

The Vulnerable God and the Problem of Suffering

Chapter 5 of *Participating in God: a Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity*,

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Is a Theodicy Possible?

Some while ago I was talking to a young woman who was suffering from a continual illness that sapped her strength, and which showed no sign of remission after some eight years. We spoke about her spiritual journey in this situation, and she said strikingly, 'I have come to a tacit agreement with God that we just don't talk about this any longer.' She had come to realise that in her case at least there was going to be no intervention, no miraculous cure, and the way she was coping with this was to treat the subject as unmentionable, as if God might be embarrassed by its being raised. So, 'we just don't talk about it'. But we do need to talk to God and about God concerning suffering; suppression is unhealthy, and any burying of resentments and protest will only break out in destructive forms later on. The Christian pastor will want to help the sufferer to express how she feels. When sufferers are driven into silence and brooding, the pastor will want to help them to re-establish communication with others and with God.

The moment of acute suffering, such as the loss of a child in an accident or the sudden death of a partner in middle life, is not of course the time for the pastor to offer theological arguments about the problem of suffering. But I suggest that the way pastors act and react in this situation will be guided by the image of God that they hold. Even more profoundly, it will be influenced by what they believe can become possible through participation, or deeper participation, in the triune God. Sometimes these beliefs may even guide the words they speak when they are asked a direct question like 'why has God done this to me?' So developing a theological approach to suffering is a critical part of pastoral theology.

How shall we think and speak responsibly about God in the face of suffering in our world - the pain of individuals, the ethnic cleansing of a Bosnia or a Kosovo, the genocide of a Rwanda or a Holocaust? I want to state immediately that no argument finally convinces. We cannot rationalise God, or fully explain suffering and evil. There cannot be a totally satisfactory theodicy, in the literal sense of the word, which is an intellectual justification of God'. We can no longer embark on Milton's kind of grand project, to justify the ways of God to men'. But I believe that we can at least work towards a theodicy with the more modest aim of thinking of God and suffering together. I am thus using the word 'theodicy' in the softer sense of thinking consistently about God and suffering in one perspective. It is possible then to move by responsible argument to the edge of a great gap which we finally have to leap • by faith; theodicy can enable us to identify where the abyss is, and •' even the direction in which we need to leap.

Basic to any understanding of the problem of suffering is, I suggest, the idea of the suffering of God, or the self-emptying (kenosis) of God. In recent years it has seemed to many theologians and ordinary Christians that an essential element in any theodicy is the belief that God suffers with creation.² It seems to fit particularly well with a move away from an interventionist or coercive picture of God's activity, to the picture we were considering in the last chapter - that is, one in which God acts with loving persuasion on the inside of nature, luring creation from within towards a fullness of life. Centuries of traditional belief about the impassibility of God have been overturned in our age, whether by theologians or devotional writers. I believe that

this revolution has been right and necessary. Yet, I want to place a warning sign early on. Much talk about the suffering of God is merely sentimental, even romantic, and does not face the real problems it raises.

For example, those who write about the suffering of God often repeat the moving story of the hanged boy in a Nazi concentration camp.³ One day the SS guards hanged two Jewish men and a young boy in front of the whole camp. The men died quickly, but the child being lighter did not. The Jewish writer Elie Wiesel who witnessed the scene and survived the camp tells how, as the boy hung in agony, he heard a man asking 'Where is God now?' and he heard a voice within him answer, 'Here he is, hanging on this gallows.'⁴ It is hard to talk about such a story; merely discussing it seems to diminish it and the participants. But we have to observe that this story has been retold many times as an illustration of the truth that God is present, suffering with us. This, for instance, is the way that Moltmann uses the story in his book *The Crucified God*; because God was identified with the suffering of the crucified Jesus, says Moltmann, he is also with all who suffer on the crosses of our world.⁵ Elie Wiesel himself, however, drew a different conclusion; this experience had, he says 'murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust'.⁶ For him, God was truly hung - that is, dead, not involved in the world any longer.

So as soon as we dare to speak of a suffering God, the theologian is faced with some hard questions. Is the belief that God suffers with the world really a theodicy, or is it a despairing view of God who is just as much of a victim of evil as we are?⁷ If we approve Moltmann's interpretation, we shall need to think about how a suffering God might not be a helpless God, but victorious over evil through weakness. There can be no theodicy without an end to evil.

Theodicy and Divine Suffering

What light, then, is cast on the problem of evil by affirming that God suffers with humanity? How does it help us practically in our experience of suffering to say that God suffers too? Here we may consider four kinds of theodicy, all of which, I suggest, are strengthened immeasurably by a belief in the suffering of God.

A theodicy of consolation

A first kind of theodicy aims at consolation, and is sometimes called a 'practical' theodicy. No attempt is made to explain the existence of evil, or to excuse the goodness of the Creator, or to justify the mountain of human misery represented by the names of Auschwitz or Babi Yar, Hiroshima or Rwanda. Instead, it is simply being claimed that it is consoling to those who suffer to know that God is with them, that suffering has not cut them off from God. People who are healthy and prosperous often abandon those who suffer, through sheer embarrassment, through a feeling of not being able to cope, through fear that associating with the sufferer will bring similar disaster, or because the suffering of another brings too painfully to mind the fragility of life and one's own vulnerability. •My friends and companions stand aloof from my affliction', laments the psalm-writer (Ps. 38-U NRSV). In this situation, it is affirmed, God does not abandon the victims. It can readily be seen that this theodicy is strengthened by the affirmation that the God who is with them also suffers alongside them, and so understands their situation from within.

This is really less of a rational argument than a picture of God that has psychological effect upon the sufferer. No attempt is being made to argue that the suffering of God somehow accounts for human misery. But believing that God suffers in God's own self and so understands their

predicament at first hand may in the end be more convincing to sufferers than any formal theodicy can be. So Moltmann remarks that 'the Shema of Israel and the Lord's prayer were prayed in Auschwitz', and that 'there would be no "theology after Auschwitz" ... if there had been no "theology in Auschwitz"'.⁸

The Book of Job fits into this kind of practical theodicy. It does not as yet hint at the idea that God suffers in God's own self, but the only answer it offers to the problem of suffering is that of consolation: God is still with Job. In his sufferings, Job has not been deserted. What satisfies Job in the end is not that he has solved the mystery of suffering, but simply that he has met God. In his soliloquies Job demands that God should break the divine silence and come into court as the just judge, to hear the supposed case against his servant. Job is confident that if only he can appear before God, he will be acquitted of the charge voiced by his 'friends', that he must have sinned grievously; since Job shares with his friends a rigid view of retribution, he assumes that this acquittal will mean that God will be obliged to put an end to his suffering. But when God does appear to him, he repents of trying to force God into a corner; it is enough simply to know that God is with him, that God has not abandoned him. So he exclaims:

I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you . . .' (Job 42:5-6 NRSV)

This is not yet a theodicy of a suffering God, but it is the foundation for one. It affirms that God is present with Job, and it leaves open the possibility of saying that this divine presence takes the mode of suffering, that God is present in the deepest sense of sharing Job's pain. When someone says to us, 'Why has God done this to me?' the only possible reply at that time may fail as an answer, but still be a response: 'God is suffering this with you;

A theodicy of story

There is, second, a more modern version of the 'practical approach to theodicy', that we might call the theodicy of story. Again there is no attempt to produce a rational argument about the problem of evil and suffering, but instead an appeal is simply made to the power of stories of others who have suffered, which can help us to find some meaning in the story of our own lives and our own suffering.

Much of human suffering appears meaningless. It is not heroic, not part of a great crusade, not the death of a martyr giving herself for a glorious cause. Suffering just befalls us, and because we cannot see the sense of it we are driven into silence. We are numbed by suffering, paralysed in our will and our emotions. We have to say that most of those who died in the Holocaust died like this - not as martyrs, not knowing why they died. We may, then, be helped to cope with suffering and find some hope in the midst of it, if we place alongside our story some greater story, a story of suffering which does have meaning. Dorothee Solle puts it this way in her book on suffering: Those who suffer in vain and without respect depend on those who suffer in accord with justice. If there were no one who said, 'I die, but I shall live' then there would be no hope for those who suffer mute and devoid of hoping.⁹

This is why we like to go to the theatre and watch the tragedies of Shakespeare; they give us a story in which we can find ourselves, by which we can interpret our lives. Our suffering appears meaningless, perplexing and even absurd, but in the moment of death Mark Antony and Lear affirm love and Hamlet affirms loyalty even in the face of the mess they have made of their lives, fallible heroes as they are.

