Evil and the limits of theology

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How ought evil to be dealt with in Christian theology? In what follows I will approach this question by reflecting on what is arguably a different intellectual tradition-- the production of theodicies-- and on the relationship between theology and this other tradition. What I shall try to show is that Christian theology ought *neither* construct theodicies, *nor* ignore the kinds of problem theodicies try to address. It ought instead to acknowledge itself to be faced with questions it cannot answer, and to be committed to affirming things it cannot make sense of.[1]

In the tradition of constructing theodicies, as it can be found for instance in contemporary texts of philosophy of religion, one sets out a few propositions—that God is omnipotent and omniscient, that God is good, and that there is evil in the world—and asks how these propositions can be reconciled. One has an easily grasped conundrum, and one that presents itself as of central importance to almost any kind of religious believer. It is pedagogically useful problem as well: a simply described, intellectually tidy puzzle to present to students, a puzzle to which one can offer competing answers, or, more rarely in practice if not in theory, from which one can mount an argument for the non-existence of God.

It is not hard to argue, as we shall see below, that this pattern of enquiry as found in philosophy of religion texts and other such places is a distinctive product of the Enlightenment rather than a natural continuation of any kind of theological tradition, nor is it hard to detect in this genre of discussions of God and evil a number of problematic features, features which have been analysed forcefully by authors such as Kenneth Surin and Terrence

[1] I am grateful to Isabel Wollaston and Phillip Goodchild, who have commented on earlier drafts of this paper.

Tilley. This still leaves open the question, however, of how a Christian theologian, recognizing both the Enlightenment derivation of theodicies, and the problems they contain, ought to respond to them. One possibility—which Surin and Tilley in their different ways have followed-- is simply to refuse the whole issue which theodicies raise, to change the subject, to insist that Christians simply think and talk about evil in a different way. One can, in other words, deem the question the theodicists ask to be an illegitimate one. This is not, however, the only option, and I shall try to show that it is an unduly drastic response. Another possibility is to accept the question the theodicists raise—or rather to accept that families of questions like this do, legitimately, arise within and around Christian thinking—without following the philosophers of religion in attempting any *answers* to such questions. Even, then, if it is right to view the tradition of theodicy-making as something like a foreign body with respect to Christian theology, it may be a foreign body from which theology can learn, a foreign body which may help theology to define its own nature, and explore its own limits.

This is of course an abstract way to approach a discussion of evil. I do not begin with a discussion of the 11th of September, U.S. militarism,trade injustice, human trafficing or any other contemporary horror, but turn my attention instead directly to the question of how one academic mode of discourse relates itself to another. Discussing evil is perhaps always a dangerous thing to do as an academic theologian; the accusation of fiddling while Rome burns, or indeed of actually colluding with evil in some way or another, is never far away. And yet there are things which can be said in defense of a discussion of the rather abstract question of the relationship between theology and theodicy. First, the question of theodicy has a tremendous grip on the minds of students and of many others with any (or perhaps even no) interest in theology. Undergraduates, for instance, are often very taken with the free will defense. Many of them judge theological proposals in other areas by the degree to which

these support, or fail to support, this answer to the problem of evil: if one puts to them some proposition concerning sin or grace or the nature of God's relationship to creation, that is to say, they may well reject it if they deem it to undermine free will and therefore the free will defence. So to think through theodicy—or rather the appropriate theological response to theodicy-- is at least pedagogically important. Secondly, although the position which I will be proposing is ultimately not particularly gratifying on a practical or pastoral level—that there are legitimate questions to which we have no legitimate answers—it is better than either of the alternatives, better, that is, than either offering the wrong kind of answer or than using a kind of theological intimidation towards people who ask the question.

In what follows, then, I will say a little more what I mean by theodicies, review a number of reasons why they ought to be avoided (some of the reasons are those laid out by Surin and Tilley, others my own), and finally turn to the question of where this leaves theology. There is, it should be noted, already available a very common answer to the question of what theology ought to do if not engage in theodicy, namely that it ought instead to proclaim the suffering of God. Almost as appealing as the free will theodicy seems to be with students, so the notion of the suffering of God is to professional theologians. In the contemporary theological world, that is to say, if one finds a theologian maintaining that Christian theology ought not construct theodicies, one can have a strong expectation that the next sentence or paragraph will contain something about the suffering of God. This is a route that will not be followed here, however, for reasons to be sketched below. The question to be asked, then, is what should one do if one *neither* aims to construct theodicies *nor* thinks that an appeal to God's suffering is helpful.

I

A classic articulation of the 'problem of evil' is put by David Hume into the mouth of Philo in Part X of *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*:

> Is he [God] 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]

Posing this or a closely related problem, developing answers to it, discussing and disecting other people's answers, are staples of the trade of philosophy of religion—the so-called problem of evil comes second only perhaps to the study of proofs of the existence of God as a centrepiece of courses and textbooks in the subject. Many of those who have proposed the most influential theodicies in recent decades—Hick, Plantinga, Swinburne—are those who have been the most influential philosophers of religion.[3]

Although contemporary philosophers of religion sometimes point back to various earlier figures or themes in the tradition—Hick famously discusses Augustinian and Irenaean theodicies, for instance— there are a number of reasons for considering what they do as in fact a practice shaped primarily by the Enlightenment. Most obviously, the God whose compatibility with evil they discuss is presented as an abstract entity with a number of characteristics, a God who can be described without reference to any particular narratives, without any discussion of Incarnation, Christology, Trinity. It is, in other words, theistic belief in general whose coherence they are exploring or defending; Christianity is generally seen as one of the things you can get by adding a few supplementary beliefs to the basic

[2] Philo describes these as 'Epicurus' old questions'.

