

An Unconventional Look at the Challenge of Theodicy

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The foundational contention of this paper is that those Christian theologians and philosophers who write about theodicy and the issues that swirl in and around it, tend to follow a common and well-known process and trajectory that is here designated as the conventional look at theodicy. It is a further contention of this paper that, within a community where belief in God is solidly intact, and where the Bible is already perceived to be reliable and trustworthy as revelation from God, this conventional approach may not be the best one to use when dealing with issues of suffering. Lastly, this paper will suggest a different way of looking at the issues of theodicy that will be designated as an unconventional look at the subject.

The conventional approach to the issues of theodicy tends to unfold along the following lines. It begins with a theologian or philosopher making some statement about the difficult nature of the subject, then to be followed by an assembly of finely tuned theological and philosophical arguments designed to resolve the knotty issues. The intention is to somehow find a way to resolve the well-known tensions associated with theodicy by trying to reconcile God's traditional characteristics of omnibenevolence, omnipotence, and omniscience with the continuing occurrence of evil in the world.

A perusal of some current contributors to the theodicy discussion will help make this point. Consider Millard Erickson, an evangelical theologian whose work is often used and cited. He begins discussion of this subject by saying "probably the most difficult intellectual challenge to the

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Christian faith is the problem of how there can be evil in the world. If God is all-powerful and all-loving, how can evil be present in the world?"¹ Erickson goes on to expand on the problem by quoting the words of David Hume who, speaking of God, said: "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?"²

John G. Stackhouse, Jr., begins with the same point, though he makes it more expansive. In an article in *Christianity Today*, he says that the problem of evil is "arguably the most important philosophical question of any era."³ And Ravi Zacharias, perhaps the most notable Christian apologist of our time who has a very good conventional-style chapter on theodicy in his wonderful book *Jesus Among Other Gods*, begins his comments on suffering and God by saying that "behind this question lies possibly one of the greatest barriers to belief in God."⁴ Any number of other authors and theologians could be cited who begin the conventional way, noting theodicy as the thorniest of issues for Christian thinkers.

Having stated their initial premise, those who follow what I am calling the conventional approach then proceed to engage in sometimes long and involved theological and philosophical discussions in an attempt to find some way (hopefully an unassailable one) by which they can either defuse or redirect the tensions between God's power, and God's knowledge, and the matter of evil so that the conflict either becomes apparent or else moot. And the usual way of doing this is to either defuse or diminish one or another of the variables in such a way as to allow an escape from the problem. For example, though the proponents of the so-called "Openness of God" theory would probably not like my characterization of their position, I think theirs is an attempt to defuse the problems of theodicy by reducing either God's omnipotence or His omniscience, depending how you read them. The result is that expectations of God become only marginally better than those we have of humans so God gets off the hook

¹ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008), 436.

² David Hume, *Dialogs Concerning Natural Religion*, part 10.

³ John G. Stackhouse, Jr., *Christianity Today*, June 11, 2001, 74.

⁴ Ravi Zacharias, *Jesus Among Other Gods* (Nashville, TN: Word Publishing, 2000), 103.

THOMAS: CHALLENGE OF THEODICY

because it becomes unreasonable to expect so much of His superior, but still modest capacities.

Perusal of some other prominent authors reveals this same strategy. The already mentioned Ravi Zacharias proceeds by laying out some very fine philosophical arguments that undermine, even destroy, the critic's allegations. One of his most powerful arguments is that one cannot at the same time argue that the existence of evil is grounds for denying the existence of God and then, at the same time argue that there is no "objective moral basis for (measuring) good and evil,"⁵ something those who use the issues of theodicy against God do quite frequently. You can't say there is evil but then say there is no standard by which to measure it!

Zacharias follows another interesting line of thought too, that evil may not be totally bad in its function and consequence, a line of thought that would also serve to reduce somewhat the power of the issues of theodicy. If evil is not really so bad, if it serves some purpose, then the tensions in theodicy are somewhat diminished.⁶ This line of argument relies on the fact that sometimes evil has an uncanny ability to open a window on goodness as when, in the midst of evil, someone does something transparently good. The stark contrast between the two can be very enlightening. Alternatively, sometimes tragedy has the effect of sharpening the focus of life as witnessed to recently by Ben Witherington and his wife upon the unexpected and untimely loss of an adult daughter. Witherington put it this way: "Death has a way of convincing us of what matters in life. It shuts up our squabbles and complaints."⁷ The effect of this tragic death on him and his wife was to sharpen their focus on the things that really matter in life.

