



To Say Something—About God, Evil, and Suffering

PAUL R. SPONHEIM

Luther Seminary
St. Paul, Minnesota

I. ORIENTATION: THE AUTHORITY OF RELATIONSHIP

FACED WITH THE STARK REALITY OF SUFFERING, CHRISTIANS CAN SAY SOMETHING.¹ They can speak of God, “the fount of every blessing,” for they live in relationship with God. They can speak of the evil that is against God and against the will of God—against the God they know in relationship. Christian faith is about an actual relationship with God, and in that relationship lies the authority, the authorization, to speak words that provide a framework of understanding even for mind-numbing suffering. The God relationship legitimates such orienting, even while it limits this speaking. Thus Christian speaking to suffering will be different from two other responses: (1) the claim to explain (away?) all suffering and to do so with certainty, and (2) the refusal to offer any words of interpretation at all, leaving us mute before and in the reality of suffering.²

This intermediate position derives from the nature of the relationship itself. Elizabeth Johnson has described the relationship as one of “mutual if asymmetrical reciprocity,” adding this:

Insofar as each is directed toward the other with reciprocal interest and intimacy, the relation is mutual. Insofar as the world is dependent on God in a way that God is not on the world, the relation is not strictly symmetrical.³

(continued on page 340)

¹Terence Fretheim and I have taught an interdisciplinary course on this topic for several years, and these brief articles reflect some of the concerns addressed in that course. In our teaching, Professor Fretheim has led the way, and I am much indebted to the depth and theological fruitfulness of his biblical work. In this instance he suggested that I offer a first sketch of the themes to be considered. I appreciate the biblical expression he has added in response. Once again we seek to show the value of interdisciplinary work in speaking of God, evil, and suffering.

²In his book *Naming the Silences: God, Medicine, and the Problem of Suffering* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) Stanley Hauerwas certainly avoids the ditch of overexplaining suffering. I fear he comes perilously close to the second ditch in his critique of theodicy (chapter two) and in seconding the call to take a seat (silently?) on the mourning bench (151). Yet to say (72) that “it just happened” that a child contracted leukemia is surely to say something, not the least by negation. And meaning is given as one locates one’s life in God’s story (67, 112).

³Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 236, 228.

PAUL R. SPONHEIM, *professor of systematic theology, is the author of* *The Pulse of Creation: God and the Transformation of the World* (Fortress, 1999).

Christians find many ways to express this asymmetry, to testify that God is “other.” Only God is eternal; we come into being and pass out of being. And in this post-modern time, even in speaking of the short-lived being of the human we are keenly aware of the limits of our historical location. But the Christian knows the psalmist’s truth that the “wings of the morning” and “the farthest limits of the sea” will not stretch beyond the presence of God (Psalm 139). Theologians may have over-extended themselves in piling up “omni’s” that finally end in the silence of the *via negativa*, but Christians will cling to this: God is truly other than all non-divine being.⁴ It is important to check that descent into the abyss, but remembering God’s otherness will properly keep Christians from claiming to fathom the full reality of God.

Yet by the creative will of God there is, indeed, a genuine relationship of intimacy and mutuality. Nobody has expressed this better than Søren Kierkegaard, whom Barth correctly cited as a witness to the “infinite qualitative difference” between God and the creature. Kierkegaard testifies with comparable strength to the standing of the creature before the Creator:

O wonderful omnipotence and love! A man [*sic*] cannot bear that his “creations” should be something directly over against him; they should be nothing, and therefore he calls them “creations” with contempt. But God, who creates out of nothing, who almightily takes from nothing and says, “Be,” lovingly adds, “Be something even over against me.” Wonderful love, even his omnipotence is under the power of love!... Thus love, which made a man to be something (for omnipotence let him come into being, but love let him come into being over against God), lovingly demands something of him. Now that is the reciprocal relation.⁵

God’s will and desire is for the other; that is clear in creation and clearer still in incarnation.⁶ But many contemporary trinitarian theologians relate this movement all the way back into the inner life of God. Thus Eberhard Jüngel speaks of the overflowing divine love:

In the eternal Son of God, who himself was not created, but comes eternally from

⁴Authors writing in the stream of process thought, while keen to stress the genuine relatedness of God, have not neglected this theme of otherness. Thus Charles Hartshorne has persistently stressed that a *categorical* difference distinguishes God from all other being. See his work with William Reese, *Philosophers Speak of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1953) 7ff. In Whitehead’s magnum opus, *Process and Reality* (corrected edition by David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne [New York: Free Press, 1978]), the otherness is clearly rooted in the “reversal [in God] of the poles” which characterize all being (36). A recent statement is Tyron Inbody’s *The Transforming God: An Interpretation of Suffering and Evil* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), with the theme of ambiguity strengthened (108-110).