[3] There are a number of distinctions that can be made, both in the way 'the problem of evil' is presented and in the kinds of solutions attempted. The problem can be set up as a logical one (is the claim that God is perfectly good, omniscient and omnipotent logically compatible with the existence of evil) or as an evidential one (does the existence of a large quantity of pointless evil count as *evidence* against belief in God, rendering the proposition that God exists less probable). The problem can furthermore be presented atheistically (as something which counts either decisively or significantly against belief in God) or aporetically (as a puzzle to be pondered by believers). Those who attempt answers, finally, can try to give an account of God and the world that genuinely explains the existence of evil, or more modestly, can offer arguments to the effect that evil does not rule out or render improbable the existence of God. In Plantinga's presentation, only the former are properly called theodicies: the latter, which he engages in, are 'defences'. I am for the most part using the term theodicy in a broader sense, to cover all attempted answers to the so-called problem of evil. C.f. the Introduction of Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Merihew Adams, eds., *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) for a fuller discussion of some of the distinctions I have mentioned. For the most part such distinctions will not be central to this discussion. It might be supposed that the kind of defence Plantinga develops, which does not try to make any claims about the way the world actually is, but only about how, logically, it might be, is less vulnerable to some of the criticisms developed below, but it does not entirely escape them.

starter kit of theism.[4] And not only is the God discussed detached from traditional patterns of Christian thinking about God[5]; also the way evil is discussed, and the way evil is discussed in relation to God, are detached from any wider theological context. Theodicy is presented as a problem studied on its own, a simply stated philosophical conundrum which a theist must face, rather than an issue which might arise in a discussion of, for instance, creation or God's relation to history or Christology.

None of these points in themselves automatically constitutes a reason to reject the business of offering theodicies as practiced by philosophers of religion. What I have said so far points to the fact that these discussions have a different texture from most traditional Christian theology. Certainly the strong Enlightenment overtones of theodicy are enough to make a Christian theologian begin to wonder whether something *might* have gone wrong here—to raise the theological hackles, as it were. But the alien approach of the philosophers of religion does not, at least not without further argument, conclusively demonstrate that what they are doing could not be useful to theology. The philosophers might argue that they are merely abstracting the central logical structure of the problem in order to be able to focus on it more effectively—this is, after all, how intellectual progress is often achieved--and that whatever answers they arrive at can then be fleshed out again if necessary in traditional theological clothing. For the moment we can however leave to one side the question of whether such a procedure could in principle be legitimate, because there are, in any case, *other* reasons to reject the kinds of arguments theodicists offer.

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[4] To put this more technically, philosophers of religion distinguish between 'restricted' and 'expanded' theism. Christianity is one kind of 'expanded' theism.

[5] It might be objected that there are prominent examples of pre-Enlightenment Christian thinkers quite happy to discuss God in a similar abstraction—Thomas Aquinas in significant portions of the *Summa Theologiae*, for instance. It is beyond the scope of this piece to go into the question fully, but I think a case can be made that in spite of superficial similarities, Aquinas and others like him were in fact engaged in a very different kind of project—in terms of its context, purpose, presuppositions, and overall shape—than Enlightenment figures or most contemporary philosophy of religion. For a related argument, see Nicholas Wolterstorff, "The Migration of the Theistic Arguments: From Natural Theology to Evidentialist Apologetics," in *Rationality, Religious Belief & Moral Commitment,* edited

Kenneth Surin, in *Theology and the problem of evil*, and Terrence Tilley in *The Evils of Theodicy*, develop vigorous attacks on the whole business of offering theodicies.[6] At the heart of the various criticisms these two authors make is the claim that theodicies tend to put both the author and the reader into the wrong kind of relationship with evil, or, more to the point, with particular evils. They try to reconcile us to evils, that is, in a way which we should not be reconciled. If one takes the long enough view, if one really gets the right perspective, the theodicists seem to say, everything is not so bad. One of the ways this is done is by discussing evil abstractly, as a generality, and thereby allowing us to avert our gaze from particular evils. If the theodicists move away from the absolutely general level, they usually only go so far as to distinguish between two categories of evil, moral evil and natural evil, and this is a distinction itself which, as Tilley argues, allows us to forget about, or not quite see, the many things which go wrong which cannot be attributed either to an individual's bad choice or to a force of nature.

Furthermore, most theodicies invoke, though sometimes with a degree of tentativeness, the notion of a greater good—God permits evil because it is somehow necessary to a larger whole which is very good, whether conceived of as a world in which free will and therefore love, relationships, moral development and the growth of character and so on are possible, or simply as a world which is in fact the best of all possible worlds. The theodicist's central task is to show that the greater good really is not conceivable, not in any sense possible if the evil were removed, so that God's omnipotence is not impugned. All this may well seem reasonable so long as one is able to confine one's thoughts to evil considered as an abstraction. It begins to fall apart, however, when one confronts particular kinds of evils.