So it is that in the midst of evil, someone might actually find the idea of a Savior quite attractive as was the recent case of an alcoholic friend of mine who returned to faith upon the untimely death of his eldest son the effect of which he described by saying, "When my son died, my own

⁵ Ibid., 113.

⁶ Interesting as this line of thought may be, it certainly raises a host of other questions not the least of which would be the question of the value or outcome of suffering. Because of the degree and intensity of some suffering, the learning or benefit would have to be very good indeed!

⁷ Ben Witherington, "When a Daughter Dies," *Christianity Today*, April 2012, Vol. 56, No. 4, 36.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

mortality came up and stared me in the face. I had not drawn a sober breath in 32 years, and I realized that I was not ready to face eternity!” The jolt was enough to return him to the community of believers. From things like this, some conclude evil has utilitarian value so is not as bad as some would think, thereby diminishing theodicy’s tensions.

Timothy Keller, the now-famous pastor of the Redeemer Presbyterian Church in downtown Manhattan, is another who has spoken to issues of theodicy with good effect. His line of thought follows the conventional trajectory. He argues that you cannot, as a non-theist or atheist, take a feature of life such as one would see in the functioning of the evolutionary process where one organism or animal preys on another and so survives, and argue that this is normal and amoral and then turn around and argue that the very idea of God must be discounted because of the existence of such carnage in the world. We cannot deny the existence of God because of the presence of death and destruction and then turn around and say that in the natural world, such things are normal and ordinary bearing no moral implications.⁸

One more person who should be mentioned is Alvin Plantinga, now widely regarded as the best Protestant philosopher on the planet. He has weighed in on matters of theodicy with a rather prodigious mind mounting a considerable defense of theism by way of what is now being called the “Free Will Defense.” This argument is quite long and complicated, but it has proven to be strong as evidenced by the absence of any serious refutations even with the passage of thirty or so years. A summary of this argument taken from an article by John G. Stackhouse is helpful. He distills the argument like this:

God desired to love and be loved by other beings. God created human beings with this end in view. To make us capable of such fellowship, God had to give us the freedom to choose, since love cannot be either automatic or coerced. This sort of free will, however, entailed the danger that we would use it to go our own way in defiance of both God and our own best interests.

For God to grant human beings free will was to grant us the awful dignity of making real choices with real consequences. If God prevents us from sinning, he is preventing us from truly free action. And if God

⁸ Timothy J. Keller, *The Reason for God* (New York, NY: Dutton), 2008.

THOMAS: CHALLENGE OF THEODICY

constantly and instantly repairs our mischief, then it is likely that we would never face our sin and the need for redemption. . . . If God, for some reason (perhaps known only to God), wants to enjoy the fellowship of these particular beings (each with particular flaws), then God must let us be who we are, sin and all.⁹

Plantinga's Free Will Defense¹⁰ rests on the understanding that love is the cardinal ethic of reality, and if love is indeed the cardinal ethic, then freedom to choose must be built into reality as well, for a love that is programmed or required is not love. Certainly, if one were to tell a lover that his beloved was merely programmed to respond, then not only would the ethos of love be destroyed, but also the possibility of it. And both the lover and the beloved would discover their love seriously cheapened, descending into some kind of self-serving or Pavlovic response. Love simply cannot grow or flourish in the face of conscription or requirement. Plantinga has also pointed out that a lot of the claims levied against God arise from a misunderstanding of God's omnipotence. People commonly argue that God's omnipotence enables him to do "anything." But, Plantinga argues, that is not true, for some things God cannot do, like contradict his own character. We simply cannot envision God as a being incongruent with his own inherent characteristics. At the core of the issue of theodicy is the expectation of some coherence within the nature of God, so God's omnipotence cannot be conceived to allow such a contradiction. It is precisely because we expect coherence within the nature of God that we are troubled by the continued presence of evil in the face of an almighty and loving God. After all, if God were able to contravene His own character, it would render the whole question of the problem of evil moot for God would no longer need any defense. We could just say that God is capricious, so face the fact that life is tough and get a helmet!

