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Do Christians Love God for Naught? Job and the Possibility of "Disinterested" Faith

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Recently, I gave a presentation to an adult Sunday school class about the "faith" of the so-called New Atheists. My undergraduate students enjoy reading snippets from these polemical writers as I introduce the broader history of Christian apologetics and the un/reasonableness of religious faith. Taking the New Atheists seriously turned out to be a harder sell on Sunday morning. I tried to claim that once you pressed beyond their caricatures of violent religion, their reductionist readings of Scripture, and the false dichotomies they pose between fact and belief, these authors do raise some objections about religion that churchgoers should take to heart. Christopher Hitchens, in particular, gets to the important issue quickly; he insists that more deleterious to religious faith than its unfounded claims is the false consolation that it offers. For him, the most devastating critique of religion is simply that it is man-made, which means it is made to answer to human need, which means that it is inherently self-interested, and thus suspect, and thus false.[1]

I wanted to show how the best atheist critiques today are not unlike the way Jesus responds to Pharisaic duplicity, or how Paul (or Luther) describes smug

[1]Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007) 3–11.

The question of whether Job serves God for naught comes back to haunt all Christians. Do we serve God for the rewards (that is, for our sake) or do we serve God for "nothing" (that is, for the sake of God and the other). Can we worship God truly—that is, in Meister Eckhart's phrase, without a why or a wherefore?

self-justification, or how James (or Bonhoeffer) critiques cheap grace. But with the education hour wrapping up, I only had time to suggest that we find a similar critique of self-serving faith already in the book of Job. After Yahweh brags about his servant Job, Satan questions the true motivation for Job's piety: "Does Job fear God for nothing?" How do we know Job doesn't fear God for the kickbacks involved—a fence around his house, productivity in work, increasing possessions (Job 1:8–10)? Such is the question around which the entire book of Job turns, and with it, many prophetic, self-critical strands of the first and second Testaments.

My last-minute invocation of Job to defend religious critiques was too late and too brief. (It didn't help that the pivotal question in Job is put in the mouth of Satan; the New Atheists alone might have been easier to defend!) In the present essay, I want to work from the other, more intuitive end. My claim is that at the heart of the book of Job lies an incisive critique of a "barter conception of religion"[2] or instrumental faith—that is, any faith "that reduces God to a means or instrument for achieving our own human purposes with professedly divine power and sanction."[3] I believe that the issue of whether faith is instrumental and self-serving or motivated by the love of God alone, and so "disinterested," is as central (and difficult) as the question about why innocent people suffer (although the two are also inextricable, as we shall see). Indeed, reading Job as a treatise on the question of innocent suffering without considering its critique of self-serving faith quickly reaches certain dead ends. That may be part of the point; certainly, any airtight defense of God in light of innocent suffering gets thoroughly deconstructed in Job. Still, can't we—or shouldn't we—conclude more than that "Job has nothing to say to the puzzle of suffering?"[4] By refocusing the issue on whether disinterested faith is possible, I believe that Job can teach us something about proper—if often painful—faith and love toward God.

Deconstructing Theodicy

A number of theologians have recently suggested that *theodicy*—that is, the defense or justification (*dike*) of God (*theos*) or, more specifically, of God's omnipotence and omnibenevolence in light of profligate suffering—entails a category mistake, at best, and underwrites atheism, at worst. These critics observe that, by repeating David Hume's conundrum as to how suffering is compatible with a God's goodness and power, theodicists pose only a logical puzzle, the solution to which comes by clarifying propositions. As with any problem, the terms of the question thus dictate the scope and tenor of the response. In the case of theodicy, the problem of suffering becomes (only) a problem of conception, and the "solu-

[2]Gustavo Gutiérrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987) 1.

[3]Merold Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith: The Religious Uses of Modern Atheism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 6.

[4]David Burrell, *Deconstructing Theodicy: Why Job Has Nothing to Say to the Puzzle of Suffering* (Grand Rapid: Brazos, 2008).

tion" entails abstract philosophical speculation about a detached "deity." Theologians interested in preserving the particularity of Christian belief and practice are doubly offended. Not only are they concerned that speculative solutions to suffering bypass more pastoral responses; they also insist that the God defended has nothing of the character of the God disclosed in Scripture and preaching. Indeed, the God of the theodicists is one capable of some abstract attributes but nothing like character at all. "He" remains simultaneously too abstract and overly narrow—the theoretical God of a theoretical problem. And here's where the odd conclusion arises that defending God's goodness and power amounts to atheism.[5] The difference between belief and disbelief in such a God is only a hair's breadth compared to the difference between a deistic God so coolly defended and the God disclosed in Scripture, hymn, prayer, and sermon.