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by R. Audi and W.J. Wainwright. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986). C.f. also Fergus Kerr, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

[6] .In the case of Surin the attack is limited to what he terms theoretical theodicies—by contrast the so-called practical theodicies he considers more legitimate. This is a distinction to which we shall return.

One by now standard way to drive this home is to point to the Holocaust, or to particularly harrowing stories from the Holocaust: can any but the morally insensitive treat this as acceptible, allowable, in view of some greater good? Another classic move is to bring in Ivan Karamazov, with his insistence that no final harmony of any kind can justify the cruel suffering and death of children, or indeed of a single child.

The most thorough, and also, perhaps, the least manipulative, development of this kind of point of which I am aware is to be found in some of the writings of Marilyn McCord Adams.[7] Adams makes two key moves: first, she draws a distinction between God's goodness to the world viewed globally on the one hand and God's love of and goodness to individuals on the other; secondly, she introduces the category of 'horrendous evils'. To produce a successful theodicy it is not enough, she maintains, to show that God produces sufficient *global* goods to 'overbalance or defeat' evil on the global scale, so that looking at the world as a whole one could say that goodness sufficiently outweighs or overcomes evil: one also needs to show that God loves, and is good to, *each person*. And this becomes particularly problematic, she argues, for the standard theodicies, when one considers the existence of horrendous evils. Horrendous evils, as she defines them, are evils which, if they are part of one's life, give one prima facie reason to doubt whether one's life could be a great good to one.[8] Some of the paradigmatic examples she lists are 'the rape of a woman and axing off of her arms, psycho-physical torture whose ultimate goal is the disintegration of personality, betrayal of one's deepest loyalties,… parental incest… participation in the Nazi death-camps, the explosion of nuclear bombs over populated areas'[9], cannibalizing one's own offspring and being the accidental agent of the death of those one loves best. Such evils

[7] C.f. for instance 'Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God' in *The Problem of Evil*, and especially the book of the same title, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999).
[8] This is a paraphrased version of her somewhat more technical definition, given on p. 26 of *Horrendous evils and the goodness of God*.
[9] 'Horrendous evils and the goodness of God', pp.211-212.

'devour… in one swift gulp'she says, 'the possibility of positive personal meaning'.[10] It is not just that they outweigh other good or meaningful things there might be in a life, so that you would need a whole *lot* of nice things to make up for them: such evils defeat, engulf, destroy any positive value to the participant's life—or at least they seem to do so on the face of it.

If one focuses one's attention on horrendous evils, Adams argues, the usual theodicies come apart. The existence of human free will, no matter how great a good that is supposed to be; the possibility of loving relationships and of growth in character for many people in the world at large; even the idea that of all the possible worlds there could have been, this one is the best; none of these things can actually help. That is to say, none of these things would give a person involved in a horrendous evil reason to see her life as a great good to herself. God could not be said to have been good to such individuals; and, again, a theodicy which can show that God has been good to the world at large but *not* good to particular individuals is inadequate.

If one accepts this line of reasoning, there is, at the very least, a central intellectual failure in the usual theodicies.[11] They simply cannot appropriately address quite a large range of very *particular* evils that occur in our world. What critics like Surin and above all Tilley do is to push the idea that such intellectual failing also has a moral dimension. If theodicies operate in such a way that they encourage us to be reconciled to evil, to become complacent about it, and perhaps even not to see the worst evils because they do not fit into the scheme, then they are bad for us and a bad thing altogether.

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[10] *Horrendous Evils*, p. 27.

[11] I use the word 'usual' here because Marilyn McCord Adams' own positive proposals need to be exempted. Adams presents her work as a solution to the logical problem of evil, and so in some broad sense one might include it as a theodicy. She is insistent, however, in refusing to attempt to find a 'morally sufficient reason why God would… permit evils' (pp. 53-54), but concentrates instead on making the case that God can 'defeat' horrors and so be good to individuals.

Whether it is fair to accuse theodicies not just of an intellectual failing but also of a moral one is an interesting question. Philosophers of religion will no doubt believe themselves to be unjustly condemned here by critics who misconstrue the nature of their efforts. Plantinga, for instance, acknowledges explicitly that his theodicy is not designed for pastoral purposes—he knows that it is not the right way in which to talk to someone who is suffering. He is not engaging in pastoral work; he is doing something different. By extension, it could easily be maintained that it is not the job of the theodicists to school us in appropriate practical responses to particular evils—struggling against injustices, comforting those who suffer, confessing and repenting our own sins, and so on—nor even is it necessarily to allow us to identify or describe particular evils well. What they are engaged in is a more theoretical enterprise, one from which they would not expect us to take our moral and practical bearings in the world. They might acknowledge that all these other things—being able to see particular evils and knowing how to respond to them-- are necessary, more important even than constructing theodicies, but might not think that that need undermine the legitimacy of their own production of theodicies. Whether this could be accepted as a legitimate defense is bound up with larger issues concerning the nature of academic reflection and its political and practical engagement. In any case it is safe to say, at the very least, that if the overall tone, the final note, that emerges from a theodicy is complacency, the sense that all is really allright with the world as we know it, then there is a problem: even if one does not go so far as to actively condemn it as morally inadequate, it runs the risk of being distasteful to anyone who does not completely shield himself from the world around him.