⁵Søren Kierkegaard, *Samlede Vaerker*, ed. A. B. Drachmann, J. L. Heiberg, and H. O. Lange, 15 vols. (Oslo: Guldendals, 1901-36) 10:132-133 (translation mine). Cf. *Christian Discourses*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Oxford, 1939) 132-133, where Lowrie adds a note stressing that to exist “for” God is “to exist directly in the face of God.”

⁶I add “desire” to the traditional “will” to incorporate the strong emphasis of theologians such as Catherine LaCugna that God creates “*ex amore, ex condilectio*, that is, out of divine love.” See her *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991) 355. LaCugna recognizes (373, note 67) that “the diffusion of God’s goodness in the creaturely realm must be rooted in freedom, not necessity.” Cf. Paul S. Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988) 71ff.

God the Father, in this Son of God coming *eternally* from God God aims at the man [*sic*] who *temporally* comes from God.⁷

God wills relationship with God's other, and to that end God wills to be known by the creature. This revelation is not tentative or murky; it is decisive and clear. This is at least part of the point being made by all the theologians signing on to "Rahner's rule," that the economic Trinity *is* the immanent Trinity. The relationship is real, also for God. And so the Christian has something to say of God in the face of suffering, for the Christian knows God existentially and essentially.

We are speaking of a living relationship, for God is with us in the flow of events we know as time. Our experience of suffering is also set in that temporal flow, and so we ask questions in the two directions of time. We ask "whence" did this suffering come to me (or to x)? (Why and how did this come to happen?) And we ask "whither" can this go? (What can be done to change this situation?) The Christian, oriented by the relationship with God, is authorized to say something in response to both questions.

II. THE WHENCE OF SUFFERING: DISTINCTIONS

This question bears importantly on the whither of suffering. Frequently one hears complaints that theologians idly or passionately ponder the why and the how of suffering, perhaps even arrogantly positioning themselves to "defend" God. I'm sure mistakes can be made in how we approach this question. But as we set about to "do" something about suffering (the whither), it will matter how it is that we are in the situation we seek to address. There are some formulations of the whence that in fact add to the suffering and may misdirect the sufferer in any attempt to alleviate the situation. At the same time, adequate formulations about the causal agents at work in the world will inform and assist the sufferer as she seeks to move forward in a world where those same agents continue to be at work.

I have written more of God and suffering than of evil. But in addressing the whence of suffering, the Christian may well begin "in the middle" of suffering. Beginning there, particularly at the end of this horrific century of holocausts, one will speak sooner rather than later of moral evil. How shall the Christian speak? Here distinctions of varying sorts will come into play. Paul Ricoeur's study of *The Symbolism of Evil* continues to provide foundational distinctions regarding the whence of moral evil.⁸ Oversimplifying Ricoeur's subtle analysis somewhat, the Christian appropriately asks, "Does the moral evil in the world come from God (the tragic myth), from humans (the Adamic), or from some primordial resistance to God (the creation-conflict or theogonic)?" The central Christian choice, complicated and compromised though it may be, is the Adamic. The famous and infamous

⁷Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World*, trans. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 384.

⁸Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon, 1967).

“free will defense” still provides the best approach. It follows well from what I have already asserted—that God seeks a genuine relationship with the other. Thus freedom for the other is essential and with freedom comes the possibility of moral evil.

Clearly, we are speaking here only about moral evil, not about what happens in the natural world and not about the sheer (metaphysical) conditions of all finite being. And even in speaking of moral evil, there are qualifications to be noted, at least four:

1. While God is responsible for the possibility of moral evil, God does not foreknow the actual coming of that evil. (That fits the general point that in a relationship of freedom there is true temporal contingency of events, evil or good, which are not known in advance.)⁹

2. To locate the origin of moral evil, Adamically, in the misuse of human freedom is not to deny that “the individual does not begin afresh,” but comes into being caught in the cumulative history of sin.¹⁰

3. An Adamic understanding can accommodate a more than human morally evil power as “freedom writ large,” so long as one grants an original goodness to this being and does not slide into saying “the devil made me do it.”¹¹

