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## Theodicy as a "Lived Question:" Moving Beyond a Theoretical Approach to Theodicy

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1. What is the social function of scholarly reflection on the theodicy question? In *Theology and the Problem of Evil*, Kenneth Surin has characterized the approaches of figures like Richard Swinburne, Alvin Plantinga and John Hick as giving an overly abstract treatment of the question. According to Surin, they have inherited the enlightenment penchant for reducing complex, concrete problems to clean and neat abstractions. Yet, one must admit that behind these highly theoretical approaches is a concern for Christian practice: inquisitive and sometimes hurting persons are searching for "answers" to why evil is so widespread in a world governed by God. However one may assess this highly analytical approach to the question, it has served a practical function in parish ministry.
2. There remains considerable debate, however, about whether this practical function of theoretical theodicies is positive. In *The Evils of Theodicy*, Terrence Tilley argues that abstract, theoretical theodicies engage in a practice which "disguises real evils" and actually "creates evils"(3). The theodicy seeks to reconcile how it could be true that God is both good and omnipotent with the reality that evil still exists. Typical answers include "Evil exists because good is impossible without the possibility of evil," "Evil exists because the world is a vale of soul-making" or "Evil exists because we are free beings" (Surin, 1991:294). Tilley argues that this discreet treatment of the problem is a distinctively post-Leibniz phenomenon. Augustine, for example, was not a theodicy in this sense. The book of Job, Tilley argues, is more of a warning against theodicies than an advocacy of one. Theoretical theodicians are like the whispering friends of Job who torture rather than help. Their theoretical arguments hide real evils rather than lead persons to a concrete response to the sufferer. Tilley ends his book with an argument based upon the speech-act theories of Searle and Austin that theodicy is a "destructive discourse" (235) which should be "abandoned" (219).
3. In this way, Tilley presents his case to "undermine and counteract the practice of theodicy" by "developing arguments inside academia"(3). From one scholar to another, Tilley has admonished his colleagues to discontinue their approach of inquiring about theodicy. Theoretical discourse about theodicy in an enlightenment tradition not only "does not solve the problems of evil," it "does create evils"(5). So, has the seemingly intractable problem of evil disappeared for persons who accept Tilley's argument?
4. Tilley's polemic against theodicy-building should not obscure the centrality of the theodicy question for Christian practice. Moving the question from a theoretical level to a practical level does not imply that one should stop reflecting on the problem. Rather, the task is to continue asking the theodicy question - but with a close relationship to questions of practice. As Moltmann says, "The question of theodicy is not a speculative question; it is a critical one." The question "is the open wound of life in this world." The believer is one who "will not rest content with any slickly explanatory answer to the theodicy question. And he will also resist any attempts to soften the question down. The more a person believes, the more deeply he experiences pain over the suffering in the world, and the more passionately he asks about God and the new creation" (49). Thus, according to Moltmann, a theoretical account of the problem of suffering – even if it has great explanatory power – should be rejected as inadequate by Christians.
5. This paper presents a constructive proposal for how a Christian may think through the theodicy question in a way that highlights its centrality to Christian practice. Like Moltmann, it does not present an answer to the question, but reflects critically on what it means in the Christian life to live with a raw, unanswered question. Rather than drawing upon speech-act theory (as Tilley does), I use George Lindbeck's "cultural linguistic" model of religion to articulate how the logic of Christian practice relates to the theodicy question.