In addition to the kinds of objections I have so far sketched from Surin,Tilley and Adams—that theodicies cannot deal with various particular evils, and that they encourage us into the wrong sorts of relationship towards evils—I want to add one further objection. Almost all contemporary theodicies are closely bound up with a widespread but unfortunate

theological assumption about the implications of human free will. This concept is in one way or another central to almost all contemporary theodicies, whether directly or clothed in broader notions of soul-making and character-development. God cannot bring about a world in which a good exercize of human freedom, correct moral choices, loving actions and relationships, a positive turning towards God, are possible, without giving human beings (and perhaps other moral agents) a freedom which inevitably they can use to do ill.

Lying behind this almost universal feature of contemporary theodicies is the assumption that divine and created agency are and must be in a kind of competitive relationship. The more God does, the less we are able to do. The more God acts, the less free we are. If we are to be genuinely free to do good things, to relate to each other, to respond to God, then at some level, at some point, God must back off. Human freedom requires God's non-involvement, at least at the moment of choice, and this great good of human freedom is also where one major source of evil comes in.

All this is for the most part taken as self-evident in much of modern thought.[12] An action cannot be free and determined at the same time; it is either free,or it is caused, but not both. Such a contrastive approach is not in fact, however, the only option when it comes to thinking about how God relates to God's creatures. One might alternatively say that the more God, as creator, acts, the more fully we come into being, and that the more God is involved with us the freer we are. It may be true that to the extent that my actions are determined by created causes, they are not free, but it does not follow that *God's* role in my action plays the same part. Again, it may be true that as a parent I have to back off to give my children appropriate freedom, but it does not necessarily mean that God must move away from us in order to allow our freedom. On the view that I am sketching, to think that this is the case is to confuse God with a created being, to suppose that God is acting on the same plane as us and

that God's action inevitably competes and interferes with the actions of created beings. On the view that I am sketching, although my mother may need to keep her distance in order to allow me as an adult to develop fully into myself, God rather needs to keep as close as possible to allow this same development.[13]

It would go beyond the scope of this paper to examine the premodern theological sources of this kind of thinking, in St. Thomas and others, or look at its contemporary exponents such as Herbert McCabe or Kathryn Tanner, or to explore whether a non-Pelagian understanding of grace is possible without such a view. It is possible, however, briefly to point to two reasons for preferring this view to the alternative.. First, it usefully helps to preserve a distinction between creator and creature, between God and humanity, not by making God distant and alien to us, but by insisting that God is more intimate than we can even conceive. And secondly, it avoids the danger which the contrasting view can very easily fall into of distancing God from much that we in fact deem most valuable and hold in greatest respect in our world. This is something that Nicholas Lash points to in a series of questions in *Believing Three Ways in One God*: 'Does not God make cities as well as stars? Is God's self-gift, the Spirit's presence, less intimately and immediately constitutive of promises and symphonies than of plutonium and silt?'[14] If we assume that what is most freely human must be done somehow away from and independently of God, then we will have to say that whereas the natural world is clearly God's creation, all that civilization produces has to do with the creator in only a very distant and derived way.

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[12] C.f. Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988) for an argument concerning the characteristic modern distortion of traditional Christian ways of relating God's sovereignty to creaturely agency.

[13] It should be noted that philosophers of religion are well-aware that a free will defence depends on what is called an 'incompatibilist' view of freedom—on the assumption, that is, that freedom is incompatible with determinism—and that there are those who defend the opposite view of compatibilism. While the view that I am sketching here might be taken as a kind of compatibilism, it is not compatibilism in its usual philosophical form. One taking the view I have outlined would, or at least could, still be an incompatibilist within the realm of created causes, insisting that to be free means precisely not to be determined by any created cause. So although I may be proposing a kind of compatibilism, it is not compatibilism as usually conceived.

What we have seen, then, is that the role of human and possibly other created beings' freedom is central in almost all contemporary theodicies, and this freedom can only play such a role, for the most part, because it has an assumed *independence* from God's control—God limits God's intervention in order to allow us our freedom. If one assumed that when we act most freely God is in fact also most fully bringing about our actions, then the introduction of our freedom into the theodicy discussion cannot help—it only makes matters worse. Why, if God can bring about our free actions, and in particular our good actions, does God ever allow our freedom to go wrong?

The argument here could of course be played in reverse. Many a modern thinker might respond to the noncompetitive understanding of divine and human agency just outlined as follows: that is all very well—if it makes any sense at all. But what then about evil? How can you possibly explain where sin comes from if you say that God is so intimately involved in free human action? Where I have pointed to a problem with theodicies in that they must presuppose a competitive understanding of divine and created action, others will see the fatal weak point of the proposed non-competitive view of God's agency precisely in the fact that it cannot contribute to a theodicy, in that it can only fall silent when confronted with how things have gone wrong.

II

We are now in a position to consider the question mentioned at the outset. If there are reasons not to adopt any, or any modification or combination, the available 'answers' to the 'problem of evil'[15], what then should Christian theology do in the face of the problem itself?

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[14] Nicholas Lash, *Believing Three Ways in One God* (London: SCM, 1992), p. 51.