We find in the Gospel passion narrative that Jesus himself depends on a story like this. In the midst of his agony, he recalls the little story of the righteous sufferer in Psalm 22, and out of his silence he speaks the words from that story: 'My God, why have you forsaken me?' It is a cry of protest (and I shall have more to write about protest shortly), but even in that cry he is beginning to relate his experience of death to God. In turn, the story of the cross of Jesus itself becomes a paradigm that we can place alongside our suffering, to see what meaning emerges.

For the death of Jesus, experienced in the moment of its happening as apparently senseless and useless, 'acquires a meaning'¹⁰ with the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, so that we can perceive by faith in this event nothing less than the story of God: 'God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself. Beyond all human stories we find that the suffering of God in the cross of Jesus has a purpose and a plot, and from this climactic point we can also read the story of God's suffering in the world before and after the cross. In this story God has an aim in view, to transform human life by the power of sacrificial love, and to bring resurrection life out of the worst kind of death. Telling the story of the suffering of God might then help us to find a path through our suffering, to enable us to use suffering in a way that will enhance life and overcome evil. We can choose to make our sufferings serve the sufferings of God, or as one New Testament text puts it, to 'complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions' (Col. 1:24).

The story of the suffering of God which reaches its greatest height and depth in the cross of Jesus may then help to give words to those who are struck dumb by suffering, may help them to start speaking about what they are feeling and enduring, even if at first they simply cry in protest at the unfairness of it all. Those who are their pastors must not react in shock at the accusations and bitterness that flow out; at least they have come out of silence and dark brooding, to speak to God and to others. So it is that the Jewish poet Paul Celan breaks out of the silence, the 'terrible dumbness' which the Holocaust has inflicted on human language itself. The story of Jesus, as - for Celan - a purely human victim of violence gives him images with which he can talk about the millions of other murdered Jews. It also gives him a metaphor for the God whom he must address, not in quiet trust but in savage irony; he speaks to God as a dead body tumbled among the many other discarded bodies, at Golgotha and at Auschwitz:

We are near, Lord,
near and at hand.
Handled already. Lord,
clawed and clawing as though
the body of each of us were
your body, Lord. 11

As Oliver Davies comments, 'There is a sense that Celan can only speak to God in this way at this time; no other speech is possible.'¹² Yet through this broken, negative appeal to the tragic story of God, Celan finds his voice as a poet, finds it possible to do the impossible thing of being a poet after the Holocaust which took the lives of his own parents among so many others.

Telling the story of the suffering of God can help us to find meaning in our stories. But if we follow this line of thought we, must be very careful to stress that we are talking about each person's : *finding* a meaning for himself or herself, not having some meaning thrust upon him or her. Pastors must not say to someone suffering, 'in the light of the suffering of God, this must be the meaning for your suffering', or even 'God's suffering tells us that he must have some reason for your suffering that we cannot know.' There can be no question of God's

having sent suffering to a person to work out some greater plan, however mysterious to us. That would be to make God an authority-figure who inflicts suffering and to whose omnipotent choice of meaning we must simply submit. Such a concept does not fit in with the character of a God who suffers. Rather, the power of the story of God's suffering is that we can make a meaning for our suffering, rather than uncovering some hidden meaning that already lies behind it. That is, suffering (like the cross of Jesus) can acquire a meaning. We can put the story of God's suffering alongside our apparently senseless suffering, and see what meaning emerges. We can see how a terrible situation can be redeemed, and good even be brought out of evil.

To succumb to the temptation of imposing meaning on the suffering of others is to diminish the horror of their suffering; it is to fail to take their experience seriously. For this reason, some Christian thinkers like Kenneth Surin have avoided any talk of meaning at all, and prefer to speak of letting stories 'interrupt' our lives.¹³ We must simply allow the stories of those who have suffered grievously to break into our lives, making us face the truth, whatever the consequence. Eli Wiesel, from his first-hand experience of the death camps, urges:

Let us tell tales ... all the rest can wait ... tales of children so wise and old. Tales of old men mute with fear ... Tales of immense flames reaching out to the sky, tales of night consuming life and hope and eternity. ¹⁴

So we might also say of the story of God's suffering that we should simply allow it to 'interrupt' our lives, to jerk us out of our complacency or out of our despair; 'all the rest can wait'. However, if approached with caution, I believe that it is important to talk about the making of meaning, or other meanings will soon flood in to fill up the void. What matters is to work together with God to make that meaning, as something new for us and God, rather than simply receiving it in a passive way.

But if meaning is to be made like this, then the story of the divine suffering must itself have meaning, and so we must be able to perceive that through suffering God will overcome evil and put a final end to human pain. We have already reflected on the power of love to fulfil God's purposes,¹⁵ and in the next chapter we shall be exploring one insight into the way that the experience of pain in forgiving love can achieve transformation.

A theodicy of protest

Still in the area of what we might call practical rather than theoretical theodicies, there is the theodicy which is characterised by protest. Rather than finding an intellectual explanation for suffering, we engage in protest against it and against those who inflict it. This can be called a 'theodicy' rather than 'protest atheism', when protest and resistance arises from the conviction that God too protests against the dealers in pain, and is on the side of the victims. The theologians of liberation have been particularly critical of Western theology in this respect; what is important, they insist, is not to explain suffering but to change the factors in society that cause it. Indeed, the development of arguments which justify a God who has created a world with suffering in it often end up by justifying suffering itself, making it 'reasonable' and acceptable.

Now, a belief that God suffers can be a strong support to this kind of theodicy. If God suffers then God too, as Leonardo Boff points out, is to be numbered among the victims and not among the torturers, murderers and oppressors.¹⁶ Belief in a suffering God forbids us to structure any theological argument where God directly causes suffering, even (as popular piety sometimes says) for 'reasons which he knows best'. It even forbids the scholastic refinement of God's being

the primary cause of suffering within secondary causes in the world. The concept of a suffering God cuts away the ground from beneath an atheism of protest, because protest atheism envisages God as a cruel tyrant who manipulates people and moves them around like pieces on a chessboard - sacrificing a pawn here, a knight there, for the sake of the strategy of the game. If the cross of Jesus tells us that God is in pain, then God's power can hardly be that of the human absolute monarch who shows his supremacy by avoiding pain; it can only be the power of a love that is made perfect in weakness.

Sufferers rightly protest against their suffering. God protests with the protesters because God too suffers. There is a mutuality between the two experiences: if God suffers then God too protests, and a God who protests against suffering cannot be the cause of it, or God would be protesting against God. At times, then, when someone says 'Why has God done this to me?' it may be appropriate to say 'God hasn't: but God is suffering with you'. At other times, however, a pastor will be sensitive to know that the first phrase cannot be heard, and only the second is necessary.

A belief in the suffering of God thus strengthens three kinds of practical theodicy - those of consolation, story and protest. Moreover, I want to suggest that each of these becomes even more practical when we affirm that the suffering God exists in triune relationships, and that God has made room for us to participate in these movements of relationship. As with our discussion of God's action in the world in the previous chapter, the invitation to participate more deeply in the interweaving patterns of the divine life is at the heart of the matter. If, to begin with, we take the theodicy of consolation, the affirmation that God is 'alongside us' in our suffering may be understood as our involvement in currents of relational love that are already there before us. God is present because we are present in God. We are not simply accompanied by another individual who suffers, but embraced by movements of suffering love - like those, for instance, between a father who has lost a beloved son and a son who has been forsaken and abandoned by all whom he loves. There are a myriad aspects of loss and alienation contained in these currents of relationship which surround us, permeated by the movement of a Spirit of hope, opening up the future in the midst of pain. Prayers of the church community for those who suffer can help to draw them deeper into an awareness of this communion of consolation. (2 Cor. 1:3-5).