### Reframing the Theodicy Question: Bringing Confession and Practice into Dialectic

6. Lindbeck describes his theory of religion as a contrast to two other theories: the "traditional cognitivist" model and the "experiential-expressivist" model (30). The former sees doctrine as propositional, speaking in correspondence to the realities doctrine refers to. The "truth" of these propositions is contingent on their status as "ontologically true affirmations" (68), and this truth is likewise "independent of the subjective dispositions of those who utter them" (66). Theodicians like Swinburne, Plantinga and Hick would be examples of this approach.
7. In contrast to the propositionalist model, the experiential-expressivist approach cuts off doctrinal language from any ontological reference, and reduces it to an expression of experience and emotion. Thus, it is easy for expressivists to posit a "common core experience" (31) from which very diverse expressions emerge, through a process of abstraction and symbolization. Doctrinal disharmony between widely variant religious traditions are not truly in tension (as if referring to different ontological realities), but are merely different external expressions of a common "preconceptual experience"(34). This approach is typical among sociological approaches to religion. What is sacrificed in this emphasis upon the experiential roots of religion are the particularities of the tradition-specific framing of the question of suffering – particularities which are transcended rather than evaluated.
8. Lindbeck proposes a cultural-linguistic alternative, which refuses to use experience or doctrine as independent foundations for religious knowledge, but brings the two together into a mutually-forming dialectic. Unlike the expressivist approach, Lindbeck assumes no fundamental commonality in experience, but instead portrays experience itself (and its interpretation) as shaped by the external factor of doctrine. Doctrine does undergo change in this dialectic, yet it transcends a simple volitional overturning by disproving (propositional) or freely reinterpreting to accommodate a new experience. Instead, doctrine functions like a set of rules for the practice/form of life in a particular religion, and as experiences change, doctrine changes its read of one's experience.
9. With Lindbeck's model, practices have just as important a role as belief in making theological decisions. A similar point has been made by Hans-Georg Gadamer. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer seeks to rehabilitate the notion of "taste" in order to show that rational judgments are not contingent upon publicly accessible rules for their rationality. For Gadamer, "taste knows something – though admittedly in a way that cannot be...reduced to rules and concepts" (38). A judgment of taste is not only in the realm of beauty, but of truth, but the judgment is facilitated by the tradition shaping a particular kind of person to make the judgment, rather than a discreet logical process. In a similar way, for Lindbeck, religious beliefs are not "primarily a set of propositions to be believed" but "the medium in which one moves, a set of skills that one employs in living one's life" (35). Lindbeck emphasizes how becoming religious requires that "one learns how to feel, act and think in conformity with a religious tradition" and that the "inner logic" of the tradition is not simply the confessions, but the logic of the tradition-formed practice (35).
10. It is important to recognize, however, that while Lindbeck's model leads to inquiry about both Christian confession and practice, it need not be isolated from making general [ontological] truth claims for these doctrines. Certainly, some have used Lindbeck's model in this way (e.g. Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*). But, as Jeffrey Hensley has argued in "Are Postliberals Necessarily Antirealists?" accepting a postliberal model does not necessarily preclude making public truth claims about theology. Assessing the truth of doctrine does require more than simply assessing the coherence of an isolated language game – but it also requires more than assessing the cognitive claims by publicly accessible rules. Like the judgment of taste, a judgment of doctrine is not relative and is in the realm of public truth, yet not by publicly agreed upon rules. In assessing the cognitive and practical portrait of Christian claims in this article, one must judge the practice as shaped by Christian doctrine, not one without the other.
11. Utilizing Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic model, one may move beyond the polarities of being completely theoretical or completely sociological/practical, approaching the problem of evil with sensitivity to both the theological and social functions of these claims. My claim is that the problem of evil is and should remain an open question for Christians. Attempts to "solve" it end in a pernicious twisting of faith and practice. As noted above, this project is dependent upon the work that Kenneth Surin and Terrence Tilley have done in attacking theoretical theodicies as a discourse-practice. Yet, my approach expands upon Moltmann's theme that suffering is an open question which is answered neither by a theodicy nor by displacing the question itself. It is a question which must be asked, and Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic model is a resource to explore how it can be asked in a way that holds together practice with confession. The theodicy question should be a "lived question" – and the asking of the question in a nontheoretical way is a way of living in the world.

### An Open Question as Confession and Practice

12. Doctrine, with both its cognitive and practical dimensions, can take many forms - a story, a statement, and even a question. The tradition provides the source for this language, and one of the most prominent pieces of the "grammar" of faith one may acquire has been in the Christian practice of reading the Psalms. The Psalms of lament often ask raw, open questions, which may or may not be resolved by the end of the Psalm (e.g., Psalm 88). The Lukan Jesus abruptly isolates one question of the Psalmist - "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Questions such as these, although not ordinarily considered "doctrine," come to be asked, and even embodied, by Christians themselves. They help shape Christian practice and a Christian interpretation of experience. As such, a question [as doctrine] can shape the life of the one who asks it.