[15] There is an exception, as already noted above I have drawn on Marilyn McCord Adams' criticisms of the theodicies of other contemporary philosophers of religion, but have in fact given no reason to reject her own positive proposals. However, while she is in some sense giving an answer to the problem of evil-- offering a way of showing God to be logically compossible with evil-- she avoids offering an

I want to suggest that there are fundamentally two options. One is to reject the legitimacy of the question, to refuse to address the issue at all, and so essentially to 'change the subject.' This, in slightly different ways, is the approach taken by Kenneth Surin and Terrence Tilley. There is much to be said for this approach, but ultimately I think it ought to be seen as an overreaction. The second option is to accept the question and its legitimacy, but to acknowledge that Christian theology is utterly incapable of offering even an approximate answer. Or, to be more precise, what needs to be accepted may not be precisely this question, but that questions in this family, questions structurally akin to this one, do legitimately arise, both in people's lives and in systems of theology. They ought perhaps not have the centrality in either Christian life or Christian theology that they are given in the philosophy of religion, but they are nevertheless legitimate.

Terrence Tilley's rejection of everything to do with theodicy is the most aggressive. Theodicies are destructive discourses which efface and perpetuate evils. What then should we do instead of theodicy? On the one hand, Tilley councils struggling against theodicies themselves: they ought to be resisted, interrupted, counteracted, and abandoned. On the other hand, we ought to be working to uncover evils ('identify their multiple forms'), to find their causes ('understand the processes which produce them') and to get rid of them ('empower the praxes of reconciliateion which will overcome them').[16] Abandon the issue as an abstract and general one, in short, and concentrate on what can be done in relation to concrete evils .

Surin, by contrast, does not reject theodicy absolutely, but rejects 'theoretical' theodicies in favour of what he calls 'practical theodicies'. Theoretical theodicies he deems those which are preoccupied with questions of the intelligibility of evil, the logical

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'answer' in the sense that others do, in that, as noted above, she refuses to answer the question of why God permits evil.

[16] Terrence Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1991), p.250

compatibility of the existence of evil and the existence of God, or the evidential significance of evil (ought it count as evidence against belief in God). Practical theodicies are those which try to answer the question, first, what does God do, and second, what do we do, to overcome evil and suffering.[17] For examples of such practical theodicies, he looks to Dorothee Sölle, Jürgen Moltmann, and P.T. Forsyth. Here there is no question of explaining evil or explaining how it is possible in a world made by a good God, but rather of exploring how God responds to evil-- how God identifies with and suffers with his creatures, and brings about salvation.

Surin presents what he is doing as a kind of change in strategy and emphasis, from an abstract, theoretical, metaphysical approach to a way of dealing with the problem which is concrete, situated, and centred on a theology of the cross. It cannot be denied that the things Surin takes up—theological reflection on the cross, on salvation, the question of what God does in response to evil—that these things are critical in a full Christian response to evil, and indeed that they play a more significant role, overall, than the questions of origin (how did evil get here, how is it possible, why did or does God allow it in the first place). On the other hand, however, Surin has not in fact simply changed strategy or emphasis, as he seems to suppose: he has changed the subject. He is not giving a better answer to the question than the usual theodicies raise, a better approach to the problems with which they grapple. He is abandoning their question, their problems, and taking up different ones.

One reason Surin may not think of himself as changing the subject is that within the so-called practical theodicies a central role is played by the notion of the suffering of God. Neither Surin nor the authors he discusses claim that the fact that God suffers makes evil, or even suffering, into a good in itself, nor that it explains why God permits it in the first place. This notion is often taken, nevertheless, to go a long way towards *justifiying* God in a

[17] Kenneth Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Basil Blacwell, 1986), p.67.

suffering world. Thus we have Surin citing with approval the view that 'a God of salvation would be justified in creating a world which contained so much pain and suffering only if he were prepared to share the burden of pain and suffering with his creatures'[18] and similarly, in reverse, that 'the God who disengages himself from the afflictions of victims cannot be justified, either by human beings or himself'[19]. Here, then, is a connection between Surin's two groups of thinkers. All alike are engaged in theodicy in the sense that all are engaged in the business of justifying God.

Does the introduction of the notion of God's suffering in fact help to justify God? One might argue against it on rather general grounds-- that theologians who take this line are rejecting a tradition which is misunderstood and misrepresented, and which in fact offers, at least in places, a richer and more adequate approach to thinking about God than the one they replace it with-- but it would be well beyond the scope of this essay to do so.[20] More to the point, in any case, it is hard to see how the suffering of God can in fact help when it comes to dealing with evil. Most fundamentally, if God does stand in need of justification, then to say that God suffers cannot provide it. If I mistreat my children, then the fact that I mistreat myself as well does nothing to make it acceptable. If one wants to say that there is any level on which God is responsible for evil or suffering, whether that be by causing it or by permitting it or by creating a world in which it occurs, it is hard to see how God participating in the suffering would diminish the responsibility.

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[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid., p. 149.
[20] C.f the thorough and impressive argument in Thomas Weinandy's book *Does God Suffer?* (Edinburgh: T+T Clark, 2000) To his arguments I would add the comment that when a contemporary theologian asserts that God suffers, and a traditional theologian asserts that God is impassive, they are not necessarily talking on the same plane, and so the one is not necessarily asserting precisely what the other denies. To maintain that God is impassive and beyond change is, arguably, to maintain that certain categories cannot be used to speak of God at all, rather than to paint a kind of picture of what God is like. It is a grammatical rather than a descriptive affirmation. And therefore it would be equally inappropriate, from such a traditional position, to describe God as static as it would be to describe God as moved. If this is right then contemporary theologians are not so much affirming what earlier theologians rejected, as breaking a grammatical rule to which earlier theologians believed they were constrained to adhere.