4. The most important distinction within the causality of moral evil is to recognize that we do not merely act toward ourselves, we act toward each other. Made in the image of a relational God, we are created in and for relationships. We bear on each other, and we can hurt each other. And we do. To root the origin of moral evil strongly in the misuse of freedom is clearly not to embrace an individualistic psychology that would often require us to blame the victim. There is ample place in an Adamic understanding to emphasize the place of compassion.¹²

In introducing these nuances into an Adamic view, we are still within that view. More specifically, we are not switching to a tragic view in which God is responsible for moral evil. God does have some responsibility, to be sure—for creating a world in which freedom can be misused, for sustaining a world in which sinful choices carry effects for the sinner and for victims, for constituting human

⁹This general point is emphasized in the “open view” of God stream of evangelical theology. See *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, by Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), and specifically Hasker’s *God, Time and Knowledge* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1989).

¹⁰This language of “not beginning afresh” I also take from Kierkegaard in his speaking of the individual as “himself and the race” in *The Concept of Anxiety*, ed. and trans. Reider Thomte (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1980) 28, 41.

¹¹Again, it is the Adamic theologian Kierkegaard who offers a succinct statement of this point. See his *The Sickness unto Death*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1980) 42, for the understanding that “the devil is sheer spirit” so that the devil’s despair “is the most absolute defiance.”

¹²I am thinking of Wendy Farley’s eloquent appeal in *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion: A Contemporary Theodicy* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990). In his chapter on “The Cycle of the Myths” Paul Ricoeur suggests ways in which the Adamic myth “reaffirms in varying degrees the essential truths of the other myths” (*Symbolism of Evil*, 309).

temporal continuity in such a way that there can be a cumulative growth in bondage to sin. God's responsibility is not inconsiderable (the only way to say less, while acknowledging the factual basis for these statements, would be to opt for the theogonic). But this is still quite different from saying that God is sending specific sufferings, perhaps as punishment for a moral evil we need to seek out in ourselves or others, or for no reason at all.¹³

In addition to these distinctions within moral evil understood Adamicly, one needs to distinguish moral evil from those sufferings which come to us either as sheer givens for finite creatures as such (metaphysical matters) or those sufferings which derive from our being part of the natural world (natural matters). Douglas John Hall has written helpfully of the first of these, specifying four dimensions of created being: loneliness, limits, temptation, and anxiety.¹⁴ These dimensions seem essential for a being created with freedom for relationship. Similarly one can work back, somewhat anthropocentrically perhaps, to speak of the suffering which comes upon us through our life as beings in nature. One thus asks, "What kind of a universe must there be in order for human freedom to evolve?" Keith Ward answers:

The universe exists in order to bring into being a creative, contingent, free realization of purpose in a communal and evolving personal form of being, related to God as its source, ideal and guiding power. The sub-personal basis of contingent creativity is the factor of randomness, which eliminates determinism but at the same time eliminates absolute control. Where changes are partly random, there must be failures and imbalances as well as fortuitous and productive interactions. The sub-personal basis of rational purposes is the predictable law-likeness of being, which eliminates anarchy but also eliminates continuous providential adjustment of the laws. Where changes are law-governed, there must be particular cases in which general laws are disadvantageous or destructive as well as cases where they provide the basis for constructive planning. The sub-personal basis for a developing community of beings is a plurality of emergent forces, which eliminates monotony but also eliminates complete harmony. Where many individual substances each develop by interaction with each other, conflict and domination are as inevitable as cooperation.¹⁵

I began this discussion of evil with the flash-point of moral evil. It is virtually impossible to deny the reality and efficacy of such evil. But it may fairly be asked whether the sorts of suffering Hall and Ward are identifying should be classified as "evil." The suffering is surely real, but the revolt against the structure of creation is

¹³I am somewhat nervous about the distinction made between "logical" arguments from evil (which assume that theism is incompatible with some known fact about evil) and "evidential" arguments (which do not make that assumption). The distinction seems to open the door to compromising either the unqualified love of God or the human experience of moral evil. See *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Daniel Howard Snyder (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University, 1996).

¹⁴Douglas John Hall, *God and Human Suffering: An Exercise in the Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986) 53-67.

