be a reasonable proxy for the level of religious faith in a community) rises with increased economic uncertainty.<sup>141</sup> So we have a fascinating situation where the ‘new atheists’ are proclaiming that it is impossible to believe in a good God because of all the suffering in the world, while the facts point to suffering (or, at least, some aspects of it) as a significant reason why people embrace religion.

Strategically, it seems that the church may be more successful in both pastoral care and evangelism if it did more to acknowledge suffering and death as major issues we all have to deal with, rather than pushing the ‘God wants you to have a good time’ message which seems to be more popular.

### 5.3 Identifying Resources

One aspect of the original plan was to identify helpful resources: resources that people have actually said they found to be helpful, as opposed to resources which say things I agree with.

I was surprised by the lack of detail here. Inevitably, some people found nothing helpful, but the aim was only to identify resources which some people found to be helpful, not which were universally recognised as being helpful.

The range of books people found helpful was interesting. Only the Bible (with one direct and one indirect reference) was mentioned more than once. Several people said that no books were helpful, so we need to be careful about how we use any helpful material which may be identified in the future.

As previously noted, one area which I deliberately avoided in the interview questions was to ask about the Christian tradition of the respondent. This would affect two areas: theology and authority.

Each tradition has its own theological specifics. To take one obvious example: for many people, the question of infant baptism is intimately connected with any response to the death of an infant.

As well as the explicit theological differences, there are cultural differences. A familiar liturgy may be found to be helpful, enabling the participant to articulate and affirm Christian truth even when they do not feel capable of finding their own words.

The Christian tradition will also affect how people understand and respond to theological and pastoral resources from different sources. To take another obvious example: if you know that a particular quote comes from the Pope, some people will have an instinctive assumption that it must be right, others will take the content on its own merits, while others will have an expectation that it will probably be misleading

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140 Vardy, *The Puzzle of Evil*, 1992, p. 202.

141 This is the conclusion of several studies in recent years, including Ruiter and Tubergen, *Religious Attendance in Cross-National Perspective: A Multilevel Analysis of 60 Countries*, 2009.

and dangerous.

## *5.4 The boundaries of a Christian response*

This next thought was not part of my original plan, but flows from it. If we are to formulate a set of answers to the problem of suffering, there is implicitly in this plan a need to define the scope of what constitutes a Christian response to suffering. What options are ‘on the table’ as possible aspects of a response?

For example: does God know the future? Christians differ on this point, but our response to suffering will depend, in part, on our answer to that question. I suggest that a Christian response to the question of suffering needs to take into account both these points of view. On the other hand, the mainstream Christian faith does not allow for the possibility of individuals achieving perfection through repeated reincarnation, so this option does not need to be taken into account in such a piece of work.

Similarly, I currently assume that a Christian response would not include Origen’s attempt to explain evil by relocating the fall to before creation (something which, to the best of my knowledge, no mainstream Christian group now affirms), while it would include the doctrine of recapitulation formulated by Irenaeus.

More work needs to be done on defining this scope, or at least proposing a working definition for the Christian community to discuss and evaluate, but that is outside the present scope of this study.

## *5.5 Ministerial Training*

In considering the application of this work to the area of ministerial training, one further thought occurs. I have found the fieldwork to be surprisingly informative and enlightening: asking people to talk about their beliefs, experience, and the links between the two, produced a good number of unexpected responses. I wonder if there is any way which a similar questionnaire, not necessarily about suffering, could be incorporated into training programs for Christian ministers as a way to help ‘ground’ the theology they are taught, and understand more clearly how it affects the reality of people’s lives.

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