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It is still common to read Job as having a theodicy, usually by appealing to Job's pious patience and to the final reward it wins. However, such interpretations have the peculiar liability of skipping from the opening scene to the final epilogue (both written in prose), all but disregarding the long poetic exchanges that comprise the bulk of Job. There one notes that it is the friends (those "sorry comforters"—16:2 NASB) and not Job who all too patiently present explanations for why Job suffers. Eliphaz promptly gives the most prevalent reason—suffering is punishment for sin: "Who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the upright cut off?" (4:7). Although the friends appeal to firsthand experience when they repeatedly assert that everyone gets what they sow (4:8; 5:27), we quickly learn that their theories are fortified by *not* considering the reality of Job's suffering. They are theodicists in the narrowest and worst sense: hypocritically neglecting Job's suffering even as they tell the victim how to solve his problem. We glimpse modern versions of their answers every time a religious ideologue explains the devastation of a hurricane, for example, as divine comeuppance for same-sex relations or, at the other political extreme, as punishment by Mother Earth for America's conspicuous consumption.[6]

But it is important to note that divine retribution is not the only explanation for suffering being deconstructed in Job. Divine pedagogy, or what John Hick pop-

[5]Stanley Hauerwas, *Naming the Silences: God, Medicine, and the Problem of Suffering* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 39–58.

[6]Deborah Caldwell, "Did God Send the Hurricane?" at *Beliefnet*, http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/2005/09/Did-God-Send-The-Hurricane.aspx (accessed August 10, 2011).

ularized as the soul-making theodicy,[7] is proposed already in Eliphaz's first speech (5:17–19) and is emphasized by Elihu (33:19–33; 36:5–15). Here, Job's suffering is not explained as just deserts for some hidden sin but as the adversity by which God "opens [Job's] ear" (36:15). In other words, suffering may be God's device for teaching humanity how to become spiritually mature and virtuous—how to make a "soul." While this response does partly anticipate God's own response to Job, as an *explanation* for why Job suffers it is just as theoretical, impervious, and suspicious as divine retribution. Both theodicies set the immediate experience of meaningless, unjust suffering into a wider context (past sin or future vindication) that promises to explain the present pain and that often risks explaining it away.

Suspecting Theodicy

When Job accuses the friends of being "worthless physicians" who "whitewash with lies" (13:4) and whose "maxims are proverbs of ashes" (13:12), he is not arguing against any one explanation that they offer but with the *explanatory function* of theodicy itself. If the more crass theory of retribution alone constituted the utilitarian religion that the book critiques, then divine pedagogy or appeal to an afterlife or any other theodicy would be better. But when God finally declares that it is Job—not his friends—who have spoken rightly (42:7–8), he calls into question *any* explanation, especially those that come at second hand and in the guise of pastoral care. What Job wants is not more comprehensive or believable explanations for his ordeal but a word (or silence!—13:5) that *does* something other than sanction the way things are. Job finds that alternative discourse in lament. Rather than speak *for* God, as if God were absent and in need of such justifications, Job increasingly speaks *to* God, demanding that God show up and account for the suffering of the innocent (7:17–21; 10:1–22; 13:20–28; 30:20–26). Job alone has spoken rightly: exclamation is preferred over explanation, protest over platitudes, angry accusation to God's face over placid defense of an absent deity.

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This last point is particularly important if we are to understand what drives the central conflict of Job and connects it to the opening question: "Does Job fear God for nothing?"(1:9). On my reading, the central conflict in Job is not between contending theodicies, but between any and all theodicies as they work to legitimize suffering versus the different way that lament operates. Even those who describe theodicy from a neutral, sociological point of view note how it serves to legitimize institutional orders by explaining, through a host of acculturated assumptions, why the poor and others who suffer have their lot while the rich and

[7]John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Harper, 1977) 253–261.

autonomous have theirs.[8] The friends are invested in maintaining the sacred order by which they benefit. Theodicy, the justification of God, often gives way to anthropodicy, the justification of ourselves.[9]

It might be helpful here to distinguish two different ways that religious belief can be critiqued. The most common and least interesting (especially among the New Atheists) is a form of skepticism, where the atheist objects to belief because of lack of evidence. The other, more important objection is by way of suspicion. Here, the questions are these: How does faith function? What are the real "operative motives" behind such faith? Who benefits?[10] Such are the questions that the famous "masters of suspicion" (Marx, Nietzsche, Freud—and Barth, too) have laid on the doorstep of the faithful and that the book of Job anticipates through the opening heavenly wager. What I have been arguing is that the explanations of suffering proffered by Job's "sorry comforters" should elicit not only our skepticism but also our suspicion. We should join Job in suspecting that the friends' defense of God actually works to defend their own comfortable lives. But if we are rightfully dubious about the motives and benefits of the friends' faith, what about that of Job? Is his faith any more disinterested?