This means that the story of God's suffering is not only a narrative to be told, 'once upon a time', but an ongoing story in which we can participate. The experience of those who have suffered and found meaning in their suffering, and above all the experience of Christ, is held eternally within the patterns of the divine dance, bringing richness to the life of God and shaping the pattern of our own life. Hearing the story told, or seeing it displayed in broken bread and outpoured wine, can thus draw us into a deeper awareness of the divine fellowship and the 'communion of saints', so that we can live in a larger story.

A significant theme in that story is protest against suffering, whether suffering comes directly from human oppressors, or from aspects of a broken and distorted cosmos that can wreak terrible damage on sentient life. I have already suggested that our participation in a God who makes space for created beings within the relations of the divine life alerts us to ways in which we can co-operate with God in making spaces of freedom in the world.¹⁷ The black theologian, James Cone, suggests that the image of God is most clearly seen in the struggle for liberation: "The image is human nature in rebellion against the structures of oppression. It is humanity involved in the liberation struggle against the forces of inhumanity."¹⁸ Sharing in God's own protest against suffering should mean that our protest is turned outwards from the temptation of nursing an internal grudge to actions in the world that can begin to create space for others.

Participating in the protest which is voiced in the triune communion makes our protest creative rather than cynical.

For God to protest against something that occupies God's own creation might, however, be thought to need some explanation. Moreover, the need for explanation becomes more acute if we want to go on and say that God allows suffering to befall us without actually inflicting it. If we wish to grapple with these issues we must move on from practical theodicies to theodicy in the sense of a reasonable argument. The most adequate - or the least inadequate - theodicy is, I believe, the argument from free will; the theodicy of a suffering God is, I suggest, necessary to strengthen the free-will defence of the existence of evil. It is needed to make this defence credible.

A Theodicy of Free Will

The argument of a free-will theodicy runs something like this:

God's purpose in creating the universe was to make a world of personal beings with whom God could enter into a relationship. For them to be real persons they must have been created free to do either good or evil; the only other option was a world of puppets and robots. If doing the right is to have any meaning, there must be the alternative of doing the wrong (evil), with all the suffering this entails.

There have been attempts by philosophers to show that this argument is neither a logical nor necessary one,⁹ and equally strident defences of it.²⁰ In brief, it seems to me that it is difficult to maintain that God cannot create some world somewhere which contains free beings for whom only good is an option. The point, however, is whether God could have created our particular world of personal beings like that, and it appears that the personal characteristics and values we actually have require a choice between good and evil for us to be truly free. The moral question, then, is whether it was worth God's creating this particular world (and so, probably, this particular universe), and this is a question to which we shall have to return. I am not concerned now to give an elaborate account of what has often been called the 'free-will defence' of the occurrence of evil and suffering in the world, but to show that belief in a suffering God strengthens the argument. Indeed, it seems essential for it to have any explanatory power at all.

The central point is that, if created persons are to be given a genuine freedom to make real choices, then God must limit God's own self. In allowing persons to grow and develop as adults. God must give them room to be themselves. God must take a risk on them, so that they can 'come of age'.²¹ This is the experience of all parents with teenage children, and similarly God must refrain from intervening in a way that would interfere with the growth in responsibility of God's human daughters and sons. God cannot control but only guide, acting to persuade but not coerce. Thus God must limit God's own self in the act of creation. The technical term usually applied to this is kenosis - the self-emptying of God. Freedom for the world therefore means self-limitation for God. While this has been increasingly accepted by Christian theologians today,²² not all draw the conclusion that this must also mean suffering for God. We can, however, see that this is bound to be true in at least three ways.

In the first place, the giving of freedom to created beings means that God is going to suffer some frustration of the divine purposes and desires. As I have argued, although God will fulfil the project of creation, there is room in this triumph for frustrations and reversals in the

intermediate scope of things, and for some loss in the long term. This is a painful experience for God that the Old Testament prophets describe in colourful language. As Hosea, Jeremiah and Ezekiel paint the picture, for example, God is like a husband suffering the agony of having an unfaithful wife. His purpose was that she should love him and enjoy marital intimacy with him, but this has been frustrated as she has gone her own way and taken other lovers.²³ Hosea, Isaiah and Jeremiah also present God as speaking in the hurt tones of a disappointed parent — a mother, perhaps:

When Israel was a child I loved him and out of Egypt I called my son.

The more I called them the more they went from me . . .

Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk,

I took them up in my arms, but they did not know that I healed them . . .

(Hosea ii:1-3)²⁴

There is the pain of God's frustrated purpose in every line of this poem. A loving relationship allows the risk of freedom to the other, and therefore involves pain. In our time, who can doubt that God's aims for human life were savagely frustrated by Auschwitz, and that God suffered all the pain of a parent who sees her children hurting not only themselves but inflicting terrible damage on others?

A second reason why self-limitation means suffering is because this humility of God allows something strange and alien to emerge from God's own creation. There is something that God has not planned, something to be confronted, something therefore to be suffered. Since the thought of the early church fathers - Athanasius in the East and Augustine in the West - evil has been named 'non-being'.²⁵ This is to assert that it has no real existence of its own. It is not an eternal reality alongside God who is Very Being, but is simply a turning away from the Good; it is a free turning from Something (God) to Nothing. Like the darkness which comes when the light is turned out, it is what happens when God's creation slips away from the divine aims. To call evil 'non-being' or 'the nothingness' (*nihil*) does not therefore deny that it is powerful, or pretend that it is some kind of illusion. It simply has no power of its own: it is a parasite, drawing its energy from preying on what is good, as a fungus draws its vitality from the life-giving trunk of a tree- Evil always perverts what is good, and twists what is full of life into what is destructive. Augustine added that since evil is 'nothing' it cannot, strictly, have a cause; while human freedom gives evil opportunity, it does not create evil any more than God does.²⁶

All this is familiar enough territory in presenting the classical free-will defence. But the implication not always drawn is that if evil issues from creation through the free will of the creatures, it is 'something that *happens* to God; it *befalls* God. The Creator does not make it, and so has to endure it.²⁷ God takes the risk in creation that non-being will emerge, and suffers its impact. Augustine did not draw this conclusion, but then he was working within a frame-work of thought (influenced by Neoplatonism) in which God was assumed to be invulnerable.

We shall see shortly that this view of non-being as 'befalling' God is in fact formative for our understanding of God's vulnerability. A word, however, is needed about the way the word 'evil' is being related to suffering in this discussion. The distinction is usually made between 'moral evil' - resulting from free human choices -and 'natural evil' - damage caused to humankind and sentient animals by events in the order of nature. While much suffering is inflicted by the immoral acts of human beings against each other, a great deal of suffering among both humankind and sentient animals is caused by what may be called natural evil, whether it be a large-scale flood or a microscopic virus. It may be said that it is a mistake to call the latter kind

of damage 'evil' at all, since a certain amount of such suffering seems to be needed for the development of more complex forms of life out of simple organisms. Evolution requires there to be victims; it is just 'nature', it may be concluded, not natural evil. But the world in which we actually live contains a wholly excessive amount of suffering caused by non-human means as well as human agents, far beyond what seems to be needed for growth and education.

All of life, not simply human life, is thus marked by 'non-being' and associated suffering. All the blame for this cannot be laid at the door of human beings, though they have certainly made things worse - or failed to make them better. Earthquakes, for instance, have a far more disastrous effect when cities, for the sake of human greed, are built over fault lines. Floods are more destructive when those who own the wealth in society force the poor to live on coastal flood plains. The AIDS virus may have leapt the species gap to humans through the hunting of monkeys for food. But I suggest that there is still such a thing as 'natural evil' in the sense that the whole of creation has drifted (or 'fallen') from the divine purpose, and does not function exactly as God intends. The capacity of nature at every level to respond to the creative lure of God may offer a clue to this defectiveness;²⁸ failure in response may mean that there is something corresponding to a 'free-will defection' at every level of nature, though not in the same way as human moral evil. Anyway, in one way or another, the *kenosis* of God will result in suffering 'befalling' God through the non-being which pervades creation.