Furthermore, there is at least some danger of the proponents of a suffering God falling into the same trap as theodicists, in diminishing the scandal of evil, offering a perspective from which all is, on some level, already acceptable. At the very least they seem, like the theodicists, to be trying to bring God and evil into a kind of intellectual resolution, so that the dissonance between our conception of God and our awareness of the evil in the world around us is done away with, the two reconciled in the notion that the suffering is all already there within God. Something like this seems to be going on in Jürgen Moltmann's references to Auschwitz. Indeed, Moltmann speaks not only of God suffering in Auschwitz but of God in his suffering as a source of comfort to those in Auschwitz [21].On reflection, this is a rather interesting claim. Moltmann was not himself in Auschwitz. He does not appeal to any specific testimonies that anyone did find this notion a comfort in Auschwitz.[22] He wants to take Auschwitz with full seriousness; and yet in effect he diminishes our vision of the suffering there by asserting that those in Auschwitz were comforted. To put God into the middle of evil and suffering, then, somehow starts to make things acceptable, makes Auschwitz something that can be integrated into and dealt with in our Christian theology; the Christian has put his God in the midst of it and now it is a little tamed, no longer threatening to stop the theological enterprise.

In various ways the insistence that God suffers, especially when presented as something new and important, is in danger of being a cheap move. What Moltmann does might be taken as an illegitimate Christian takeover of Jewish suffering.[23] But it is not only in Christian-Jewish relations that something may be going wrong here: it is also in Christian-

[21] 'as a companion in suffering God gave comfort where humanly there was nothing to hope for in that hell', *History and the Triune God* (London: SCM, 1991), p. 29.
[22] Moltmann does, it must be said, make this comment about God as a companion in suffering giving comfort in the broad context of 'points which have emerged from Jewish and Christian discussion of theology after Auschwitz'.
[23] For related criticisms of Moltmann's highly influential use of a story of Elie Wiesel, c.f. J-B Metz, 'Facing the Jews: Christian Theology after Auschwitz' in Fiorenza and Tracy, eds, *The Holocaust as Interruption* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1984), cited in *Theology and the Problem of Evil*, p. 124, and

atheist relations. Asserting the suffering of God offers the theologian too easy a way to wrong-foot the protest atheist: God is made invulnerable to blame since God is now suffering more than anyone.[24] It does not of course cost the theologian anything to attribute any level of suffering to God that she pleases, but it does give her an easy way to be taking suffering seriously and even perhaps to feel that she herself is siding with the victim.

These criticisms are only sketched, and they are highly controversial. Whether one thinks that they work or not, however, one point that is not controversial is that to bring in the suffering of God does not *directly* answer the theodicy question, at least in its standard Enlightenment version. And so Surin's shift from theoretical to practical theodicies does indeed amount to a change of subject.

Surin does, however, offer, or at least hint at, a justification for his change of topic—a justification for ignoring the question which goes beyond the fact that all the answers to it are highly unsatisfactory. The question itself, as a product of the Enlightenment, is problematic. From the point of view of a theology of the cross, which Surin champions, 'the true deity of God is revealed on the cross of the crucified Jesus of Nazareth', and if this is true, then it may be, says Surin, that

> the true divinity of the triune God…is in actual contradiction with the theodicist's essentially *metaphysical* conception of the essence of God, the kind of conception that allows the theodicist to talk about the divine attributes of omnipotence, omniscience and benevolence in isolation from the event of the cross, and from the triune life of (the Christian) God[25]

In other words, the very terms in which the problem is posed rely on a misconceived philosophical theism. One may change the subject not only because the question cannot be answered, but because it is so problematic a question that it ought never to have been asked.

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also Marcel Sarot, 'Auschwitz, Morality and the Suffering of God', *Modern Theology* 7 (1991), 135-152.

[24] Certainly in the context of human relationships such a move would often appear highly manipulative. Consider the parent who, accused of having done some very particular kinds of harm to his or her children, responds with a discussion of how much he or she has suffered for the children over the course of their lives.

Is it legitimate, then, to see the problem of evil as posed by the philosophers' of religion as a mere product of the Enlightenment, and therefore something which Christian theology can properly ignore? Much can be granted to this point of view. It is clear that asking this sort of question about evil took on with the Enlightenment a prominence, an intellectual centrality and self-evidence, which it never before had. It is clear that the problem of evil as presented by philosophers of religion is not an ahistorical, timeless question, a universal human conundrum, but that in different societies and in different parts of the Christian tradition people have, in the face of various evils, asked very different kinds of questions. And, as has already been granted, there is something very foreign to Christianity in the abstractly conceived God of the Enlightenment with his or its abstractly conceived and fixed number of attributes.

In spite of all this, however, simply to turn away from the problem of evil as the Enlightenment focused on it is too easy a response. Many a Christian theologian will want to agree with Surin that Christian theology does not work in terms of an abstractly conceived God with a number of properties, but whether they make this point by insisting on the centrality of narrative for Christian thought, or with Surin on the christological and cross-centred nature of a Christian understanding of God, or in some other way, it is still very likely that a ghost of the Enlightenment problem, a version of it, something with a family resemblence to it, will come back to haunt them.