Does Job Fear God for Naught?

So far, I have tried to indicate that the book of Job questions the defenses of God's power and goodness not because they don't work or are unconvincing, but rather because they work all too well. Actually, the friends may be comforting themselves by legitimating a worldview where "blessings" (read: rewards) come to those who deserve them. It is not simply the most tactless explanation of suffering as direct punishment for sin that exposes this barter conception of religion. Rather, any and every explanation for suffering—when done at second hand and with an aim at solving the "riddle" of suffering—risks justifying the ways of humans to God, rather than vice versa.[11]

But does Job fare better? Yes and no. On the one hand, his persistent self-defense suggests only a more patent, forthright form of self-justification: "I hold fast my righteousness, and will not let it go" (27:6). God will later accuse him of seeking to justify himself by accusing God (40:8). While I'm not sure I agree with a former student when she described Job as a "whiner," it's true that, for all his disagreement with the friends about whether he has done something to deserve his lot, Job, at the start, implicitly affirms their idea that only the guilty *should* suffer. He simply insists that he's the exception to the rule, and so uses the very barter conception of religion to defend his own innocence.

On the other hand, if we look at how Job's pleas and responses develop over

[8]Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor, 1990) 53–59.

[9]Hauerwas, *Naming the Silences*, 59–64.

[10]Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, 10–17, 25–29.

[11]See John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book I, line 26.

the course of the book, we see evident growth away from self-seeking religion and toward love of God "for nothing." In other words, Satan's question is answered only as Job gradually cultivates empathy for other sufferers and the possibility for true worship of God. Gradually, his own self-protective motivations crack open toward real empathy and gratitude.

In his *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, Gustavo Gutiérrez writes of two pivotal transformations that Job undergoes in this regard. The first is Job's gradual shift from defending his own innocence to defending all who suffer.[12] Eliphaz speculates that Job is being punished for his lack of regard for the poor, naked, indentured, and widowed (22:5–11). Job counters that throughout his life he has fathered the needy, welcomed the stranger, heartened the widow, and (a final retort to his friends?) comforted those who mourn (29:12–25). At first glance, this is but another instance of third person speculation versus Job's testimony. On closer inspection, it is clear that Job's "innocence" has become the more active striving for social justice rather than the mere absence of willful sin.[13] Moreover, Job traces the suffering he shares with the poor not directly to God's injustice but to human predators and unjust social systems (chap. 24). God is not off the hook for permitting such exploitation, as Job still insists. But note here how his accusations against God and human injustice are motivated not by narrow self-defense but by empathic solidarity with the poor and oppressed. As his field of vision widens, Job comes closer to disinterested faith.

Yet even Gutiérrez, father of liberation theology, with all his emphasis on systemic injustice and solidarity with the oppressed, understands that this first transformation cannot stand on its own. Job's emerging empathy needs to be circumscribed and completed by a new, unexpected display of disinterested love. And so, God speaks. In the words of Gutiérrez: "emphasis on the practice of justice and on solidarity with the poor must never become an obsession and prevent our seeing that this commitment reveals its value and ultimate meaning only within the vast and mysterious horizon of God's gratuitous love."[14] The second transformation is essential. God breaks in from the whirlwind, modeling and eliciting "unjustified" attention and love.

The Why of Whirlwinds and Worship

Søren Kierkegaard is among those concerned to prevent any explanation of faith (theodicy included) from becoming more important than the faith being explained. Pondering, for example, why people believe, Kierkegaard responds: "Well, there is no 'why'; so it is indeed lunacy….There is no 'why,' because there is an infinite 'why.'"[15] Likewise, God's response to Job from the whirlwind provides no sure

[12]Gutiérrez, *On Job*, 31–49.

[13]Ibid., 39–43.

[14]Ibid., 96, 129 note 4.

[15]Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991) 120.

answer to Job's "Why?" and yet may still offer an evocative response—an "infinite why." If, for example, we assume that Job most wants and needs a reason for his suffering, then God's speech leaves him and us wanting. No why is given or received. If, however, we assume that God's wager and Job's quest work to purify the motives for faith, then God's revelation comprises something like a mysterious, infinite why that founds and fuels a faith past all calculation.

God responds to Job's questions about why he and others suffer with seventy-some questions of his own. He begins by inquiring into where Job was when the foundation of the world was laid (38:4) and ends by asking whether Job thinks he's able to catch Leviathan, the ancient sea monster, with a fishhook and parade it around like a pet (41:1–5). Every question is rhetorical, of course. They are meant to remind Job of all he cannot know and control. When God first demands that Job reply, the latter only covers his mouth and admits to (and maybe sulks in) his inability to do so. But Job's second response is different. Famously, he admits that he has uttered what he did not understand but is also satisfied with having seen God face to face. He then "repent[s] in dust and ashes" (42:3–6).