This leads to a third reason why the self-limitation of God entails the suffering of God. The emergence of non-being raises the matter of divine *responsibility* for a broken world. While the free-will defence argues that the emergence is not absolutely necessary in our world, it is very likely to develop through free choices -when human beings are immature and the divine glory is veiled. As Reinhold Niebuhr puts it, sin is 'inevitable, but not in such a way as to fit into the category of natural necessity'.²⁹ It is, we might say, practically inevitable but not logically necessary. In short, God took a considerable risk in granting radical freedom to creation. While not directly creating evil and suffering, God puts the world into this situation. In the Hebraic-Christian tradition, God is not then absolved from final responsibility in choosing to make a free world at all, and in taking such a severe risk.

To assign ultimate responsibility to God is thus a healthy religious feeling which ought not to be suppressed. The Old Testament prophet Jeremiah did not shrink from being angry with God,³⁰ and the modern Jewish poet Paul Celan finds his voice in the silence following the Holocaust by blaming God. The irony of a well-known aphorism, addressed to God catches the point: 'It's no wonder that you have so few friends when you treat those you have so badly.' The feeling of protest is complex; we have seen that God shares our protest against suffering, and has not inflicted it in any particular circumstances; yet as the Creator who has chosen to make free worlds, in some sense God is the target of protest.³¹ Now, if God is finally, though not immediately, responsible for the way that the world is, a God of love will take responsibility. As a faithful covenant-partner, God must share the suffering that flows from the risk. Only the fact that God suffers can make credible the tracing of suffering to the free will of creation.

If God exposes a creation to the high risk of slipping into non-being, God too will face the outcome of the risk. But then this is what the Christian story of the cross of Jesus tells us. God does take responsibility; in the cross 'God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself'. As the theologian Karl Barth puts it,

The fact that from all eternity God resolved to take to Himself and bear man's rejection is a prior justification of God in respect of the risk to which he resolved to expose man by creation - and in respect of the far greater risk to which he committed him by his

permitting of the fall. We must insist upon man's responsibility . . . But much more must we insist upon the responsibility which God himself shouldered.³²

These convolutions of careful thought about 'prior justification' are given a different tone by Sydney Carter in a song called 'It was on a Friday morning' in which the singer is complaining about all that is wrong in the world. The refrain runs:

It's God they ought to crucify instead of you and me
I said to the carpenter, a-hanging on the tree . . .³³

and the hearer says to herself: God *was* crucified. 'It's God they ought to crucify . . .' This sentiment becomes unhealthy, of course, when it is used to excuse human beings from their responsibility for their own free choices. It is also misleading if it is taken to mean that God directly causes suffering. Evil emerges from the creation as something strange to God, something that befalls God, as I have been arguing. The Creator does not design evil and suffering as a great educational opportunity. The epitome of that kind of thinking is found in the work of the psychologist Carl Jung, when he argues that the cross of Jesus was the way in which God cleared his guilty conscience for the wrongs he had done to human beings. Jung particularly had the story of Job in mind, judging that God owed something to Job for the way he had used him.³⁴ Nevertheless, the urge to trace responsibility for suffering to God in an ultimate manner is an essential part of a free-will theodicy, and it can only be met by the conviction that God also suffers.

I have been arguing so far that a belief in the suffering of God is essential to any theodicy, to any attempt to understand the love and justice of God in a world of pain. The belief that God suffers strengthens a theodicy of consolation, a theodicy of story, a theodicy of protest and most important, a free-will theodicy. They are only made credible by the assertion that God in God's own self shares the risk of creation and suffers with a broken world. But the question remains as to what kind of suffering' we are talking about, and whether the concept of divine suffering we have is adequate for theodicy. In what sense is God vulnerable?

The Vulnerability of God

Why were the fathers of the early church, and the schoolmen of the Middle Ages, so opposed to saying that God suffers? Often, today, religious writers express astonishment that their ancestors in the faith could have been so blind to what seems obvious to us. But as soon as we go beyond a merely sentimental belief in the suffering of God, we can see why they thought divine passibility to be so dangerous a heresy. When we think at all carefully about it, suffering must involve *being changed* by something or someone outside oneself. It means being affected, conditioned and even afflicted by another. A suffering God must be 'vulnerable' in the strict sense of open to being wounded'.

Aquinas speaks on behalf of the Christian philosophy of the Middle Ages when he binds together suffering with change, and therefore excludes God from both. To suffer, he argues, even to have the feeling of suffering, one must have the potential to receive some impact from outside oneself. One must have the potential to receive an injury, whether it is the physical blow from a fist or the emotional blow of feeling rejected. But as pure actuality (*actus purus*), he maintains. God cannot have any potentials that God does not eternally realise.³⁵ From a reflection on the nature of love, a modern Christian thinker (Daniel Day Williams) equally links together suffering and change, though by contrast with Aquinas he ascribes both to God: 'There can be no love

without suffering [For] suffering in the widest sense means the capacity to be acted upon, to be changed, moved, transformed by the action of, or in relation to another.'³⁶

To love is to be in relationship where what the loved one does alters one's own experience. Love is the sharing of experience and mutuality of feeling. Sympathy must be taken in its literal sense of 'suffering with'; as Charles Hartshorne puts it, simply to be aware of the suffering of another will mean a 'participation in that suffering'.³⁷ Hartshorne points out that involvement in the feeling of others means to be influenced and so altered by them: 'to love is to rejoice with the joys and sorrow with the sorrows of others. Thus it is to be *influenced* by those who are loved.'³⁸ Moreover, the person who loves is also changed by taking the other into account as he or she is, gladly receiving what he or she has to contribute to the relationship.

Thus, if we say that God loves, it seems we must say that God not only suffers but is changed by those whom God loves. Several theological strategies have, however, been developed to avoid this conclusion. First, some Christian thinkers have exempted God from change by developing a concept of love which does not involve any suffering at all. If suffering implies being changed, then love cannot suffer. Aquinas, notably maintained that love could be a purely 'intellectual appetite'. In this, he stood in a long tradition of regarding love as the merciful willing and doing of good to another, without involving the sharing of feelings in literal 'compassion'.³⁹

Augustine, for example, had already asserted that when we talk about the 'pity' of God we are not saying that God grieves, or has 'the wretched heart of a fellow-sufferer'; his pity really means 'the goodness of his help'.⁴⁰

But if we bring this view of love as beneficence or goodwill up against the test of practical theodicies, we find it sadly lacking. It scarcely seems, for instance, to meet the demands of a theodicy of consolation. If love does not involve sympathetic suffering then we can only say that God is present with us in the manner of doing good to us. But in our society there is a reaction against people dismissed as 'do-gooders', precisely because they do charitable deeds without any real empathy with those whom they are helping.

There is moreover a problem with the affirmation that 'God loves the whole world' if that love is understood simply as 'doing good'. God's equal love for all does not seem to issue at present in all equally being-done-good-to. This problem has been sharpened by contemporary Black theology which observes that it is not just random individuals who have lost out on being-done-good-to, but a whole ethnic group. Black theologians are less concerned with the problem of suffering as a theoretical problem, than with the unjust distribution of suffering so heavily among black people. James Cone, for example, concludes that the question 'Is God a white racist?' is an urgent one, and is only made absurd by the fact that God suffers with black people.⁴¹ Thus a theodicy of protest can hardly be supported by the restricting of love to doing good. Divine love must include a sympathy that suffers with the oppressed, and so protests against suffering with them. You protest against a do-gooder God; you protest with a suffering God.