Thus, for instance, suppose it is said that Christian reflection does not, when properly understood, involve playing around with the postulates of a staticly conceived theism, but rather focuses on, and indeed places itself within, a story of God's dealings with the world. And suppose one adds that this is a story that points our thoughts to things such as covenants between Yahweh and Israel, human rebellion, the faithfulness of the Lord, rather than to

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[25] *Theology and the Problem of Evil*, p. 67.

abstractions such as omniportence, benevolence, and the permission of evil. All this may be true, but it must also be said that this is a narrative which extends not only forwards to an anticipated eschatological resolution but also backwards in time to the creation of the world. And, at least if the narrative is construed in a traditional Christian manner, the scattered references in the Old Testament to something like an original conflict between God and watery, monstrous forces of chaos are resolutely subordinated to the image of God creating in sovereign serenity, utterly in charge and unopposed. Now, though the narrative primarily revolves around the question of how God *deals* with disorder, disruption, chaos, disobedience and rebellion, the narrative is nevertheless put together in such a way that it is at least not unnatural to ask, how could these elements have made their way into the plot of a story with such a serene and unruffled opening? The narrative is not structured *around* such questions, but it is structured in such a way as to make such questions, close cousins of those of the theodicist, askable.

Or again, suppose we were to say, rather like the thinkers of whom Surin approves, that Christian theology ought to be centred on the cross, and that it must be resolutely Christocentric. This theology of the cross and Christocentrism, however, only get their significance if the Christ on the cross is also the one who was there at creation, the one 'through whom all things were made'.Once again there is room here for a close relation of the theodicist's question to make its entry—how have things got to such a state where the cross is necessary if Christ is the sovereign creator in the first place? Surin seems to say that this is not the right question to ask, but unless one is a follower of Marcion, and simply detaches the creator from the redeemer, it seems that this is a question to which the theology of the cross is going to be open.

Thus, even if the canonically formulated 'problem of evil' does not come up within Christian theology, something rather like it seems often to be lurking in the wings. To give a

final example, suppose one were to say, Christians do not place themselves, as the theodicists' theists seem to, in a timeless and abstract situation characterized by 'there is evil' and 'there is (or might be) a good, powerful, all-knowing God'. Rather they locate themselves at a particular time in salvation history, between the Incarnation, cross and resurrection (when a victory over the powers of death and darkness is decisively won, a reconciliation between God and the world established in principle) and the eschaton, when all this will be brought to definitive completion. But this vision leaves open the possibility of the question, why the delay between these two moments? Why this long period during which there are wars and famines and soul-destroying sin and suffering, in which the victory of Christ is so often not apparent?

If one moves away from the abstract theism of the Enlightenment and towards specifically Christian ways of speaking, then, the notion of evil will take on new kinds of shapes, as does the way one talks about evil in relation to God. The 'problem of evil' as formulated by philosophers of religion might not arise, but analogues to it, more concretely textured and contextualized variants of this question still remain askable. And this is not only the case for theological systems; such questions arise equally for ordinary believers, particularly when they look on at other people's suffering, degradation, despair and untimely deaths.

Admittedly such questions do not have the centrality within Christian thought and practice that the problem of evil does in the philosophy of religion. One might be suspicious of a theological system constructed primarily around them, and if an individual was *entirely* paralysed by such questions, one might want them to begin to turn their attention to the kinds of things Surin points to-- what God does, and what we ought to do, in response to evil. Nevertheless, the reality and legitimacy of these questions ought not be denied. Indeed, given the legacy of the Enlightenment, one could say that while for pre-modern theologies such

questions need not always arise or be addressed, in the contemporary context they *do* arise and *must* be addressed. One cannot wish away the impact of the Enlightenment.

My proposal, then, is that these questions, these concrete and theological versions of the so-called 'problem of evil' ought to be acknowledged as completely legitimate *and* as utterly unanswerable. Christians believe God is working salvation, and trust that ultimately God will bring good out of all conceivable evils, but this does not make these evils goods, nor render their presence explicable, nor allow us to understand how they can take place in the good creation of a loving and faithful God. Sometimes of course we can already see, and must look for, good coming out of evil—suffering can bring growth, sin is an occasion to turn back to God's forgiveness with trust, dependence, gratitude. But we cannot turn these things into explanations, in part because suffering can also, through no fault of the sufferer, bring about degradation and corruption, and sin can build on itself and perpetuate itself. When we see good coming from evil, we can see this as the beginning of the hoped for work of God, but not the beginning of any kind of explanation.

I have said that questions arise which should not be pushed aside and cannot be answered. Another way to articulate this is to say that it is of the very nature of Christian theology to make affirmations, or patterns of affirmations—about the goodness, faithfulness and creative power of God on the one hand, and the brokenness of creation on the other—that it cannot co-ordinate or make sense of. There are points, then, at which systematic theology (if there is such a thing) ought to be, if not systematically incoherent, then at least systematically dissonant. Just as believers may have to live with evils they cannot make sense of or integrate into any larger positive picture, so too theologians may have to live with points of systematic incoherence that they cannot make go away, not even by dismissing the problem and changing the subject, and that we cannot resolve, not even by saying that God suffers.

