

Introduction: What is Theodicy and Theodical Spirituality?

Lenten Soup Supper Series at Christ Episcopal Church Eureka

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Opening story: Contemplating Protest Prayer on the River Jordan

Theodicy

-The question of suffering was posed more than 2000 years ago by the Greek philosopher Epicurus: ***How do we reconcile an all-loving and all-powerful God with a world of suffering?***

-The theological term for these attempts to defend God is ***theodicy*** (coined by 18th century German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz)

- Θεός (*Theos*) and δίκη (*dike*): *Theos* is translated "God" and *dikē* can be translated as either "trial" or "judgement." Thus, theodicy literally means "justifying God."

-Although various theologians offer a panoply of diverse and creative solutions to the problem of suffering, most are simply "solving" the problem of suffering by simply removing a key point to Epicurus' trilemma. The problem of suffering is solved if we can remove either the reality of suffering or the love of God or the omnipotence of God.

-Remove the omnipotence of God?

-***Process theologians***: God is a process and evolving and is therefore not perfect

-***ancient (and modern) pagans***: "the gods must be crazy"

-***Rabbi Harold Kushner***, author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*

-Remove the benevolence of God?

- ***Carl Jung***: *Answer to Job*

-***Dystheism***: bad god

-Remove the reality of evil and suffering?

-***Buddhists***: all is illusion

-***Christian Scientists***: Mary Baker Eddy

-***Gnostic dualists***: Spirit is good / flesh is bad / God of Old Testament is evil

I am open to these ways of thinking and can even find them poetic, beautiful and refreshing, but I hesitate to dismiss a basic and foundational understanding of God that is held by most Christians today and has been held by most Christians throughout history.

For our purposes, we will remain committed to dealing with the problem of suffering while wholly affirming the same realities that are affirmed by the majority of Jews and Christians: evil/suffering, divine omnipotence and divine benevolence.

I am drawn to those in the tradition who have wrestled with this trilemma and brought their “wrestlings” to God in prayer. I call this prayerful wrestling *theodical spirituality*...

A Brief Survey of Christian Theodical Spirituality

- *JOB: THE BOOK OF JOB*
 - o *THE PATRON SAINT OF PROTEST PRAYER*

- *AUGUSTINE (354 – 430 AD): CONFESSIONS*
 - o *INTIMACY IN CONFESSIONS OF FRUSTRATION*

- *BOETHIUS (480 – 524 AD): THE CONSOLATION OF PHILOSOPHY*
 - o *THE CONSOLATION OF PRESENCE*

- *JULIAN OF NORWICH (1342 – 1416): SHOWINGS*
 - o *RICH REVELATIONS OF LOVE*

- *FYODOR DOSTOYEVSKY (1821 – 1881): THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV*
 - o *KISSING THE INQUISITOR*

- *C. S. LEWIS (1898 – 1963): A GRIEF OBSERVED*
 - o *A COMPASSIONATE GAZE OBSERVED*

The Theodical Spirituality of the Fourth Gospel

-Margaret Davies (author of *Rhetoric and Reference in the Fourth Gospel*) calls John a “theodicy” but never interrogates the text with the question of suffering

-Robert Kysar (author of *John, The Maverick Gospel*) does bring the question of suffering to bear on the text and initially finds John’s answer in what he calls “limited dualism” (evil and suffering are powerful forces at war with the slightly more powerful forces of divine goodness and life) / What’s the potential problem with dualisms?

-Towards the end of his career, Kysar saw a more radical hope in the Fourth Gospel’s ambiguities and their potential to collapse the Gospel’s dualisms and dichotomies...

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-Remove the omnipotence of God?

-Process theologians: based on the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead (mathematician) and developed by theologians Charles Hartshorne and John B. Cobb / Process Theodicy (Theodicy: defense of God) / God is a process and evolving and is therefore not perfect / God is like an imperfect parent, making mistakes with his children / God is limited by time / reacts to events / The universe is an adventure for God as it is for us

-Gnostic dualists: Spirit is good / flesh is bad / God of Old Testament is evil demiurge and Jesus comes to show us God's true spiritual nature / Jesus comes to separate us from our bodies / What aspects of John might lend themselves to this kind of an interpretation? The first commentary we have of John was written by a Gnostic (Heracleon, a student of Valentinus [100s])

-ancient (and modern) pagans: "the gods must be crazy" the gods get in fights with one another / get jealous / sleep around / play tricks on people and ultimately they are fairly limited / they are far from the omnipotent, immutable God of classic theism

-Rabbi Harold Kushner, author of the best-selling and pastoral book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*.

His three-old son was diagnosed with a fatal disease (progeria / rapid aging) and he began wrestling with this question / he basically says "Things happen in life that God has nothing to do with, and there is a way to find peace in accepting this."

This book has comforted thousands of people, but it still solves the problem by removing God's omnipotence.

The love of God is challenged by psychoanalyst Carl Jung, especially in his provocative *Answer to Job*,

Richard Swinburne / God causes suffering to give us opportunity to be courageous to be responsible

and the reality of suffering is dismissed by Christian Scientists as well as Buddhists.

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I am drawn to those in the tradition who have wrestled with these trilemma and brought their wrestlings to God in prayer. I call this “protest against God.” It’s a protest theodicy.

In this Lenten study, we will see how the Gospel of John offers a potentially transformative response to the question of suffering and the human compulsion to blame. The disciples’ question in John 9:2 (“Who sinned, this or his parents, that he was born blind?”) invites the reader to bring his or her own question of suffering to the Johannine Jesus, whose response continues into the healing narrative (9:3-7), the interrogation narrative (9:8-41), and the Good Shepherd discourse (10:1-21). The Gospel does not offer a theodicy but rather a *theodical spirituality*, an experience of praying the question of suffering and remaining open to a divine response. Jesus’s response consists of three sets of symbols that each include two supporting dichotomous symbols (day/night, vision/blindness, sheep/wolf) and a core symbol (light, judge, shepherd) that subverts the dichotomy. Jesus’s response reveals the scapegoat mechanism in which an innocent victim is blamed by violent victimizers. However, rather than blaming the victimizers, Jesus continues to engage with the characters who appear to be villains. In the Good Shepherd discourse, I argue that the reader is invited to identify with the symbol of the wolf and thus bring his or her compulsion to blame to the Good Shepherd. By responding to the human compulsion to blame with self-giving love and forgiveness, the Good Shepherd potentially disarms and transforms the reader. Just as the light of the world subverts the dichotomy of day and night by transforming them into one continuous day so too does the Good Shepherd subvert the dichotomy of the sheep and wolf by welcoming them both as members of his beloved flock. In this way, the reader is invited to bring to the Johannine Jesus

his or her own violence, resentment and wolfish rage regarding the question of suffering and to experience the theodical spirituality of the Fourth Gospel.

Feb 20th: Introduction: What is Theodicy and Theodical Spirituality?

Feb 27th: Fruitful Ways of Reading the Gospel of John

March 6th: Blaming the Victim: Day, Night and Light (John 9:1-5)

March 13th: Blaming the Victimizer: Vision, Blindness, and the Judge (John 9:6-41)

March 20th: Blaming God: The Sheep, the Wolf, and the Good Shepherd (John 10:1-21)

March 27th: Conclusion: Claiming and Reclaiming Christian Theodical Prayer