A more modern version of love without suffering, and so without change, runs like this: unlike us, God knows that evil will finally be overcome, and so cannot share the anguish that we feel. Charles Creel, for example, gives the example of a mother who (supposedly) does not share emotionally in the distress of a child when she knows that the child is being frightened by a danger which is only imaginary. So, Creel argues, 'we cannot rule out the possibility that God knows something about our destiny that renders it inappropriate for him to be disturbed by our suffering in this life.'⁴² In reply, we may return to our earlier consideration of God's knowledge of the future;⁴³ if there can be unknown elements for God in a future whose outline God is nevertheless certain about, this gives plenty of room for genuine empathy with us. But we may

also notice that Creel's argument depends quite largely upon whether we are convinced by his illustration of what human love is like. The picture of the unperturbed mother misses, I suggest, the nature of sympathetic suffering as a necessary form of communication between persons. Whatever superior knowledge she has, for the mother to be truly in contact with her child it is quite appropriate for her to share the child's feelings of distress. When we apply this analogy to God, we can see again how theodicies of consolation and protest require this intimate communication through suffering; indeed, communication with the triune God means nothing less than participation in God.

Human love always involves some suffering in sympathy with others, and this in turn means being changed by others; it seems meaningless to apply the analogy of love to God unless we are willing to affirm these characteristics in God also. A merely beneficent love does not, in any case, meet the test of theodicy. Nor does a second strategy which has been adopted to avoid the conclusion that suffering involves change of some kind. That is, it may be suggested that God feels the *emotion* of suffering without this having any effect upon God's very *being*. For example, H. P. Owen proposes that God's experience of suffering takes the form of an imaginative response.⁴⁴ That is, God *imagines* what it would be like to experience the suffering that the world actually *knows*. It is hard, however, to see the difference for God's being between suffering in imagination and experiencing the actual mental pain which Owen denies to divinity. As Aquinas points out, any emotion is a movement from one state to another, and so involves change.⁴⁵ Further, if we apply the tests of the theodicies of consolation and protest, it is unlikely that sufferers will feel comforted by the notion that God is just imagining what it might be like to be them, while knowing nothing of it. This is God the romantic dreamer, not the sympathiser. Nor does such a speculative involvement in suffering support the theodicy of divine protest.

A third strategy for moderating the vulnerability of God accepts much of the linkage between love, suffering and change. But it is suggested that while God is indeed affected by human suffering, God still remains in total control of these effects upon the divine life. As Marcel Sarot puts it 'God may be influenced by the world, as long as this influence is subject to his will', so that 'God remains master of his own passibility'.⁴⁶ When Sarot writes of the divine suffering being subject to the will of God, he does not mean suffering which flows from a once-for-all willing self-limitation of God in creation which God cannot go back on. He means a continuous 'self-restraint' of God, which God 'can end . . . when-ever he wants to, and this means that he can interfere whenever he wants'.⁴⁷ Sarot thus affirms a 'qualified form of passibility' in God in which God is passible but never passive, since God has command over any impact from outside.

A similar theory of 'semi-passibility' is the view that God, while not subject to change by the world, voluntarily changes the divine self in response to the suffering in the world.⁴⁸ Only God, as it were, makes God suffer in order to be able to sympathise with us and comfort us. In the words of Moltmann, God's suffering is 'the supreme work of God on God himself'.⁴⁹ Sarot takes a step further into passibility by proposing that God is indeed affected by created reality, but still keeps a kind of filter on the nature of this influence. He argues that this has some analogy with human experience, since he believes that in personal relations both partners have the 'ability to choose freely how they will act and react towards the other . . .' Personal relations are thus completely different from 'causal relations', which he defines as those 'in which "passion" is caused within the being by something outside the being overpowering its will'.⁵⁰ This means that the subject experiencing such an impact upon herself is 'nothing more than a passive victim'. Thus, Sarot argues, personal and causal relations in human life exclude each other, and only personal relations are suitable for God.

But if God thus has 'complete control' over the reception of influence from outside, this makes God's experience of suffering very different indeed from ours. Central to suffering as we know it is a feeling of helplessness. To some extent we do fall victim to what we cannot regulate. A God who simply devised all God's own suffering, or had total command over how much should impinge upon the divine life, would have a suffering difficult for us to recognise. This in turn would undermine any theodicy of story, as this kind of story of divine suffering could not provide an occasion for us to make meaning out of our own suffering. Moreover, such an image of God comes perilously close to divine masochism, and so to condoning and glorifying human suffering as an offering required in imitation of God. It is feminist theologians who have; particularly drawn attention to this latter danger, perhaps because it is often women who have been expected to sacrifice themselves in imitation of a God for whom sacrifice seems to be the last word.⁵ This picture of a God who produces and controls divine suffering therefore also fails to meet the requirements of a theodicy of protest. Indeed, protest is undermined in several ways. It is not only difficult to conceive of God protesting against a suffering under divine management; if God can end self-restraint 'whenever he wants to', the urgent moral question arises as to why God does not 'interfere' in an Auschwitz or Rwanda and so whether God can be conceived as in protest against them.

We notice that Sarot's exclusion of any causal effect of the world on God, in which things 'happen' to God, depends upon his definition of causation as something which always simply 'overwhelms' the recipient. God clearly cannot be overwhelmed by the world, or simply be its 'passive victim'. But this absolute distinction of 'causal' from 'personal' relations in human life seems to polarise our own relations quite artificially; our experience of human relations, even the most healthy ones, may contain a mixture of influences, some of which we can control, and others which we cannot. What 'happens' to us, as opposed to what we allow to happen, does not necessarily overwhelm us. So we can conceive of suffering 'befalling' God without thereby making God a total victim of the universe.

Indeed, the 'free-will' theodicy seems to require, as I have argued, precisely this kind of contingent happening in the divine life. When evil is defined as non-being, it emerges from God's creation through creaturely free will, as something strange to God. We may say that it 'befalls' God. The suffering which it causes in the world also 'happens' to God in the sense that it causes God to suffer through the deep sympathy of love. It is not sufficient to say that God changes God, that God adapts the divine being to the actions of our world. In the humble act of creation. God freely chooses to be open to the hurt that will befall, with its unpredictability. God willingly faces something unknown and alien on the journey of love for the sake of creation.

Christian thinkers in the past who denied that God can be 'changed or affected by the world, and therefore cannot suffer in the divine nature, certainly did not intend to create an image of a remote, dictatorial and non-compassionate God. That would be a travesty of their faith in the biblical God of love, with whom they knew themselves to be intimately related, as is witnessed for instance in the intensely personal *Confessions* of Augustine. Nor is it fair to suggest that their thought had been completely taken over by the philosophy of their time, although the presuppositions of Platonism, Neoplatonism and Aristotle did undoubtedly exercise some influence on the early church fathers and the medieval theologians. In particular, it seemed to them that the only possible cause and ground for the world in which we live - a world of change, flux and decay - must be a world which is an unmoving and unchanging perfection. In terms of Platonic philosophy, the necessary basis for a world of Becoming (our world, always in development and becoming something else) must be a world of pure Being. Such Being was therefore defined as the opposite of Becoming. It followed that God as Absolute Being must be

absolutely unaffected and un-conditioned by the world of Becoming. In the technical terms of philosophical theology, God was Necessary Being and the world was contingent; that is, the world was vulnerable to what happened to it and so was in a process of change, while God was not.

At the same time, however, the earlier theologians had their own inner dynamic of faith which came from the reading of Scripture and the worship life of the church. This led them to offer resistance to the inroads of philosophy and most notably in their persisting with the scandal that God had become a human being in the incarnation, and could be said to suffer in the human nature of Christ (though not in God's own nature). We must always remember that they were not concerned so much to present a philosophical picture of God, as to do justice to their beliefs 'from within' that God was the sole origin of all reality and had created *ex nihilo*; that God was unchanging in moral character, unlike the arbitrary and cruel gods of Greek and Roman mythology; and that God was unique and not to be made one of a class with anything or anyone else. God was the ultimate Mystery who could only be addressed by 'saying' and 'unsaying', by using negative language as well as positive images. The word of the prophet Isaiah, 'Truly you are a God who hides himself (Isa. 45:15 NRSV), was taken immensely seriously. The human mind could only begin to grasp the mystery and wonder of God if it remembered that in many aspects God was 'not like' the world; God was, for instance, imperishable, incomparable, inexpressible. It was perhaps inevitable that in the context of the thought of their time, the only way that all these intentions could be expressed was by using the negative attributes of impassibility and immutability. So there was a tendency for the God of Scripture to take on the colours of philosophy; God's unchanging faithfulness became an unchanging immobility, and God's moral otherness from the world (holiness) became a philosophical otherness that effectively excluded God from the turmoil of history.