Such repentance shouldn't suggest that Job finally "'fesses up" to some hitherto undisclosed sin. It probably means that his stance toward God "turns around" as his lament gives way to wonder and hope; the Hebrew *naham* even allows that it is the "dust and ashes," symbolic of his near despair, that he is now abandoning.[16] At any rate, Job links that transformation with the fact that, whereas he had once known of God "by the hearing of the ear," he now sees God with his eyes (42:5). But what does he see in God? How has it turned him so?

Job sees God's power, to be sure, and many of us remain dissatisfied with that as a response to his cries.[17] But he also comes to know a God whose cosmic justice is less predictable, calculable, and anthropocentric than Job had assumed. Whereas Job wants justice on a scale he can know (and the friends think that they have it and know it), God makes rain fall in places where no one lives (38:25–27). God is the God of wild oxen and hawks and monster hippopotamuses, none of which Job controls and all of which God relishes. Admittedly, God's tone can sound derisive and taxing: "Do you know the ordinances of the heavens? Can you establish their rule on the earth?" (38:33). But it is also magnanimous, playful, and teasing: Do you *really* want a wild ox sleeping beside you? (39:9). Could *you* have thought up something as strange as an ostrich? (39:13–18).This is a God who takes special delight in all that is superfluous and useless by human standards. In other words, this is a God of freedom and grace—a God whose gratuitous favor will offend all who keep score while surprising those who, like Job, can learn to partake in it.

Ecologists find in God's speech a radical broadening of the horizon of our moral worldview. Whereas Job earlier learned to join the poor and oppressed to better discern the ways of God, here he learns that God's free grace sustains the

[16]Gutiérrez, *On Job*, 86–87.

[17]Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering*, trans. Everett R. Kalin (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 109–119.

whole creation, and that that creation needs our humble wonder as much as our resourcefulness. All are called to care and attention beyond all utilitarian calculation.[18] Christians thus join environmentalists in learning about nonhuman justice. They join Hindu and Buddhist readers of the Bhagavad Gita in learning to act without attachment to the fruit of their actions. They might even adopt as their own a prayer attributed to Rabia al-Adawiyya, an eighth-century Sufi Muslim: "O God, if I worship Thee in fear of Hell, burn me in Hell; and if I worship Thee in hope of Paradise, exclude me from Paradise; but if I worship Thee for Thine own sake, withhold not Thine everlasting beauty."[19] Christians could even join a/theistic Jewish thinker Emmanuel Levinas in using the term liturgy (*leitourgia*) for whenever one's expectations for reciprocity are interrupted long enough to respond in absolute gratitude and compassion to the vulnerable face of the Other.[20]

Christian worship is both practice in and the "payoff" of such disinterested love. Worship, like funny ostriches or the desert rain and the God who delights in them, is not a means to some other end, including an eternal reward. Rather, as Meister Eckhart says of our relationship with God, worship is without a why or wherefore.[21] At last, then, Job's faith becomes *zwechlos aber doch sinnvoll*, pointless but significant. God *wins* the heavenly wager in a strong sense, not by rightly predicting the authenticity of Job's faith but by eliciting fidelity beyond all calculation—precisely because it is just this that God displays. In the end, disinterested faith is not something Job *has* as such, even as a human capacity. His faith remains a gift, the response of gratitude to a gratuitous God, made manifest in love and worship. As readers of Job, we too are called to purify our faith by asking how we benefit from it and whether we believe in order to secure what we think we deserve. But we, like Job, also trust that self-justification and self-suspicion alike get interrupted by an unjustifiable, gratuitous God, and that faith might just become our useless, grateful wonder at that fact. ⊕

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[18]Norman Wirzba, *The Paradise of God: Renewing Religion in an Ecological Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) 41–47. Compare Bill McKibben, *The Comforting Whirlwind: God, Job, and the Scale of Creation* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 2005).

[19]The prayer is found frequently on the Internet; see, for example, http://www.enotes.com/middle-ages-biographies/al-adawiyya-rabia (accessed August 10, 2011).

[20]Emmanuel Levinas, "The Trace of the Other," in *Deconstruction in Context*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986) 347–350. Dirk Lange first alerted me to Levinas's use of *leitourgia*. See his *Trauma Recalled: Liturgy, Disruption, and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010) 199–200 note 32.

[21]See, for example, Reiner Schürmann, *Meister Eckhart: Mystic and Philosopher* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978) 63–64; Frank Tobin, *Meister Eckhart: Thought and Language* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986) 122–124.