Standard discussions of theodicy set up three apparently incompatible propositions—God is powerful, God is good, evil exists. What is at stake here can be summed up with a variant on this trilemma. One might say instead that there are three features of a Christian theology, all of which are desirable, but not all of which can be achieved; a theology ought to provide a fully Christian picture of God; it ought to give, or at least leave room for, a full recognition of the injustice, terror and tragedy that we participate in and see around us. And it ought to be coherent. And I am suggesting that not all of these can be achieved. Something has to be sacrificed. Process theology sacrifices the traditional picture of God to achieve a coherent system that allows for evil. I have outlined how theodicies tend to sacrifice the full recognition of evil to hang on to what is at least thought to be a traditional conception of God while maintaining coherence. The option I am recommending is to sacrifice neither the picture of God nor the recongnition of the range and depth of evils in God's world, but instead the possibility of a manifestly coherent theological vision.[2627]

III

The proposal I have made has been set out against the background of a variety of exclusively contemporary positions—theodicies offered by philosophers of religion in the last few decades and recent theological criticisms of them. It is worth saying something, however briefly, about how such a position is related to classic (pre-Enlightenment) discussions of evil, such as those of Augustine or Aquinas. These

[26] In *Church Dogmatics* III,3 Karl Barth prefaces his treatment of 'nothingness' with a discussion of the brokenness of theology, and the fact that theology must be a report of the way things are which does not 'degenerate into a system' (*Church Dogmatics* III,3 p. 295). He himself seems in danger of doing so, however, in his subsequent discussion of the 'right' and 'left' hands of God, and in the notion that nothingness is that which God does not will, so that 'what really corresponds to that which God does not will is nothingness' (p.352).

[27] I am not advocating the assertion of *logically* incompatible propsitions, but rather the holding of a set of beliefs which, somewhat more broadly, *we cannot make sense of*. There may be some other

thinkers do, it must be conceded, offer larger explanations of why God permits evil, in terms of a conception of what might be called the completeness of the universe. But one can also find, in the way they deploy the notion of the *privatio boni*, if not a systematic incoherence, then at least a systematic inexplicability entering into their theology. Evil is a privation of good, but it is difficult to work out within these schemes where the privation as such comes from. According to Aquinas, for instance, God is the first cause of all that is, but that does not make God the cause of evil, since evil is precisely *not* something which is, but a lack. But why is there this lack—why are some things not all that they should be? If one hunts within his system for an explanation of where then the lack itself comes from, how it comes to be that there is this lack, especially as regards *voluntary* evil, one meets only with frustration.[28] Now, one might say that Aquinas has a blind spot here, that he simply forgets to explain the ultimate cause of sin; or one might say that he is being slippery and sophistical.[29] But it is also possible to construe the non-explanation as deliberate and up-front; there is a hole in the fabric of Aquinas' account, and there ought to be a hole there, because the thing in question is inexplicable.

IV

The position I am proposing, one might say, is nothing more than the rather common theological cliché: evil is mysterious. But if this is a cliché, then like many clichés it is often not taken seriously, not thought through fully. One sign of this is that an appeal to mystery is often made in a rather half-hearted way—I do my best to

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perspective in which they all make sense together, but if so this is something of which we cannot even begin to conceive.

[28] An evil action, an action which lacks some good it should have, comes from a deficient will, which is deficient because it 'does not subject itself to its proper rule.'(*Summa Theologiae* I 49 a.1 *ad* 3). Whatever is good and has being—the will itself—is caused by God, but not its deficiency. Where then does its deficiency come from; why does the will not subject itself to its proper rule? We are given no answer.

explain evil, but then in recognition of the fact that my explanation is not very good, neither intellectually satisfying nor pastorally appropriate, I add that of course it is essentially mysterious.

To say that evil is a mystery in fact raises its own interesting questions: how, for instance, should *this* use of the word mystery be related to its use in other places in theology, and in particular, to its use in discussing God? Should we say that evil is mysterious *in the same way* that God is mysterious? Surely we cannot do that. Should we say that evil is mysterious in the *opposite* way that God is mysterious? This too may have its dangers—evil is being given undue status. How is it then that our words falter before, and our minds cannot grasp, either evil or God? Should we perhaps relate the two not as positve infinity and negative infinity, but as infinity and zero, both of which can wreak havoc in mathematical equations? We cannot understand the one because there is too *much* meaning, and the other because there is too *little*? Perhaps. But how then account for the fact that an encounter with the mystery of evil sometimes brings people to a deeper awareness of the mystery of God?

There is clearly much to be thought through. The appeal to the mysterious nature of evil ought not be simply a matter of theologians throwing up their hands when they notice just how pathetic and tangled their explanations are becoming. If theology acknowledges itself to be up against its limits here, there might in principle be things it can learn about itself by examining the nature of its limitation. It is important, in other words, to be clear about what cannot be made clear.

It is not only, however, that there might be interesting theoretical consequences if one takes fully seriously the mysteriousness, the inexplicability, of evil. It is also I think pastorally important to be as clear as possible that evil, or

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[29] Carl Jung considered the doctrine of *privatio boni* 'a regular *tour de force* of sophistry', *Collected*

particular evils, do raise questions and these questions cannot be answered. When someone asks, confronted with things gone horrifically wrong, where is God, why does God allow it, they should not be told their question is mistaken, that even to be asking the question means they have the wrong conception of God or the wrong way of approaching God. Nor should they be fobbed off with inadequate answers, made to think that they are just not quite intelligent enough or detached enough to appreciate the free will defence. To be clear that there is a problem with no solution may not be very satisfying, but it avoids creating further problems.

Works of C.G. Jung, Volume 11, p.313, cited in David Burrell, *Aquinas: God and Action* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979)