Language is not merely descriptive but performative. In the setting of this present study, we may say that it is also pastoral. One can easily see that in a certain cultural context the denial that God changes or suffers could have the performative function of enabling participation in the triune God; to be fair to our ancestors in the faith, this might now be taken as shorthand for saying that God does not suffer and change.⁵² In our time, however, we must also be sensitive to the performative nature of language. In an age after the Holocaust, and in an age of sensitivity to the problem of human suffering in general, I suggest that to state 'God does not suffer' will inhibit participation in God. To say this to a suffering person will send all the wrong signals in the way that it did not do in the past, when it could be used but then modified and checked by being placed in a context of other language about God's caring presence with us and intimate relation to us. I have been suggesting that in our time the requirements of theodicy, both practical and theoretical, will only be met by talking about the suffering of God in a way that has a recognisable connection with our own suffering.

We could not speak in this way, of course, unless we had good theological reason for thinking that the fundamental concerns of earlier theologians were also being met - for God's faithfulness, sovereignty, uniqueness and mystery. In the previous chapter on God's action in the world, I suggested that God can still be God when divine potentials have not yet been actualised, as long as God freely chooses to be limited by the act of creating. This addresses the objection of Aquinas that suffering means having unrealised potentials: God remains God in suffering, if this too is freely chosen. Such a choice should be understood as a once-for-all resolve of God in creation, binding God's self to a way of acting ever afterwards. The notion that God *chooses* to suffer may however, be open to the same allegation of divine masochism as the notion that God *controls* divine suffering. We might end up once more by glorifying suffering as a way of life, and

forcing self-sacrifice on others. It is essential then to place this choice in the context of suffering 'happening' to God, or 'befalling' God, which is consistent with the free-will theodicy in which evil emerges from creation as something strange to God.

By saying that God chooses to suffer, we thus mean that God chooses to be in situations where suffering can be inflicted upon God, with all its unpredictability. God opens God's own self to the world in vulnerability. God sets out on the road where hurts will happen, as Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem, the place where prophets had often been killed. God opts to be in the way of being injured. We too can, for the sake of love, choose a path where it is likely that suffering will be imposed upon us, even though we have no desire for suffering in itself.

This leads us to another aspect of God's 'choosing' to suffer, by analogy with a healthy way in which we can 'choose' suffering. When suffering does befall us, we can choose it for ourselves in the sense of taking hold of it, accepting it as our own and doing something with it. We do not resentfully regard it as something alien to us, but boldly take possession of it; as Dorothee Solle perceives, 'what I take belongs to me in a differing sense from what I only bear'.⁵³ This is what the philosopher Kierkegaard called 'active suffering', which is 'the highest action in inwardness'.⁵⁴ So sufferers from cancer, or from a cruel bereavement or from debilitating unemployment may take hold of their suffering, and speak of 'my tumour', 'my loss', 'my poverty'. We have not chosen these things in the first place, but when they happen, we can choose them as our own. This acceptance does not mean passivity, mere resignation or Stoic toleration. Once we have accepted ownership of our suffering, we are free over it, to see where it can be ended, and where causes of suffering can be dealt with. Moreover, when someone accepts as her own the suffering inflicted upon her, the oppressor loses all power over her, all ability to dominate. When a sufferer has lost her fear of suffering as something strange to her being, she has the strength to resist and rebel against the tyrant. This is the strong mood of protest, not the weak mood of petulance and self-pity.

Active suffering like this would even 'de-throne' God, if God were the one inflicting suffering on us. But in fact God is not the oppressor. God too protests against suffering, and does so by choosing suffering as God's own. When suffering happens to God, then God lays ownership to it. The triune God who thus chooses to be open to suffering is not subjected to it; it has no power to overwhelm God since it has been freely grasped as belonging within the interweaving relations of love.

God Suffers as Trinity

The strongest challenge to these ideas about the suffering of God comes not from philosophy, but from the very same place that seems to call out for God to suffer. That is, it may be said that pastoral experience itself demands that there be at least some dimension of God that is invulnerable. The most impressive statement of this case in recent times appears in the book by Frances Young titled *Face to Face: A Narrative Essay in the Theology of Suffering*. The challenge is not so much in the argument as in the life-experience that underlies the book, for it is a story of bringing up a severely brain-damaged child, Arthur. The author honestly and painfully recounts the way that this experience brought her into religious doubt and perplexity, even while she was functioning successfully as a professor of theology and a Methodist minister. From this experience she has come to the conclusion that we can only cope with suffering if there is some aspect of God which is immune from suffering - which is detached, impassible, invulnerable.

Frances Young marks the turning point in her spiritual journey towards a new sense of the reality of God as being a moment when she heard a voice within her saying, 'It makes no difference to me whether you believe in me or not.'⁵⁵ She interprets this inner voice as meaning that in one dimension of God's being, it makes no difference whether the world rejects God's love and suffers the inevitable consequences of its refusal of God's purposes. God is untouched. However at the same time she does want to say that there is another aspect of God's being which is immersed in the world, and which does suffer. The image of the sea sums up for her this duality in God, unafflicted and suffering, detached and involved:

That passionless deep beyond all sense
That rages with passion, deep and intense,
Mercy in wraths serenity.⁵⁶

This duality in God is, as we have already seen, expressed in process theology with the distinction between the 'primordial' and 'consequent' natures of God. For Frances Young, this double-sidedness is illuminated by the 'mystery of the Trinity'. She appeals with approval to the view of the Greek fathers of the church, who taught that God 'is impassible in his "essence" but became "passible" in Christ, who as both divine and human, "unafflictedly suffered"'.⁵⁷ In the second person of the Trinity God draws near and feels our pain, suffering in the human nature of Christ but not in his divine nature; in God's eternal being, God is immune. Perhaps the strongest alternative to a radical binding together of suffering and change in God is to make this distinction between the immanent being of God and divine activity in the world (or the *oikonomia* of God). The argument runs that in God's actions and energies towards us, and especially in God's encounter with us in the incarnate Son, God is vulnerable and passionate; in God's inner being, however, there is invulnerability and passionlessness.

Frances Young thus speaks of the 'dark side' of God which is both beyond knowledge and 'beyond passion'. We notice that here she follows the scholastic tradition of regarding impassibility as a form of lack of knowledge of God; it attempts to respect the mystery of God by not positively ascribing passion to God's inner being. In this way of thinking, to speak of God as 'impassible' is not to be mistaken for a description or a characteristic of God; it is, rather, refusing to shrink God within the bounds of human knowledge and language, such as our perception of suffering. God cannot be put in the class of those who suffer. Yet the term 'impassible', I suggest, cannot be evacuated of all descriptiveness, as is shown by Frances Young's own forming of an image of God's essence, as an 'ocean of love that can absorb all the suffering of the world and purge it without being polluted and changed by it'.⁵⁸ I have myself been urging the mystery of God, but not through the negative attributes of impassibility and immutability; rather, the mystery of God is in the hidden depths of what we do know of God through revelation. That is, it is impossible to turn the triune movements of suffering love into objects that we can observe; we cannot grasp them, but only participate in them. This is the true darkness of God, the hiddenness of God's being.

However, what is so challenging about Frances Young's account is not her appeal to a negative theology, but her own story. She has found a reason for this picture of God in her own experience that it helps to find people who seem to be detached from your own suffering, in the sense that they are not overwhelmed by it. They stand firm like granite, or they are as stable as the depths of the ocean. This has been her experience as someone who has both received care and offered care to others. Faced by the sorrow of some friends whose baby had been stillborn, she relates how she found that she could be of no help while she was 're-living her own pain', her own 'protest at the suffering of the world'. She discerned that she was 'too involved', and it was only when the self-involvement was purged that she could become of any use to her friends.