The arguments of Zacharias and Plantinga and others are useful and helpful. They are engaging and effective. They illustrate the existence of some healthy links between theology and philosophy and life. But, as pointed out at the beginning, their lines of thought follow what in this paper

⁹ John G. Stackhouse, Jr., "Mind Over Skepticism," *Christianity Today*, June 11, 2001, 74.

¹⁰ The shortest version of this argument can be found in Plantinga's essay *God, Freedom, and Evil*, Eerdmans, 1974.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

is called the conventional discussion of theodicy—describe the issues, then argue a way into and through the issues hoping to resolve the tensions.

It is right at this point that I make the observation that, for those for whom issues of God and faith are already quite settled, the conventional approach to theodicy might not be the best. One reason is that, if you look at it closely, it is only scantily biblical. Noble and enlivening and useful as the arguments and processes may be, they are primarily philosophical, logical, or theological in nature, drawing little directly from the narratives of Scripture. At the very least, they do not draw their major substance from any biblical account as much as from the various forms of argumentation. This point is not likely to be missed within a community that believes the Bible to be credible and God to be loving and reliable.

It is in light of this eventuality that the title of this paper emerged, “An Unconventional Look at Challenges of Theodicy.” Is there a way to look at theodicy that draws its thought and conclusion more directly from some passage (or passages) of Scripture than is seen in the conventional manner? Is there an unconventional way to look a theodicy?

In this paper I propose there is another way, one that draws directly on at least two of the narratives of the Bible, the first the story of Job, long associated with theodicy, the second the experience of Habakkuk. We turn first to Job.

The story of Job is well-known and has long been used as evidence and a point of discussion by those interested in theodicy so there is no reason to relate it here in any detail. The gist of the story is that a righteous man got caught up in the timeless saga of suffering because of things he could not see, things going on behind the scenes. For at least part of his suffering time, Job was an unwitting (and, therefore, grumbling) participant in the drama. Particularly poignant in his story is the interchange between himself and his wife! When told in traditional context, that interchange is said to depict the final and dramatic cost of Job’s faithfulness. It is viewed as testament to a fierce devotion to God that the man would not surrender even if his life’s companion scorned him. There were also his friends (we do well to use the word “friends” advisedly here), who, to borrow words from Gardner C. Taylor, came and “stared into his grief for seven days, and

THOMAS: CHALLENGE OF THEODICY

then spoke too quickly.”¹¹ These words encapsulate a certain wisdom that, when dealing with suffering, particularly that of others, we ought to be not so quick to offer explanations lest we say more than we know. But, rather than looking at the dimensions of the problem, let us focus on the resolution to the sufferings of Job as it appears in the story. How were the issues troubling Job settled in the narrative?

If the progression of the story may be condensed and paraphrased, as the discussion (if we can call it that) between the Almighty and Job progresses, God finally says to Job, “Job, you are such a big and wise man, why don’t you come out here and face me? Come and let me ask you some questions.” And so Job presents himself before the Almighty and God begins to ask him a whole array of questions, questions that Job found himself unable to answer. In this showdown, according to the words of one of my predecessors, the score ended up being God 82, Job 0!

Fascinating is the fact that this interchange resulted in the collapse or evaporation of Job’s wranglings. In the face of the grandeur and love and majesty of God, Job’s troubles and questionings simply vanished. Who can forget his words, found in Job 42:1-6:

Then Job replied to the LORD: “I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted. You asked, ‘Who is this that obscures my counsel without knowledge?’ Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. You said, ‘Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me.’ My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore, I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.”¹²

Before drawing any conclusions from this, let us turn to the experience of the Prophet Habakkuk for it has some interesting parallels. The little book by his name in the Old Testament is remarkable in many ways, but nothing is more remarkable than the directness with which the human prophet confronts God! Even a cursory and initial reading of his writings

¹¹ Transcribed from Gardner C. Taylor’s sermon titled, “Seeing Our Hurts through God’s Eyes.”