13. But how can an open, unanswered question shape one's practice? The potential function of an open question can be illustrated through Michel Foucault's chronicle of how Western society has responded to insanity. In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault contrasts two approaches toward the phenomena of madness: dialogical and monological. In medieval and renaissance times, madness is openly engaged with all its mystery by the philosophical and theological resources of the day. Shakespeare's plays provide an excellent example of this. In Shakespeare, madness is enigmatic but not alienated from common reflection - linked with reflection about unrequited love, murderous passion, and unexpected wisdom (30-32). But enlightenment thinking brings an end to this type of engagement: "The constitution of madness as a mental illness, at the end of the eighteenth century, affords evidence of a broken dialogue" (x). Through processes of exclusion and the supposed progress of science, "the experience of madness remains silent in the composure of a knowledge which, knowing too much about madness, forgets it" (xii). What one can fully explain, she can forget. Whereas madness was once seen as an "open question" worthy of commentary by playwrights and theologians, it became explained more and more by a combination of social/psychological/medical forces which preclude the philosopher and require the specialists. The genuine "otherness" of madness was gradually vanquished, with the voice of the madman being reduced to a "silence," a "silence" on which (Foucault argues) the "language of psychiatry" has been "established" (x, xi). This silencing of the madman corresponds with the "forgetting" of that "madness" which can be "explained," thus protecting one from having to dialogue and engage with madness as earlier eras had done.

14. A similar pattern can be seen regarding the problem of evil and the homeless. One who interacts with the homeless is bombarded with multiple "causal explanations" of why a homeless person is in her predicament: mental illness, alcohol or drug abuse, a bad home life, etc. Furthermore, many homeless persons are notorious for dishonoring their "charitable" givers, refusing gifts of sustenance for substances of addiction. Thus, in responding to the homeless person, there are two prominent explanations which justify non-action: first, the social and psychological forces which have resulted in homelessness are a total explanation of this person's suffering; second, because of the power of these forces, the person cannot be "fixed," so it is vain to help.

15. If one refuses to fully "explain" the phenomenon of homelessness, she is left with a disturbing gap. What grounds does one have - given all of the social, psychological and chemical forces - to reach out in compassion to a homeless person? Although these sociological explanations are important in the broader picture of helping a person, there is still the theodicy-shaped question which must be asked: why did this suffering happen? If sociological explanations come to function as a totality, then there is no reason to reach out and identify with the sufferer. As John Milbank puts it, if one presupposes that this is a world of immanent social forces - without an alternate ontology to ground a critique - then "force is best managed and confined by counter-force." (4) What the theodicy question unveils is an audacious presupposition that a world of peace is prior to the present world of violence. "Why is this 'violence' happening?" The question is a prominent one if peace is deserved or expected, in spite of the fact that violence has taken place. Even though there are many sociological explanations of the "violence" of the sufferer - the violence itself is still worthy of protest. Otherwise, like Foucault's account of responses to madness, the suffering of the homeless can be "explained" and forgotten. The suffering of the other can be reduced from an open question to an answered one, a dialogue to a monologue.

16. In contrast, as a Christian acts in compassion to a homeless person, the dialogue of "how could this be happening?" is opened. The suffering of the other is an anomaly for the Christian which can be adequately responded to only through active engagement. In this way, Christian acts of compassion are modes of asking the theodicy question. Even if a homeless person cannot be "fixed," the Christian response is to continue identifying with the sufferer in compassion. No matter what kind of sin and dysfunction mar the situation, the Christian comes close to the sufferer to protest with her: "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

17. My argument here about homelessness is little more than a reinscription of one of Tilley's central arguments: that theodicies efface evil. But this reinscription, under the influence of Lindbeck, takes a different focus. My argument does not directly attack theodicians who write and publish in the academy. Instead, it says that persons who refuse action in response to suffering - like those who ignore the homeless - are in fact living out a theodicy. For these persons, the suffering of the other is not a raw, open question - it can be neatly explained with sociological and psychological arguments. As Tilley argues, the academic theodicians' work to "explain" evil can "blind one to the variety of evils" and "create more evils by 'justifying' extant evils" (1991b: 307). This false vision justifies non-action as a concrete response to actual evils. But most people would do just fine without the actual arguments of scholarly theodicians, for their action speaks loudly: "the suffering of this other who I am passing by is not a problem." The raw, open question of suffering is a missing dimension in the practice of all who explain and forget the suffering of a concrete other.