So God, she concludes, 'is not emotionally involved [with us] in a self-concerned way'; he assures us that 'It makes no difference to me ...' while at the same time in Christ 'he subjected himself to personal involvement in pain and anguish'.⁵⁹

I feel a sense of presumption in daring to comment upon such a testimony, born out of so many years of self-giving love. However, I want to suggest two responses to this witness, while thoroughly respecting its integrity. We can surely sympathise with the desire for a God whose existence is not threatened by suffering, as ours is, and this can be considered from the two perspectives of origin and destination. First, as the only 'unoriginate' reality, God owes nothing to anyone or anything for the origin of God's existence. Traditionally, this has been called the 'aseity' of God; God exists from no one except from God's own self (a se). However, we need not equate self-existence with self-sufficiency. A God who exists from nothing but God's self can still choose to be fulfilled in the manner of that existence through fellowship with created beings, to be open to being affected and changed by them. If we dare to comment on the comforting words that Frances Young heard, I suggest that while we might indeed hear God saying 'It makes no difference to my reality or my love whether you believe in me or not', it would still make a difference to God in the richness of divine life, its bliss and satisfaction.

Second, Frances Young is rightly pointing out that a sufferer will not be helped if the one caring for her is overwhelmed by his or her own feelings of distress, or becomes erratic in response because of these emotions. But, with regard to God as the supreme carer, this need is not best met by keeping back an area of God's life that is invulnerable, an untouched reservoir of bliss. I do not think that we can speak of a God who shares the risk and responsibility of creation - an essential part of theodicy - if God puts part of the divine being into a zone of immunity. The need for a carer who is not herself broken by suffering is surely best met by showing how a suffering God will finally bring about the end of evil, and will achieve the fulfilment of divine purposes. I sketched an outline of this goal of God's love in the previous chapter, and I intend to return to it in thinking about the power of forgiveness. *Human* carers need to learn some non-involvement, as they will otherwise be overwhelmed and incapacitated by the pain of others; but it is the power of *God's* love to absorb suffering, to be changed and yet not degraded by it.

Yet there still remains a challenge in what Professor Young proposes, and this is further to do with the doctrine of the Trinity. If we do distinguish between an untouchable 'essence' of God and a divine Son who suffers with us in a human nature, we are also of course distinguishing between a Son who suffers and a Father who does not; the Holy Spirit is usually also exempted from suffering. The persons are, in this, distinct. If we affirm, by contrast, that God suffers with the world in the whole of the divine life, without reservations, then we seem to have lost a way of 'telling the difference' between the divine persons. Moreover, the particular role of the Son in incarnation may appear to have been undermined. This was one reason, in fact, why the fathers of the early church maintained the impassibility of God. They were faced by opponents - 'monarchians' - who claimed the suffering of God the Father in order to deny any particular existence of three persons and to affirm one supreme divine subject in three modes of successive activity. God was portrayed as acting first in the mode of Father, then Son and then Spirit. In the memorable words of Tertullian, they 'put the Paraclete to flight and crucified the Father'.⁶⁰ Much of the rejection of *patrapassianism* (the suffering of the Father) was simply an attempt to deal with this monarchian heresy.

In response to this ancient anxiety, we may now be able to see that it is *only* by speaking about the suffering of the Father and the Spirit as well as the Son that we can discern the true nature of relationships within God. Within the divine perichoresis, all three persons suffer, but in different ways according to the distinction of relations. Putting it more dynamically, we may say

that there is suffering within all three movements of relationship. The holding of created beings within the pattern of movement of the divine life will mean suffering for God, in so far as this embraces the refusal of love by the creation. There is the pain of rejection, and the pain of empathy with the results of this rejection in the lives of creatures. The difference between modes of suffering in God is brought to light when we ask *where* this creaturely 'no' to God can be located. Here the theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar offers a crucial insight: since 'there is nothing outside God', there is only - one place where our 'no' can be spoken, and that is - ironically - within the glad response of the Son to the Father. Just as our 'yes' to God leans upon the movement of thanksgiving and obedience that is already there in God, like the relation of a son to a father, so we speak our pain-giving 'no' in the same space. Our 'no' is a kind of 'twisted knot' within the current of love of the Son's response.⁶¹ So von Balthasar says: 'The creature's No, its wanting to be autonomous without acknowledging its origin, must be located within the Son's all-embracing Yes to the Father, in the Spirit.'⁶²

The drama of human life can only take place within the greater drama of the divine life. Our dance of relationships can only happen within the patterns of the larger Dance. 'The creature's No resounds at the "place" of distinction within the Godhead.'⁶³ That is, von Balthasar affirms, there is already an infinite distance between the Son and the Father through the pouring forth of the Son from the being of the Father. What greater distance could there be than a giving away of Godness by the Father in begetting the Son? While the Father does not cease to be God, such an infinite self-gift amounts to a gulf of 'Godlessness'. This distance has room for all the distances between persons that there are within the world of finitude, including those of sin.⁶⁴ In von Balthasar's vision of God, the role of the third divine Person, the Holy Spirit, is that 'he maintains the infinite difference between [Father and Son], seals it and bridges it'. We must surely add, however, that the Spirit continually 'opens up' the divine space into new dimensions of love. Later we shall see how all this comes to a focus and to a resolution in the cross of Jesus; but this is only possible because the story of creation from the beginning is God's carrying a creaturely 'no' within the divine life.

We may take von Balthasar's picture of 'distances' in God and interpret them in terms of spaces within and between the interweaving currents of relational love in God. They are spaces in a dance of perichoresis. When God enters with deep empathy into the experience of the human movers and dancers, God will identify with the lives of human sons and daughters in different ways according to modes of being as Father, Son and Spirit. First, in the movement of fatherhood, God has the particular kind of suffering that comes when a pouring-forth of selfhood is met not by a glad 'yes' of receptivity but a 'no', when 'the recklessness with which the Father gives away himself encounters a freedom that, instead of responding in kind to this magnanimity, turns it into a calculating, cautious, self-preservation'.⁶⁵ Yet such is the fatherly love of God that God will suffer with a human son or daughter, just as a human parent enters with sympathy into the pain of a child, feeling the hurt they have caused themselves. Second, in the filial movement of love. God will be identified with human sons and daughters, so that there will be the suffering of bearing the 'no' of created beings within the 'yes' to the Father, of caking all those movements of resistance up into the pattern of the dance. While in fatherhood God suffers with created persons, in the movement of sonship (and daughterhood) God will suffer as the human son or daughter does, damaged as they are by their own refusal of love or by the sins of others. Third, as Spirit, God is wanting to open up the space within the dance in creative ways; this involves the particular suffering that comes from the 'no' which is one of self-preservation, or the hoarding of space. God as Spirit will then suffer in creatures, suffering at the depths of human life and nature, crying out in the birth-pains of creation (Rom. 8:22-3).

God is always entering with sympathy into the life of creatures. It is not only in the particular point in history of the cross of Jesus Christ that God makes a journey into human life and is changed by the experience. But the Christian story is that in Christ God goes furthest on the journey into the creation for which space has been made in the fellowship of the divine life. God has never been drawn further into flesh than here, giving God's own self without any reserve at all. In the cross the divine Father suffers with this human Son (Jesus) more fully than with any other; the divine Son suffers more completely as this human son than as any other sons and daughters. In the mystery of incarnation, the movements of divine and human sonship towards the Father can be identified as exactly the same. Since nothing is held back in this sameness, it is not just functional, but a matter of divine being. Because of this identification, we too can lean our sufferings upon those of the Son, so that God suffers not only 'with' but 'as' and 'in' us in the interweaving relationship of the divine dance.

The Limit of Theodicy

But I must end with the same word of caution with which I began this chapter. There can be no complete theodicy. There can be no completely rational defence of God in a world of pain. If there could be, it would justify suffering on the one hand, and destroy faith on the other. In argument we may talk of the risk that God took in creation, and the way God shares that risk in suffering. Rational theodicy is thus not divorced from practical theodicy: they are both concerned with a suffering that 'befalls' God or 'happens' to God. But it still remains open to decide whether God's creative decision that set all this off is worth the cost. In Dostoyevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, one of the characters (Ivan) asks the question: 'Is the whole universe worth the tears of one tortured child?'⁶⁶ He has in mind the story of a rich land-owner who threw a peasant child to his hunting dogs to be torn apart because the child had thrown a stone and broken a dog's leg. Is it all worth the tears of one child, let alone the millions in Auschwitz? Even if God suffers, is it worth it? Ivan thinks not, and says that he is 'returning his entrance ticket to God with the polite observation that the price is too steep'.