¹² Scripture taken from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*, copyright 1973, 1978, 1984, International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

will show that he was not reticent to turn his face heavenward and blurt out accusations:

How long, LORD, must I call for help,
but you do not listen?
Or cry out to you, "Violence!"
but you do not save?
³ Why do you make me look at injustice?
Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?
Destruction and violence are before me;
there is strife, and conflict abounds.
⁴ Therefore the law is paralyzed,
and justice never prevails.
The wicked hem in the righteous,
so that justice is perverted.¹³

Clearly, the prophet is angry here. And he lashes out. And God responds giving an answer that could be summarized thus: "Habakkuk, I am going to do something. I am going to send the Babylonians in to over-run the land and they will put an end to all the injustice!" Of course, this was not the answer the prophet was looking for. It is the equivalent of God saying to us, "I am going to send in the Communist Chinese to over-run your land and they will put an end to the injustice!" So, in consternation, Habakkuk cries out again to God, perhaps using even stronger language. And again, there comes a reply from God at the end of which the prophet's troubles were all resolved. And how did resolution come?

The answer begins with a hint found in Chapter 2:20, where, juxtaposed over against the lampooned capacities of the pagan gods, it is recorded that, "The LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him." There follows chapter 3 which is, arguably, one of the most magnificent chapters in all the Bible, a chapter where God comes out as a Warrior, capable of distressing even nature itself. The language is magnificent and should probably be read here to make the point, but let it suffice that the magnificence of God is again revealed in a powerful way. The effect on the prophet is remarkable. Habakkuk says:

¹³ Quoted from the *New International Version*.

THOMAS: CHALLENGE OF THEODICY

¹⁶ I heard and my heart pounded,
my lips quivered at the sound;
decay crept into my bones,
and my legs trembled.
Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity
to come on the nation invading us.
Then comes a most beautiful confession:

¹⁷ Though the fig tree does not bud
and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails
and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the pen
and no cattle in the stalls,
¹⁸ yet I will rejoice in the LORD,
I will be joyful in God my Savior.

In an agrarian society, this describes disaster! Yet the prophet confesses both trust and joy even in the face of that.

Let it not escape us that in the cases of both Job and Habakkuk, the questions that were so very urgent in their minds, got lost in a moment of worship! When Job and Habakkuk were able to catch a vision of God in all his glory and majesty, the questions of theodicy dissolved into ephemera. They lost their urgency and simply vanished away.

Some reflection on the experiences of Job and Habakkuk bring some interesting thoughts to mind. The first is that the worship of God is a balm for the human soul, even in times of great trouble. Perhaps we should say it is a balm especially in times of great trouble. It seems that for those who already trust in God, resolution to the troubles of suffering could be found by creating or seeking out times of worship. It may be that believers who are suffering need not so much careful argumentation as occasions of worship. A vision of the majesty and glory and power of God is refreshing for it corrects for the parallax of circumstance and we realize our troubles are not the most magnificent things in life.

Secondly, it seems the grandeur and glory of God and their contemplation, remind us of mystery and the power it has. I do not use mystery here as an attempt to evade the problem of theodicy, nor do I use it in some mystical sense, but rather, I use it in hopes of humbling humans in their trumped-up capacity for knowing. So often we think that we can,

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

by careful thought and reason, find the answer to all problems. In truth, human knowledge is very limited and the process of knowing is very frail. We, more often than we think, run into mystery, mystery understood as “a problem that encroaches upon its own data.”¹⁴ It is not hard to run out of capacity to know. In our experience, the solutions quickly get beyond our capacity to know and we ought to recognize that. We are simply too over-confident about what we think we can actually know. The problem known as theodicy certainly participates in this dynamic.

Lastly, the narratives of Job and Habakkuk reveal that our frustration with circumstance is no reason to doubt either the power or goodness of God. In both cases, God was proven both good and kind, able to act in behalf of those who trust Him. These narratives leave no room for the diminution of God’s glory and power. We may conclude that reducing the power and majesty of God, or diminishing His love, are not solutions to the problems that surround theodicy. They are fallacies of human invention for in both these narratives, God clearly acts in the defense of His people. The path to action may be surprising or it may be circuitous, but there is no reason to doubt that God is active and active for the best interests of those who trust in Him. In this, the goodness and faithfulness of God is seen. The conclusion is that calling the goodness of God into question is not a solution to the struggles of theodicy.

An unconventional way of looking at theodicy, then, is to conclude that God is great, and God is good, and our sufferings are part of a bigger picture that we cannot fully analyze or understand. Our best strategy, then, is to worship God and trust Him in spite of the things that trouble us.

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¹⁴ Zacharias, 109.