18. To explore further what is happening theologically when one asks the theodicy question through action, it is necessary to see how the question is configured in theological literature. Tilley has already given a reading of Job to be an anti-theodicy, a book which "warns against the possibility of providing a theodicy" (109). Alice Laffey has supported Tilley's thesis by drawing upon material in the Pentateuch and the prophet Habakkuk. In my discussion below, however, the focus of my biblical inquiry is on theological links between suffering as an open question and the Christian ethical response to suffering.

### The Theological Shape of the Theodicy Question: the Narrative of Creation and Consummation

19. The Hebrew narrative of creation not only resists the impulse to engage in speculation or provide answers to the theodicy problem, its narrative shape provides boundaries as to how far such speculation should go. In comparing Genesis with another ancient near east text, the Babylonian Enuma Elish, there are striking differences in the role of conflict at creation. In the Babylonian creation account, creation itself involves a battle with gods who are associated with chaotic forces. Marduk had to defeat the Sea goddess Tiamat. For the Babylonians, in the beginning there was violence. In the Genesis creation account, however, it is striking that YHWH has no competitor who wages war on divine power. Thus, for the Hebrews, in the beginning there was peace because of the sovereign reign of YHWH, while for the Babylonians, the beginning, like the present, involved conflict.

20. Consequently, the Babylonians and other polytheistic religions have comparably less philosophical difficulty accounting for evil, since superhuman evil and well as superhuman good has clear agency: in good gods or bad gods. A "world of peace" is just as unimaginable in this framework as it would be for a Zoroastrian: Good forces will never be completely sovereign - they may win the battle, but they cannot "win the war." In contrast, the sovereign reign of peace is precisely what the Genesis narrative claims to have in ethical priority over the present world: the present world must be accounted for by a "fall" of humans and nature from God's original design. Thus, there is not an ontological necessity to the violence and suffering in the present reality: the presence of Eden suggests that these things are "not the way things are supposed to be." In contrast, as Milbank argues in *Theology and Social Theory*, much of contemporary social scientific discourse assumes the contrary - that violence and suffering are "just the way things are" and so they can be fully explained by the psycho-social forces at play. These social scientists, like the "Enuma Elish" and the Baal text of Ugarit, assume that in the beginning, there was violence.

21. In light of this contrast of the Genesis account with ancient and modern appeals to the ontological necessity of violence, one may ask the question: why is "Eden" a necessary movement in creation? Why did the Hebrews not simply claim that God created the world "as it is?" The very presence of Eden shows insight into the possibility of redemption - the possibility that things should be better than the present reality, that the present reality of violence deserves protest. Thus, with the account of the fall, the evil in the world is not due to the agency of malicious gods, but from the sinful alienation of humans from their creator. But how did this happen? Did God know that the fall was going to happen? Several theological traditions have developed around these speculative questions - from *felix culpa* to certain process theologies. But both groups are treading in the open "gap" that the Genesis creation account opens up. It does not speculate on why the fall was allowed to happen. Rather, the fall is a way of narrating that a prior world of peace in relationship to God is "the way things should be" - but that somehow the present reality is not that way - and it is not the fault of God or of demons. How could it be that we ended up in this botched world? How could it be that there is such great suffering if God is benevolent and almighty? The Hebrew scriptures do not speculate except in the fallacious arguments of Job's friends. These are natural questions to ask, given the narrative shape of creation, but it stays "open" because in this openness is where the believer lives: treating the present reality of what is, according to the way things should be; entering into redemptive and compassionate acts which presuppose the reign of a sovereign God, even while addressing realities of evil which cannot be fully explained in relation to that sovereignty.

22. This question of the extent of divine sovereignty leads one to consider a second dimension in the relationship between Hebrew creation and its ancient counterparts: God the "warrior" with chaotic forces. The Old Testament does have examples of Yahweh fighting with other gods. In reflecting on the great redemptive event of the exodus, Psalm 114:3-5 personifies the Sea (Yam) that "looked and fled." Another Psalm reflecting on the Exodus speaks of Yahweh crushing "the heads of Leviathan" (74:14). What is striking about these divine warrior accounts is that these "wars" with chaotic forces did not happen in the original creation narrative, but in describing acts of redemption. Since there was peace in the beginning, chaos and evil ultimately have a temporal role rather than one coexistent with creation (Anderson: 168-9). There was a time when chaotic forces were not, and there will be a time when chaotic forces will be no more. In this present "in between time," God acts as warrior to the chaotic forces. Evil and violence are not properly "necessary," but part of a temporary order which will be superseded when God's reign is fully established.