The belief that God suffers with us may help us to say that the making of persons is worth all the tears. But only faith can answer the question, 'is it worth it?' after all reasonable arguments have fallen silent.

NOTES

1. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book I, 26.
2. For reviews of recent writing on the passibility of God, see Paul S. Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 16-45; Marcel Sarot, *God, Possibility and Corporeality* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1992), 1-30; Thomas Wemandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2000), 1-25.
3. The camp was Buna, although Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, trans. R. A. Wilson and J. Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1974), 273-4, wrongly identifies it as Auschwitz.
4. Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. S. Rodway (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981), 76-7.
5. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 277-8, cf. 252, 255.
6. Wiesel, *Night*, 45. For accounts taking Wiesel's conclusion seriously, see K. Sunn, *Theology and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), H6-32; Marcel Sarot, 'Auschwitz, Morality and the Suffering of God',

Modern Theology 7/2 (1991), 137—9.

7. This is the view of Herbert McCabe, *God Matters* (London: Chapman, 1987), 92.; also John K. Roth, 'A Theodicy of Protest' in Stephen T Davis (ed.). *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1981), i2i.

8. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 278.

9. Dorothee Solle, *Suffering*, trans. E. Kalin (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1975), i50.

10. Hans Kung, *On Being a Christian*, trans. E. Quinn (London: Collins, 1977), 433.

11 *Poems of Paul Celan*, trans. Michael Hamburger (London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1995), 'Tenebrae', 115. I am indebted to Oliver Davies for drawing my attention to this poem.

12 Oliver Davies, 'Soundings: Towards a Theological Poetics of Silence' in Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (eds), *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation* (forthcoming, 2001).

13. Surin, i162.

14 Elie Wiesel, 'Art and Culture after the Holocaust' in Eva Fleischner (ed.), *Auschwitz, 'Beginning of a New Era?': Reflections on the Holocaust* (New York: Ktav Publications, 1977), 403.

15. See above, Ch. 4.

16. Leonardo Boff, *Passion of Christ, Passion of the World*, trans. R. Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987), in-i2.

17. See Ch. 3 above, pp. 97-8.

18. James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, revised edn (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986), 94.

19. E.g. J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 162-76.

20. E.g. Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 173-89.

21. 'The world come of age' is a phrase made famous by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, enlarged edn, ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. R. Fuller and others (London: SCM Press, 1971), 326-7, 360-1; cf.

279-80.

22. See e.g. Maurice Wiles, *God's Action in the World* (London: SCM Press, 1986), 21-5; Keith Ward, *Religion and Creation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 167-71, 258-61.

23. E.g. Hosea 2:1-10; Jeremiah 12:7-11; Ezekiel 16:1-34.

24 Also Isaiah 1:2; Jeremiah 31:20.

25. Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 4-5; Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* 11.9; *Enchiridion* 4.13-14; cf. Origen, *De Principiis* 2.9.2.

26. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* 12.6-8.

27. For extensive argument of this point, see Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God*, 210-29.

28. See Ch. 4 above, pp. 144-7.

29. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. I (London: Nisbet, 1943), 279, cf. 257•

30. Jeremiah 15:18.

31. This is stressed by Roth, 'A Theodicy of Protest', 14-18.

12 Oliver Davies, 'Soundings: Towards a Theological Poetics of Silence' in Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (eds), *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation* (forthcoming, 2001).

13. Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil*, 162.

14. E. Wiesel, 'Art and Culture after the Holocaust' in Eva Fleischner (ed.), *Auschwitz, 'Beginning of a New Era?': Reflections on the Holocaust* (New York: Ktav Publications, 1977), 403.
15. See above, Ch. 4.
16. Leonardo Boff, *Passion of Christ, Passion of the World*, trans. R. Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987), in-i2.
17. See Ch. 3 above, pp. 97-8.
18. James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, revised edn (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986), 94.
19. E.g. J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 162-76.
20. E.g. Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 173-89.
21. 'The world come of age' is a phrase made famous by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, enlarged edn, ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. R. Fuller and others (London: SCM Press, 1971), 326-7, 360-1; cf. 279-80.
22. See e.g. Maurice Wiles, *Cod's Action in the World* (London: SCM Press, 1986), 21-5; Keith Ward, *Religion and Creation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 167-71, 258-61.
23. E.g. Hosea 2:1-10; Jeremiah 12:7-11; Ezekiel 16:1-34.
24. Also Isaiah 1:2; Jeremiah 31:20.
25. Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 4-5; Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* 11.9; *Enchiridion* 4.13-14; cf. Ongen, *De Principiis* 2.9.2.
26. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* 12.6-8.
27. For extensive argument of this point, see Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of Cod*, 210-29.
28. See Ch. 4 above, pp. 144-7.
29. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Vie Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. I (London: Nisbet, 1943), 279, cf. 257•
30. Jeremiah 15:18.
31. This is stressed by Roth, 'A Theodicy of Protest', 14-18.
32. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 11/2, 165. At this point, I am drawing on material from my book, *The Creative Suffering of Cod*, 34—6.
33. Song, 'Friday Morning' in Sydney Carter in the Present Tense, Book 2 (London: Galliard, 1960).
34. Carl G. Jung, *Answer to Job*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954), 91-2.
35. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia.2.3; 3.1; 9.2. Thomas Weinandy also bases his argument for divine immutability and impassibility on God's being pure act: *Does God Suffer?*, 123-7.
36. Daniel Day Williams, *The Spirit and the Forms of Love* (Welwyn: James Nisbet, 1968), ii7.
37. Charles Hartshorne, *A Natural Theology for Our Time* (La Saile, IL; Open Court, 1967), 105.
38. *Ibid.*, 75.
39. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia.20.1; 13.21.3; *Summa Contra Gentiles* 1.91.16. Cf. Anselm, *Proslogion* 8.
40. Augustine, *Contra Adversanum Legis et Prophetarum* 1.40.
41. James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (London: SPCK, 1967), 163, 166-7.
42. Richard E. Criel, *Divine Impassibility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 117.
43. See Ch. 4, pp. 142—4.

44. H. P. Owen, *Concepts of Deity* (London: Macmillan, 1971), 23-4.
45. Thus, Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 168-70, proposes that grief and sorrow can be ascribed to God in the sense that he is 'intensely concerned' about human suffering, but not as any kind of emotion. Even if this is coherent, I suggest it similarly fails the test of practical theodicies.
46. Sarot, *God, Possibility and Corporeality*, 66, 41.
47. *Ibid.*, 55.
48. E.g. Jung Young Lee, *God Suffers For Us: A Systematic Enquiry into a Doctrine of Divine Possibility* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), 41.
49. Jurgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, trans. M. Kohl, (London: SCM Press, 1981), 99.
50. Sarot, *God, Possibility and Corporeality*, 34.
51. See Solle, *Suffering*, 25-7; Mary Grey, *Redeeming the Dream: Feminism, Redemption and the Christian Tradition* (London: SPCK, 1989), 13-14, 122-4.
52. E.g. Justin Martyr, *Apologia* 1.20; Tertullian, *Adversus Hermogenem* 12; *Adversus Marcionem* 1.8; Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia.9.1-2; Ia.20.1.
53. Solle, *Suffering*, 103.
54. S. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. D. F. Swenson and W. Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1941), 386-8.
55. Frances Young, *Face to Face: A Narrative Essay in the Theology of Suffering*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990), 81, 248.
56. *Ibid.*, 242. My italics.
57. *Ibid.*, 274.
58. *Ibid.*, 245.
59. *Ibid.*, 239.
60. Tertullian, *Adversus Praxean* I.
61. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theodrama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, Vol. IV, *The Action*, trans. G. Hanson (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1994), 330.
62. *Ibid.*, 329.
63. *Ibid.*, 333-4.
64. *Ibid.*, 323-4.
65. *Ibid.*, 328.
66. F. Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. D. Magarshack (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982), 287.