¹⁵Keith Ward, *Rational Theology and the Creativity of God* (New York: Pilgrim, 1982) 196. This is not to say that God does not act within nature; see Ward's *Divine Action* (London: Collins, 1990).

absent.¹⁶ To use the same evaluative term to refer to these very different sufferings seems to be to dull the edge of necessary distinctions. Moreover, there is yet another kind of suffering which does not fit within the frame of evil. Hall speaks of the suffering Christians know through participation in the transforming work of God.¹⁷ We might speak of it as sanctification, or better as vocational suffering in that we are called back and ahead into our role as creatures.¹⁸

We are called ahead, even as we suffer. With these distinctions regarding the whence in place, we ask, "Whither can we move?"

III. THE WHITHER OF SUFFERING: DIRECTIONS

Relying on the previous sections, I will risk here a staccato set of directions for the saying of something.

1. We can teach the faith in such ways that we do not place on people the added burden of figuring out secret (even to them) sins or wondering when a violent God answerable to nobody and nothing will visit them again.¹⁹ Perhaps one will speak slowly and softly in an immediate moment of loss, but the teaching of the faith over the long haul will function as preparation and support for the few words one does manage to mutter. Tex Sample found it so:

When our older son, Steve, was killed on his motorcycle, we clearly went through the hardest time of our lives, yet I remember both the surprise and the gratitude I felt to discover that my faith was not a house of cards and did not collapse in the face of a loss I experienced as amputational. I knew it was an accident....I did not wonder what I or someone else had done wrong or what was the source of the judgment that led to such tragedy.²⁰

2. We can hope and believe that God is at work for good within the weave of causes that is the world. We can remind ourselves and others of how contemporary scientific studies represent an invitation to such hope and faith in their recognition of indeterminacy.²¹ We can take up the call to intercessory prayer, believing that

¹⁶I am reminded of John Hick's distinction between pain and suffering in *Evil and the God of Love*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1978) 292-94. In her remarkable book, *The Body in Pain* (New York: Oxford University, 1985), Elaine Scarry focuses on torture and war as phenomena where the pain involves "the making and unmaking of the world" (her subtitle).

¹⁷Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, chapter five.

¹⁸I have discussed this in my forthcoming book, *The Pulse of Creation: God and the Transformation of the World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999).

¹⁹Dorothee Soelle's treatment of Christian masochism and sadism remains highly insightful for me, not the least as she addresses doctrines of the atonement. See her *Suffering*, trans. Everett R. Kalin (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).

²⁰Tex Sample, *U.S. Lifestyles and Mainline Churches* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990) 84.

²¹See the aforementioned detailed study, *Divine Action*, by Keith Ward. Many of John Polkinghorne's books are helpful at this point. His fullest statement may be his Gifford lectures, *The Faith of a Physicist: Reflections of a Bottom-Up Thinker* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1994). A helpful recent publication is *Chaos and Complexity: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action*, ed. Robert John Russell, Nancey Murphy, and Arthur R. Peacocke (Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory, 1995).

“our prayers actually make a difference to what God can do.”²² We can hope, believe, and so pray without being able to sort out definitively the factors of human will, the integrity of the causal process, and divine action.

3. We can say something by acting, by responding to the abundant biblical call to care for the suffering, indeed, to love the enemy. We can resist a logic of disjunction that proposes that the sure way to praise God is to curse humankind. We can resist what Sharon Welch has called the “ethic of control,” a concern with final, perfect solutions that paralyzes finite ameliorative action.²³ We can act to better the situation of the sufferer.

4. We can look to the end, believing God will establish a new heaven and a new earth. As to where we will be, we may be less certain. But we can learn and use the prayer, “I believe, help Thou my unbelief.” And we can take some comfort from what we already do witness, the remarkable capacity of God to save what seems to us sheer wreckage.

These things we can say and do. Is it enough? Is the “something we can say” solid enough and sure enough? As we follow whither the directions would lead us, we can make one further distinction—a rather fundamental one—between God and us. We can hear the promise that something is simply settled in God, so that nothing can separate us from God’s love. And as for us, perhaps in relationship we know what we need to know with a certainty fit for freedom. ⊕

²²This phrasing is Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki’s in *In God’s Presence: Theological Reflections on Prayer* (St. Louis: Chalice, 1996) 49. Cf. Terence Fretheim’s “Prayer in the Old Testament: Creating Space in the World for God,” in *A Primer on Prayer*, ed. Paul R. Sponheim (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 51-62.

²³Sharon D. Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).