23. Knowing the temporal limitations of evil, one may be tempted to be pessimistic about the "present evil age" and simply long for a future world of consummation. This is exactly what happened in the thought of many Jewish apocalyptic writers during the exile: the present age is so evil that God has left his people and redemption is only beyond history. Salvation for the righteous is "guaranteed" – they just need to keep courage to wait for God's cosmic, otherworldly redemption (Ladd: 199). In this schema, which George Ladd claims is developed largely as "a solution to the problem of why the righteous are suffering," there is no need for an ethical response to evil (192). Ladd demonstrates the "ethical passivity" in non-canonical Jewish apocalyptic literature with the following observation: "With the exception of Enoch 92-105, there is almost no ethical exhortation in the entire corpus of non-canonical apocalyptic literature, and it is notable that this material [Enoch 92-105] lacks many of the usual characteristics of the apocalyptic genre" (198-9). Hope in an exclusively future redemption leads to passivity. In the process, evil is explained: punishment and vindication will take place in a future age; it need not be "protested" against now.

24. In contrast to the exilic Jewish apocalyptic literature, Jesus proclaimed "the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15, RSV). While God's kingdom is proclaimed, an ethical exhortation to repentance is given. Jesus did not deny the apocalyptic eschatology, but he combined it with the ethics from the prophetic tradition. As Ladd argues, Jesus had a "dynamic concept of the Kingdom of God": the present world is characterized by "radical evil," and there will ultimately be a "new order of things," but there is a present "inbreaking of the divine world" in the movement of redemption. Thus, the "powers of the age to come have invaded the present evil age" (199). The hope of a cosmic salvation should not shield God's people from ethical action toward present evils, but should launch them into the spreading of the "reign of peace" which will be consummated in a future age. One's eschatology provides the ground for the "protesting" question of theodicy: because one has tasted the [apocalyptic] hope, evil and suffering seem all the more unnecessary and absurd. Witnesses to God's Kingdom are witnesses to a peaceful reign that has broken into the present, making suffering into a question which calls for concrete response.

25. This is the "hope-shaped" dimension of the theodicy question. It is because one has begun to experience the apocalyptic reign of peace that, with Ivan in *The Brother's Karamazov*, the Christian "cannot agree to accept" this world (235). Evil is not explained; it is protested against by acting as if a reign of peace were prior to this world of violence. As Gustavo Gutierrez says in *On Job*, "Only if we take serious the suffering of the innocent and live the mystery of the cross amid that suffering, but in the light of Easter, can we prevent our theology from being 'windy arguments' (Job 16:3)" (sic 103). The question of theodicy, and the life of the Christian, is lived between the suffering of the cross and the increasingly penetrating light of Easter. As such, the question of theodicy remains open and anomalous rather than answered and (hence) forgotten.

26. Christian response to the sufferer is not only a witness to hope and a protest against a violent order. Its refusal to "accept" the seeming necessity of violence grounds a compassionate response to persons beyond the point of "fixing." A friend who was a hospital chaplain gave me a concrete example of "compassion as protest." A nurse was tending a child with a terminal illness, with a disease that had no cure. No matter how many IVs of medicine the child received, her disease could not be healed. From the perspective of the nurse, there was no reason to keep helping: the child could not be fixed. The chaplain, in counsel with the nurse, described a compassionate response as being "an act of civil disobedience against a kingdom of violence and death." By continuing to come close to the sufferer who cannot be fixed, one is keeping the theodicy question open by asking "how could this happen?" rather than accepting the Buddhist maxim "life is suffering."

27. In sum, my study concurs with Surin and Tilley that constructing theodicies is a destructive practice. In fact, when one looks at the social function of an open theodicy question in the life of the Christian, there are distinct benefits in cultivating the raw openness of the question. Christian compassionate action both bears witness to God's sovereign reign of peace and protests the present invasion of that reign by violence. This proclamation and protest find their expression in concrete compassionate response to the sufferer – a response that asks with her, "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

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